Introduction

“Modern-Day Badass Drag Queen Superhero Nuns”

From the moment I met the Sisters, they were fuckin’ modern-day badass drag queen superhero nuns!
—Sister Saviour Applause, Russian River Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

“May I give you chlamydia and syphilis?” politely inquired Sister Dire-Reahh, of the London House of Common Sluts, as we strolled through Soho with Sister Cumminga Wrasse in search of a good kebab shop. The two Sisters had sat down for interviews with me after taking part in a protest against cuts in National Health Service funding for HIV prevention. We must have been quite a sight, myself in street clothes accompanied by two clearly male nuns in formal habits, although relatively few people stared openly—this being not only England but Soho. Sister Dire, following the tradition that the U.K. houses of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence inherited from their Australian forebears, wore only dark sunglasses with an otherwise stern, black-and-white traditional habit reminiscent of the habits of many Roman Catholic nuns’ orders. Sister Cumminga, as a “dual tradition” Sister with roots within the order from both the United Kingdom and France, added to that look the white makeup base and colorful facial designs that are the hallmark of the houses in North America, South America, and mainland Europe.¹ Both sported the muted, low-profile coronet used by U.K. and Australian houses beneath their veils.

Having already worked intensively with the Sisters for over a year and a half at the time this conversation took place, I had learned to respond with aplomb to nearly any situation. I grinned at Sister Dire’s request and replied, “From a Sister, anything!” And I waited expectantly for the punch line. Smiling, the Sister reached into the capacious purse that is another hallmark of the order. She pulled out two plush toys: one a pink, snakelike
spiral with two beady eyes at the top, and the other a round green blob with rather innocent eyes, a puckered mouth, and green bits sticking up from the top like mussed-up hair. They are part of a line of plush toys produced by the company Giant Microbes, which creates educational toys in the shape of microscopic organisms—including those that cause sexually transmitted infections. The pink spiral represents the microorganism that causes syphilis; the green, that which causes chlamydia. Sister Dire explained to me that she finds the toys useful in one of the central activities of Sisters around the world: the promotion of sexual health. She then handed me the London house's version of the Play Fair! pamphlet, an irreverent and sex-positive guide to sexual health that was first written by the San Francisco Sisters in 1982, when an as-yet unnamed immune disorder was beginning to spread with frightening speed in their community.

Although this encounter took place in London, it could have happened in any of the eleven or so countries, across four continents, where the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence currently have a “house,” or chapter. The Sisters might look a bit different; outside the United Kingdom and Australia, for example, some Sisters have a signature makeup design or “face,” and party dresses are more common than black-and-white traditionals. But the playful, sexual humor and the commitment to activism, education, and various other forms of community service are consistent across the order, as are these Sisters’ simultaneous camping and claiming of the role of the nun.

Queer Nuns focuses on this unusual approach to activism. As an activist strategy, what I call “serious parody” simultaneously critiques and reclaims cultural traditions in the interest of supporting the lives and political objectives of marginalized groups. Considering themselves quite seriously to be nuns while at the same time parodying the Roman Catholic Church, which has been such a vocal opponent of LGBTQ communities in recent decades, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence enact serious parody by combining the familiar tropes of drag queen and female religious renunciant to produce an image and a role that have opened space for both vocal political protest and day-to-day community service and activism, yet have also positioned the order to reinscribe relations of power of which its predominantly white, gay male adherents are less aware. Over the course of this volume I demonstrate both the promise and the pitfalls of serious parody, arguing ultimately for its effectiveness
in certain parts of the Sisters’ constituencies and for its importance as a strategy of ludic, performative politics that can be enacted by other activist movements facing situations of open and unwavering opposition from culturally powerful institutions. Like any performance, serious parody as a broader activist strategy can either challenge or reinscribe existing relationships of power, and it often does both at once. Thus, in this book I argue not for serious parody as a panacea that can answer every problem encountered by ludic, performative activism, but rather for its possible uses and potential challenges in the efforts of activist groups to work within communities that are opposed and oppressed by culturally significant traditions and organizations—as is the case with queer communities and the Roman Catholic Church.

Encountering the Sisters

Someone encountering the Sisters for the first time might be surprised by many aspects of the experience. Indeed, quite a few Sisters have stories like that of Sister Glo Euro N’Wei of The Abbey of St. Joan in Seattle. An HIV prevention worker even when not in habit, Sister Glo recalled being in face (a synonym for “in habit” in most houses that use whiteface makeup) at a gay men’s health summit. “I was in the lobby of the hotel waiting for something,” she recounted in an interview, “and one of the other participants came up and was like, ‘Sister, I just have to ask. What the fuck?’” Sister Glo explained to me that the man was from an Italian Catholic family and simply couldn’t comprehend what Glo and other Sisters were doing, or why they might be doing it. Like this man, some observers who are unfamiliar with the Sisters are startled by their appearance itself: people of a wide range of body sizes, shapes, and levels of hirsuteness, wearing dresses and white pancake makeup with bright designs and glitter, or formal habits with large sunglasses and perhaps a bit of lip color or rouge, crowned by coronets of all shapes and sizes and colorful veils cascading down their backs. Many wear heels or impressively tall platform boots, and most carry purses in often quirky designs. In many houses the picture is completed by cigarettes dangling from several Sisters’ fingers and by the presence of a few figures clad in black leather, sometimes with whiteface—as they often call their white makeup—and sometimes not. These are the Guards, who ensure that
everything runs smoothly and that the Sisters are safe from verbal and physical assault.

Upon encountering Sisters for the first time, a curious onlooker might approach them, asking some version of the question raised by Sister Glo’s conversation partner. In a group of Sisters the dynamics of rank might not be obvious to an outsider, but the one answering such questions will nearly always be a fully professed Sister, known as an “FP” or a “black veil” despite the fact that outside the Australian houses and the houses descended from them, most FPs wear colorful veils or more creative headdresses, and rarely wear black. Yet they are entitled to do so, whereas novice Sisters almost universally cover their heads in white.

Figure I.1. Members of the Order of Benevolent Bliss (Portland, Oregon) pause for a photo op during their bar ministry on World AIDS Day, 2009. The member in the cowl is a postulant; those wearing low-profile coronets with white veils are novice Sisters; the one in the black cap wearing partial whiteface is a Guard; and the rest are fully professed Sisters, or FPs. These are the habits used by the Portland house; other houses have different sartorial standards. Note not only the variety of headwear among the FPs, but also the fact that two are wearing white veils. This unusual occurrence is due to the fact that these are the Veil of Shame and the Veil of Remembrance (see chapter 5), worn by these Sisters and written on by community members as part of their World AIDS Day observance. Photo by the author.
Novices are encouraged to speak to the public, but since they are not allowed except in special cases to appear as Sisters, or “manifest,” without an FP present, they will typically have a more experienced nun nearby to help them represent the order accurately. Postulants, the rank below novices, generally may not speak to the public. To symbolize this restriction, and the attendant emphasis on listening and learning rather than speaking during this stage of training, in orders whose postulants wear whiteface the postulants frequently “have no lips”; that is, they do not color their lips but rather leave them white (see figs. I.1 and I.2).

The Sisters as a Worldwide Order

While members often speak of the Sisterhood as a single, worldwide order, the use of such language is an acknowledgment of broadly shared goals, values, and history and not an institutional fact. There is no international governing body of the Sisters, and every country or region where houses consider themselves closely aligned to one another manages that alignment differently.5 One can speak, for instance, of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence as a worldwide order, of the French order (which recently included a house near Fribourg, Switzerland) or the German-speaking order (which includes houses in Zurich and Vienna and recent missions in Odessa and Prague despite the language difference in the latter two cities), of the Australian order, or even of the Missionary Order of Perpetual Indulgence, an order of U.S. Sisters who have no immediate access to a geographically based house.

That said, while the San Francisco house has no formal institutional oversight of any other house, its collective opinions carry immense weight since it is the founding house, the Mother House, of the entire worldwide order. The two founders who remain most active in the order also retain significant influence; they are Sister Soami (also known as Mish from his original name, Sister Missionary Position) and Sister Vish-Knew (initially Sister Adhanarisvara and later Sister, then Grand Mother, Vicious Power Hungry Bitch, or Vish). The San Francisco house also holds the trademark on the name “Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence,” although it reserves legal action regarding trademark infringement for cases of serious misuse. Thus, while the San Francisco house does not officially set policy for the worldwide order or even for houses in the
United States, it does have the ability to recognize houses, or to refuse to do so, and to grant or revoke permission to use the order’s name. In recent years that responsibility has been taken over by a representative body in North America, the United Nuns’ Privy Council.

Most houses of the Sisters are located in cities, although the order has been appearing in less-populated areas in the United States since

Figure 1.2. Members of the Erzmutterhaus Sankta Melitta Iuvenis zu Berlin on bar ministry in that city, March 24, 2012. Left to right: Mother Katharina Lætitiam Donans, Schwester Francine, Schwester Daphne (behind Schwester Francine), and Gardist Heinrich. Postulant Victoria and Postulant Laetizia are partly hidden behind the four FPs. Photo by the author.
the early 2000s. The first houses took shape in large, urban areas with sizeable and recognized gay neighborhoods: San Francisco, USA (1979), Toronto, Canada (1981), Sydney, Australia (1981), Melbourne, Australia (1983), Seattle, USA (1987), London, England (1990), Paris, France (1990), and Heidelberg, Germany (1991). Yet in 2001 a new house was founded in the Russian River Valley, a region roughly seventy-five miles north of San Francisco that is known as a gay resort area. The town of Guerneville that is the Russian River Sisters’ home of record registered on the 2010 U.S. census as having a population of 4,534—a far cry from San Francisco’s more than 800,000. A few years later, the Russian River house sponsored the formation of a house in Eureka, California, a college town of just over 27,000 in logging country near the Oregon border. And while houses continued to form in both mid-sized and large cities around the world, a few came to represent regions rather than specific cities. The Russian River house is technically one such house, as it draws its members from across the North Bay Area and beyond, and the French houses other than those in Paris were intentionally organized based on their regions within the country as the French order began to expand geographically in the mid-1990s. In addition, 2007 saw the formation of the Grand Canyon Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, which one founder, Sister Odora Flatulotta D’Pew, called “one of the first state houses.” Although the house was founded in Phoenix, Arizona, Sister Odora explained, “we wanted to incorporate the fact that we had individuals in Tucson and Northern Arizona.” Over the years, each house has taken the form that best suits its members and its community.

As in most organized social movements, occasionally houses experience such severe tensions between their members that they split into two (or, rarely, more) houses. Such schisms generally have one of three results. Most commonly, one of the houses resulting from the schism survives while the other or others fade out. In some cases, as in Seattle in recent years, the two houses exist side by side but only one is recognized by the San Francisco house. And on rare occasions, two houses may be recognized and coexist with varying levels of peace and conflict. To my knowledge, Paris is the only place where this last situation currently holds true. That city is the site of origin of the French order as a whole, but its house split in a schism in 1996, six years after its founding. The new house called itself the Couvent de Paname, after a nickname
for the city of Paris, and although tensions continue to arise at times between the two houses, they seem to have staked out different areas of interest and activism that allow them to share the city productively. Notably, this peace seems to have been initially due to the San Francisco house’s recognition of the Paname convent, as well as to what Jean-Yves Le Talec circumspectly terms “long negotiations.”

While houses occasionally form as the result of schisms, for the most part new houses form either because a fully professed Sister moves to an area in which there is not currently a house or because people who live in that area learn of the Sisters and wish to start a house; sometimes the situation is a combination of these two cases. Outside the United States, the process of starting a house varies from country to country. Some houses, like that in Montevideo, Uruguay, have followed the lead of most of the earliest houses and simply begun manifesting—that is, appearing in habit in their communities—and doing the work of the Sisters. Other houses have begun as “missions” under the guidance of another house. Today most houses go through the mission stage, with other Sisters or other houses (or both) in their national or regional order as their guides to help them with both the administrative and the artistic aspects of becoming Sisters. In a mission house, all Sisters generally begin as novices and then are elevated to fully professed Sisters when the mission is granted full status after a year or more. In North America the San Francisco house grants full status by issuing a document known as an exequatur that gives the new house permission to represent the order. In addition, all U.S. houses must register as 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations in order to accept and give out the charitable donations that are the backbone of most houses’ work in their communities.

In each country there is a different relationship, often at least somewhat formalized, between the Sisters and the state. These relationships span the gamut, however, from working closely together, as the Uruguay house and many of the German-speaking houses do, to refusing all state funding, as many of the French houses do. The former move seems to be more common in regions where there are state-sponsored outreach programs for sexual health and where the state—or at least that aspect of it—is generally trusted by the communities the Sisters serve, in which case the Sisters often partner with or even become an arm of
those programs. Greater separation between convent and state is more common in situations where there are concerns about complicity with or co-optation by government forces.

Since 2006, U.S. and Canadian missions have developed under the oversight of the United Nuns’ Privy Council, or UNPC. With two representatives from every fully professed North American house, the UNPC was designed to offer more consistent and accessible guidance to Sisters developing houses in new areas. Sister Katie Kizum, who was serving as the UNPC chair at the time I interviewed her, explained it this way:

The UNPC . . . was founded as . . . a formal way to help mission houses. And as part of that, sort of a natural adjunct, was asked to manage the trademark process. We don’t hold the trademark for “Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence”; San Francisco [the San Francisco house] still holds it. But they’ve asked the UNPC to manage it . . . We help the missions out and help them move forward . . . They’re forming a business and corporate persona, but they’re also learning to be Sisters with a capital S, and all the stuff that goes along with that. The Sistory, the spirituality, the community involvement, all of that stuff gets somehow tied together, and yet has to fit into a corporate framework. Which we struggle with on a regular basis.17

Indeed, that tension between the ludic engagement of the Sisters in their communities and the twenty-first century routinization of that free-spirited engagement is a central source of the interpersonal strife that can arise at times within houses.

Sister Titania Humperpckle’s “SisTree,” a genealogical tree of the worldwide order, listed 115 “total world orders, houses, convents, and missions” at the end of 2016, noting that of that number, eighty-four are currently active while thirty-one have closed. Although the list of active houses fluctuates quite frequently, the houses and missions that appeared to be active as of 2016 have their homes in the United States, Canada, Uruguay, Australia, England, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, France, Germany, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic. The Sisters have an organizational presence in twenty-two states of the United States as of 2016, as well as in the District of Columbia, and no small number of these houses exist in politically conservative states such
as Alabama, Georgia, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. Canada has three active and approved houses as of 2016, including fully professed houses in Vancouver and Montréal and a mission in Toronto, and outside North America the countries with the largest populations of Sisters are Australia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. According to the Uruguayan Sisters with whom I spoke, there is also an unrecognized house in Buenos Aires, Argentina, called Las Hermanas de Santa María de Los Buenos Aires.18

At the end of 2016 the “SisTree” listed a total of 1,617 Sisters and Guards who have joined the order over time. This appears to include those who have retired or have joined the Nuns of the Above (that is, have passed away), as well as those who have been excommunicated for serious ethical violations such as misappropriating funds for personal use. Although the Sisters do not maintain demographic data on their members, both in my ethnographic work and in the demographic questions I asked of interviewees I observed a predominance of white, cisgender, gay men in the order who identified themselves as either middle-class, working-class, or poor and who came in their own estimation equally from middle-class backgrounds and from working-class or poor backgrounds.

Joining the Order

While every house sets its own policies and procedures, there are strong similarities within and even across national and regional orders regarding the processes involved in becoming a member. A person who wishes to join the Sisters must begin by getting to know them, and becoming known by them. In the North American and German houses, this step is formalized through the declaration of aspirancy: one declares that one aspires to join the order. That person then becomes an aspirant, and must remain active in that role for a minimum period of time and/or a minimum number of events, depending on the house, before advancing to the next stage; a typical minimum in North America is three months’ time. Dressing in street clothes and using “secular” names—that is, not yet choosing a Sister or Guard name—aspirants in many German and North American houses appear to onlookers simply as hangers-on or Sister groupies. A few houses require aspirants to wear drag or simply
something outrageous, but there is no shared signifier of aspirancy beyond these basic requirements. One cannot with certainty identify an aspirant on sight, but only by being told that the person is one.

More orders worldwide have a stage of postulancy than have an aspirancy; in fact, the French orders combine the two stages into a postulancy of six to twelve months, during which the postulant wears street clothes (plain or outlandish) and accompanies the Sisters.¹⁹ The French houses are not the only ones to require unusual clothing but not habits for postulants; however, in other orders postulants have a shared habit that is often rather simple and drab, such as a black choir robe with a grey cowl. In many houses that use whiteface, one begins to learn the artistic tricks of this sort of makeup as a postulant. However, as mentioned earlier, many such houses require that postulants leave their lips white as an indicator that they are not yet experienced enough to represent the order to the public. Upon elevation to the postulancy, many also take on their first Sister or Guard name, which they are allowed but not required to change as they learn more and advance through the ranks. North American postulancies generally last a minimum of three months; English postulants are in that role for a year and a day unless their postulancy is accelerated; and in the Convent of Dunn Eideann in Edinburgh the postulancy lasts, according to Brother Bimbo del Doppio Senso, “for as long as it takes you to make a full traditional habit.”²⁰

Postulants usually have one or two formally designated mentors, who are variously termed (depending on the house) “sponsors,” “big Sisters,” or “mothers.”

Smaller houses, particularly those in smaller countries, have found these two stages of postulant and aspirant to be prohibitive to their prospective members. Thus, houses such as those in Montevideo and Zurich skip both stages and induct new members directly into the novitiate. All houses, however, share the final two stages of novice and fully professed Sister. Novice Sisters around the world are recognizable by their white veils. Additionally, in many cities a Sister is first allowed to wear the house’s coronet as a novice. The Couvent de Paris is one exception to this rule; according to Sœur Néfertata, in that house novices wear a veil with no coronet, while fully professed Sisters, unique in the worldwide order to my knowledge, wear the coronet with no veil.²¹ Novices in the orders that use whiteface are allowed to have lips and therefore to represent the
order to the public; however, except in the special case of novices who are founding a mission and who therefore have no FPs nearby on a regular basis, novices generally may manifest (and therefore represent the order) only alongside an FP. There are fewer restrictions on a novice than on a postulant or aspirant in the houses that have those prior stages, but there are also greater expectations. Novices must manifest a minimum number of times and/or for a minimum period of time, the latter ranging from six months in many North American orders to five years in the Montevideo house. Like postulants, they work under the guidance and supervision of one or more FPs. In most houses, novices are required to faithfully attend all business meetings, thus proving their commitment to the less glamorous parts of the order’s work, and they often are required to complete a novice project. While such projects frequently take the form of organizing an event (often in the North American houses a fundraiser), novice projects can also include anything from reorganizing the house’s financial bookkeeping, its archives, or its website to designing a walking meditation based on the oral history of the Sisters.

Upon completing all of the requirements for novices, one either is simply elevated to FP by the house or applies to the house for elevation. At any of these stages one may be denied elevation by one’s house, based upon the opinions of the fully professed members. Such denials take place for a wide range of reasons, which vary from house to house and may be perceived as more or less accurate or valid by the person being denied. Nevertheless, the decision stands. Common reasons for refusing elevation include failure to attend meetings or to manifest regularly, interactions with the community or with other Sisters that senior members deem inappropriate, violations of the house’s policies and procedures, and even a vague perception among senior members of the order that the candidate is simply “not ready.” Upon refusing a candidate’s request for elevation, a house may choose to terminate that person’s candidacy altogether (which, unlike excommunication, usually does not preclude resuming one’s candidacy later, or in another house), or it may require the candidate to remain at the same rank for a longer period of time and then request elevation again.

Upon becoming a fully professed Sister—or in some houses a fully professed Guard—one has full rights and responsibilities in the house. Because of a perception that they play more of a supporting role in the
order, Guards are barred in some houses from becoming fully professed; other houses allow them to attain this rank but grant them fewer rights than fully professed Sisters enjoy. While FPs are expected to uphold the mission of their house and the values of the Sisterhood as a whole, they have much greater freedom of expression and activity than do postulants and novices. An FP Sister’s elevation is represented nearly universally by the replacement of the novice’s white veil with the black veil of the fully professed Sister, but only in houses that retain the traditional black-and-white habit do FPs commonly wear the black veil with which they were elevated. Instead, they wear veils of all different colors and even of different materials. During my fieldwork with the Order of Benevolent Bliss in Portland, Oregon, for example, Sister Dixie Rupt generally wore a feather boa mohawk instead of a coronet and veil, and once, for the Army of Lovers–themed bingo game shortly before Valentine’s Day, she showed up with a phalanx of toy soldiers glued down the center of her shaved scalp. Other Sisters prefer garlands of flowers, or they pile colorful feather boas on top of their coronets.

Fully professed Sisters are generally referred to by the title of “Sister” and Guards as “Guard” (novices are “Novice Sister” or “Novice Guard,” postulants are simply “Postulant,” and aspirants have no special title or name). However, some orders also use the title “Mother,” and some have an “Archmother” or “Archabbess.” In Australia, use of the term “Mother” originated as simply another clever pun, when founder Sister Volupta was renamed by other members of his house as Mother Inferior. It seems then to have become a term in that country for founding Sisters and for more long-standing members of the order. In the German-speaking and French orders, the usage of the title is much more clearly delineated: a Mother is the founder and/or the current head of a house and an Archmother or Archabbess is the founder and/or the current head of an entire order. Thus, ArchiMère Rita du Calvaire is one of the founders of the entire French order, and she became the Archmother of that order when the original Paris convent began to create new houses in other regions of the country.
Masculine Personas and Guards

While the order as a whole is referred to as “the Sisters,” there have been masculine personas since the latter part of the 1980s and Guards in the order since the early 1990s. Masculine personas do the same work as a Sister, but in a persona drawn from the roles open to men in the Roman Catholic Church. In North America one of the earliest such figures was Pope Dementia the Last, who appears to have joined in the early 1990s, and today there are Sisters of all genders and embodiments who have alternate personas that manifest as Brothers, Popes, Cardinals, or Fathers. Complicating this picture are Sisters like Father Oh, Mary!, who explained to me in an interview that despite the title of Father, she was a Sister. “I choose to manifest as a Father for purely physical reasons,” she told me.

I'm HIV-positive for over twenty-five years, and I have pretty severe neuropathy in my feet, and I can't wear high heels. So if I can't wear high heels, I don't want to be a Sister [meaning present a feminine persona]. I want to be a Father, and so that was purely the reason. And also I had done drag for so many years, as a woman, that I wanted to explore the whole genderfuck, kind of Cockettes aspect of drag. It was very appealing to me.26

The Australian situation, and historically that in the U.K. houses as well, is somewhat different in this regard. As the Sydney house’s website explains, “We . . . use ‘Gay Male Nuns’ and ‘Lesbian Monks’ in our terminology, as there are no such animals in the ranks of the Roman Catholic religious!”27 Mother Inferior explained that historically this approach was meant “to keep the gender statement clear.”28 Yet as structured as this may sound, more than one Australian Sister recounted to me stories of members who unsettled the structure by joining the order in personas that did not match their secular identities—cigender lesbian women, for instance, who joined as gay male nuns and used the pronoun “he,” and cigender gay men who joined as lesbian monks, using the pronoun “she.” Brother Bimbo, from the Convent of Dunn Eideann in Edinburgh, has bridged these traditions of gender in a different way, as the U.K. houses have shifted over time due to influences from the European
mainland. When she joined the order, she explained to me, “our house being descended from Australian [houses], . . . women were pretty much expected to be Brothers at that point. But now, since we decided that there was no point to that, because it was possibly emphasizing a duality with which we don’t agree, since then all the women in the order have chosen to be Sisters.” Brother Bimbo has retained the title of Brother despite being a Sister because of the alliteration in the name.29 Clearly, genderfuck comes in many forms; even within a relatively small and young organization, the nature of gender subversion changes as the politics of gender shift across regions and time periods.

In addition to male personas who do the same work as Sisters and may in some cases even be Sisters, there is another role that pursues the order’s long-standing mission of “the promulgation of universal joy and the expiation of stigmatic guilt” in different ways. As Jean-Yves Le Talec reports, when the French order was founded in Paris in 1990 it included four categories of persona. Three were already known in the San Francisco house that mentored the Parisian founders: Sisters, of course, as well as saints and angels—titles reserved for community members who had significantly contributed to the Sisters’ work. The fourth was a French innovation. Termed Garde-Cuisses (Leather Guards) as a pun on the Vatican’s Gardes Suisses (Swiss Guards), the Guards were, in Le Talec’s words, a response “au souhait de représenter la ‘tribu cuir/SM,’ et dont le rôle officiel est de ‘protéger le corps des nonnes’; leur rôle auprès du public est défini comme équivalent à celui des Sœurs; les Garde-Cuisses sont également maquillés” (to the wish to represent the “leather/SM tribe,” and for whom the official role is to “protect the bodies of the nuns”; their role with regard to the public is defined as equivalent to that of the Sisters; the Garde-Cuisses wear similar makeup).30 According to Le Talec, the San Francisco house was already including the leather community in the 1980s through the role of saints, who generally dressed in leather; the French order simply formalized their involvement by shifting that role to the vowed role of a Guard.31

During the course of the 1990s the role of the Guard spread to other orders, partially through the travels of Guards themselves as they moved to other countries and joined new houses. Today Guards are present, though in far fewer numbers than Sisters, in Germany, England, France, Canada, and the United States. Different houses have
incorporated the role of the Guard differently, such that Guards wear whiteface in some houses, partial whiteface in some (such as a single band of white across the eyes, or white on only one side of the face), and no whiteface in still others. Guards generally dress in black and often in leather, and in most houses their main role is to support and protect the Sisters of the house. In the Scottish houses, in part because of a need to include people who cannot make a long-term commitment to the order and a wish to honor the hard work of those people, rather than Guards there are henchpeople. These make no formal commitment to the Sisters, but simply show up and help out when they can. They generally dress in street clothes, but at least in 2011 the Edinburgh house had a henchperson who occasionally appeared in habit to make a particular political point.32

Taking Vows

At a certain stage of their development, generally upon entering the novitiate, Sisters and Guards take their first vows to the order, to the community, and to themselves. All take vows again upon their elevation to FP. The content and format of the vows vary between and sometimes within houses; whereas in some houses all members take the same vows, and may even reiterate or renew them whenever new Sisters or Guards are elevated, in others each individual member writes personal vows or a supervising Sister writes them. Some vows are truncated, such as those Sister Mary-Kohn described for the Los Angeles Sisters: “I’m a nun; I’ll get the rest later.”33 Others are elaborate, lengthy enough that most members cannot commit them to memory, and some even carry a copy of them on a laminated card.34 In many houses one takes vows twice at each stage of elevation where vows are required: once in private, often shortly after the house decides to elevate that Sister, and once in public. The public vows are often the more elaborate. Two stories from different orders serve to illustrate the wide range of ceremonies for Sisters who are becoming fully professed.

Sister Unity Divine, a founder of the Los Angeles house, had the task of designing the profession ceremony for the founding Sisters, which is still in use for new FPs in the house today. In contrast to their very brief private vows, this house conducts an elaborate and highly symbolic
public ritual for each newly elevated member. “We wrap everyone [all new FPs] in a red cloth,” Sister Unity explained to me.

They wear a white outfit, like our traditional white outfit, and a wedding veil. And we lift them in the air, all of us [the existing FPs] together, and when they’re halfway up they take their vow. And then we lift them all the way up and we turn them once in a circle. Before lifting them all the way up, we change the wedding veil for their hoobie-doobie [the Los Angeles house’s coronet] and black veil, and then we turn them in a circle, lifted above our heads, and then we set them down and open the red cloth, and they present themselves to the world and say their name aloud.

Mother Premonstratensia, one of the founders of the Adelaide house within the Australian order and later a member of the Sydney house, described a very different and uniquely Australian ceremony, although the story begins unremarkably enough:

When the novice elects are ready, or when the house agrees that they’re ready to progress to full profession, the Adelaide house rule specifically says that certain things have to be done. The novice gets to choose the place, the day, and must provide a feast. . . . Once that profession is set up, then the novice and the Mother of the house and the Novice Mistress would normally get together and work out an actual liturgical setting for it. And whilst there are, I would say, standard, generalized vows, which primarily aim at the four tenets of the order as originally designed by San Francisco, clustered around those the novice can place other vows as well. Generally, though, the vows are either fun vows, vows to lighten the burden to some extent, or they’re vows of a much more ordinary sort of thing. So, for example, I took a vow of opulence.

Mother Pre explained that like the Sydney house, the Adelaide house had taken the dingo as its symbol because of the ways that animal, similarly to LGBTQ people, had been unfairly maligned and even scapegoated in Australian society. He then returned to his story:

So . . . my profession was actually done by two Mothers, one from Sydney and one from Adelaide, in front of the dingo enclosure in the
Adelaide Hills, in a private zoo. And there’s a wonderful story that attaches to that, because we were all then in black habit, of course, and there was about eight of us, and this particular reserve contains this very large and somewhat complicated aviary. It’s a bit like a maze, it sort of wanders about for a bit. So we entered at one end, all in habit. [It is worth remembering here that Australian Sisters wear a full, traditional habit that resembles that of a Roman Catholic nun; they wear no whiteface, and they usually wear sunglasses.] Unbeknownst to us, coming in from the other direction was a Greek family. And we met in the middle. And they all had video cameras [and] they took lots of photographs of the nuns. So I suspect that somewhere there are relatives in the Peloponnese still scratching their heads, trying to work out what went on! But it was a great, fun event. We also had a little baby with us, and it turned out that the mother and the father of the baby had managed to find a manger. . . . So we put the baby in the manger and we all gathered round, and there were photographs of nuns hovering about the baby in the manger. It was lovely.36

Serious, farcical, or most often some combination of the two, a Sister’s or Guard’s vows are for life. Short of excommunication or apostasy, one never ceases to be a Sister, even in retirement or when out of habit. Nearly universally, the Sisters I interviewed described the experience of taking their vows as deeply moving and even life-changing.

**Developing a Name**

Upon attaining the level within their house where they must begin to develop a Sister or Guard persona, new members must also come up with a name for that persona. They retain their secular, or non-Sister, names, and members of the order may use both names interchangeably for them, but when out in the community they use only their Sister or Guard name. Some individual members and even entire houses work diligently to keep a Sister’s secular name from being revealed.37 With over 1,600 current and former Sisters and Guards, the task of creating a unique name becomes more difficult every year. In fact, there has been some discussion of loosening that requirement in cases where an established member is geographically far removed from the new member
who wants to use that same name. Generally, though, each Sister’s or Guard’s name is unique.

Sister names share much in common with the time-honored drag tradition of incorporating witty, sometimes searing, and often sexual puns into otherwise innocuous-sounding names; for this reason, it is helpful to pronounce Sister names aloud in order to understand or guess at their full meaning. Quite a few Sisters also incorporate religious references into this punning. Thus, for instance, the unassuming name of Krissy can become Sister Krissy Fiction, the Nun Who Got Nailed, of the Order of Benevolent Bliss in Portland, Oregon. Here the primary pun is on the word “crucifixion,” but what the Sisters call the “tag line” plays on the multiple meanings of the term “nailed”—not only literally nailed, as Jesus was to the cross, but also the meaning of having had sex. Although Sister Krissy did not reference any further meaning when discussing her name with me, one might also hear in the tag line a reference to arrest and perhaps to the long history of police harassment and entrapment of LGBTQ people. And lest one assume that such religious wordplay is simply the result of anti-Christian sentiment, it might be worth mentioning that in her secular life (the term Sisters use for when they are out of habit), Sister Krissy is an ordained minister with the United Church of Christ. While he is not currently serving a congregation because of the economic challenges of ministry, he has in the past served as a youth minister and continues to consider Christianity an influence on his broader religious perspectives.

The two earliest Sisters who remained involved with the order both initially took religiously inflected names. One, formerly a Roman Catholic seminarian until suspicions about his sexual attractions led to his being encouraged to leave, became Sister Missionary Position. The other, of Mennonite heritage but having become a practitioner of Transcendental Meditation, initially took the name “Sister Adhanarisvara” (sometimes spelled Adhanarishvara in archival documents), after an androgynous or intersex form of the Hindu deity Shiva. Sister Adhanarisvara soon became Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch, but in the early part of the 2010s she began using the name Sister Vish-Knew, returning again to a Hindu reference in the name of the deity Vishnu.

Other Sisters’ names are more direct in their meaning, such as the name of Sister Dire-Reahh, mentioned at the outset of this chapter.
Sister Dire explained to me that, like a number of Sisters, she had her name given to her and then found that it aligned well with the mission of the order:

I started off, as a postulant, calling myself . . . something like Dire Bolical. It had the Dire in there at the beginning, but it was only until I kind of got to noviceship that Sister Sissi [Sister Sissiphyllis] and Sister Pop [Sister Angelpopstitute] for some reason came up with this Imodium, diarrhea, coming-out-of-your-ass kind of idea. And I think it’s because I was a very energetic novice, and early fully professed Sister, where because I was helping to shape the house I was always engaged, always emailing, always telephoning, always organizing. And I have a tremendous amount of energy. And I think they had the idea that I had verbal diarrhea at some point. . . . In the London house . . . there is the idea that we want to kind of reflect our community, and diarrhea is an involuntary part of taking anti-retrovirals. It upsets your stomach and you will have diarrhea. And it’s good to explain that to somebody who doesn’t understand HIV and AIDS. And say, “There is a purpose to my name as well. It’s not just about making you laugh.”

Other Sisters’ and Guards’ names reflect their mission, like Guard Noah Shame of the Order of Benevolent Bliss in Portland, Oregon, or a personal experience or perspective, such as Sister Rhoda N’Lytenment of The Abbey of St. Joan in Seattle. Occasionally a Sister will take a name that references her racial or ethnic identity, like Sister Mary-Kohn of the Los Angeles house, a Chicana Sister whose name is a pun on maricón, an epithet in Spanish for a gay man. And some Sisters’ names come closer to the names one might hear in a Roman Catholic convent. Sister Mary Ralph of the San Francisco house even took the name of her late biological aunt, a Roman Catholic Sister of Mercy, in recognition that both of them were doing the same work but in different venues. Finally, some Sisters’ names offer political commentary, such as the name of Sister Connie Pinko of the San Francisco house, which references the socialist and anarchist tendencies of queer activists and some Sisters in that city.

A note on pronouns is also in order here. Because one’s secular and Sister or Guard personas are separate entities, they easily can and often
do have different genders. Additionally, the question of pronouns—at least in a language that uses gendered pronouns—is further complicated by situations such as those described above for Father Oh, Mary! and Brother Bimbo, both of whom are Sisters and use feminine pronouns (she/her/hers). In the Australian order and among some of their U.K. descendants, nuns are always “he,” because they are gay male nuns (regardless of one’s secular gender or sexual identity), and monks are always “she” because they are lesbian monks. Outside Australia, quite a few Sisters have told me that they don’t care what pronoun is used for their Sister persona, although I have yet to meet a Guard who does not use masculine pronouns. And some Sisters feel that Sisters are genderless, or perhaps a different gender altogether—that of “Sister.” A few of these asked me to use no pronouns at all for their Sister persona. Likewise, I use each person’s chosen secular pronoun when speaking of experiences in secular life. Thus, I may write of one Sister as “she,” another as “he,” and a third using no pronouns at all. I may switch, when writing about a single Sister, between “she” and “he,” or between “she” and “they,” as I switch contexts between the person’s work with the Sisters and their secular life. This is a part of working with the Sisters, and increasingly of working with queer communities in general. Gender is never simple, is rarely predictable, and sometimes is not at all what it may seem.

Motivations and Priorities

People join the Sisters for a wide variety of reasons, having largely to do with one or more aspects of who the Sisters are, the work they do, and the communities within which they work. Since these various factors differ somewhat from house to house, so too do the precise reasons people give for joining. For instance, in Las Vegas, the Sin Sity Sisters focus exclusively on HIV/AIDS services, raising an impressive amount of money each year for their program, which serves people of all genders and sexualities who are HIV-positive and cannot afford medication. Working directly with pharmacies and insurance companies, the Sisters’ AIDS Drug Assistance Program, or SADAP, pays for HIV medications for their clients. Logically, then, those who join the Sin Sity Sisters usually have been affected in their own lives by HIV and AIDS, whether
because they are themselves HIV-positive, because the disease has affected their friends and loved ones, or both.43

Many are drawn to the community service aspect of the Sisters, some through the focus on HIV and AIDS and others through an equally strong commitment to other aspects of the Sisters’ work. Three Sisters’ stories help to illustrate this.

Sister Angelpopstitute joined the Couvent d’Ouïl in the west of France in 1996 as Sœur Angel, de l’ABBA Tahj-Maale (a play on the French word *labattage*, meaning slaughter and referencing homophobic violence in France at the time). Before becoming a Sister, he was already involved in HIV services and support, but having become the director of an important AIDS charity in France, he began to be concerned that the organization was becoming too reliant on state funds and might not retain its own identity and voice. He had already encountered the Sisters the previous year, so when he quit his position with the charity, he approached the Couvent d’Ouïl instead. Sister Angel mentioned multiple times during our conversation the friends and fellow Sisters lost to AIDS. She told me,

The first thing I did, when I started to think about what’s going to be my character, because of all these people that we had lost, so, right? I had brought two golden wings. I didn’t even know what I wanted to do. Two golden wings. And then when I was going out as, not a Sister, not even a novice, but a postulant, I was allowed to wear not whatever I wanted, not a Sister outfit, but some kind of thing that I would be recognizable from all other people. So I decided I would actually have these two golden wings, and I had bought at the time two bright red feather boas. I took all the feathers out and I glued all the feathers on the wings, and that’s the way it started. And after that, well, that’s the kind of angel that I want to be for people. What is very, very important for me is the memory. . . . And that started the journey of Angel as a duty of memory.44

Sister Connie Pinko, on the other hand, was a high school student on a trip with their mother to tour potential colleges when they first encountered the Sisters in San Francisco. Sister Connie recounted, “Growing up in a place like Colorado [more specifically, Colorado Springs], where openly gay people aren’t there—I was the only openly
gay person in my high school growing up—it blew me away that there were these people who were so unabashedly gay.” She laughed.

Like, big homos, and they didn't give a shit what other people thought. And not only that, but they were there doing political work, they were there doing awareness and, you know, amazing, amazing work. Like, donation buckets, everything. And I was in love and didn't really know what to do about it. I thought it was all gay men. And my sophomore year of college at Cal [the University of California at Berkeley], a friend of mine who I had actually known from activist work back in high school told me that he was starting to join the Sisters, and he was a trans guy. And I was like, “Oh, so they let people who aren’t just, like, standard gay men in the organization.” And he was like, “Yeah, there's women, there's trans women, there's trans men, it’s great. You should do it.”

After graduation, Sister Connie did.

A number of Sisters spoke of having a calling to the Sisterhood, much as they might in the context of religious nuns’ orders, and for a significant minority this calling is an extension or redirection of a calling to more traditional religious leadership. The following conversation began when Sister Kali Vagilistic X.P. Aladocious of the Asylum of the Tortured Heart in San Diego asserted, “I honestly feel that I was born to be a Sister.” I asked her to expand on her comment, and then Sister Trystina T. Rhume, who was between houses at the time, and Guard Inya from San Diego each weighed in as well.

SK: I felt that it was a natural expression of what's inside of me. In a lot of ways a destiny. When I saw a Sister for the first time it was on TV. I wanted to be that. By the time life happened and it came around, it was more of an opportunity to express what was going on inside. And so it was taking something deep within me and bringing it forward. And something very natural to me.

ST: Can I say something to that too?

MW: Yeah.

ST: I also had that calling. My father is a Methodist minister, and my grandfather is a Methodist minister, and my great-grandfather was a Methodist minister. And they say some things are just in your blood.
When I was a teenager I was just, I hated all religion. But honestly, I do think that it was in my blood. Because when I heard what the Sisters did it was the same thing. I was like, I had always had a calling to do something like that, but when you’re gay that’s just not something that they’re going to allow, and I’m not going to hide the gayness in me. And so the Sisters is a perfect fit! You know what I mean? It’s a perfect fit! So I get to react to what’s in my blood, and do what I think I was called to do in some way, that fits the community that I live in. It’s brilliant!

SK: I’m shaman, I’m priest, I’m a nun. One of the things that I’ve been looking into, it’s a term that has been given to me, and then I recognized it but I didn’t really understand it, was heyoka, which is Lakota for a particular type of shaman work, which is living the contrary. Contrary to that which is happening. It’s a form of sacred clown. After a few years of the term being used referring to me, I looked it up and read the definition. And I could remove “heyoka” and put “Sister” in there, and it’s exactly the same. And so people are called to be heyoka, it’s a deep calling, Creator calls. And so I think it, [to Sister Trystina] like you, it is in your blood.

ST: It is.

SK: It’s a calling that, you know, whatever divinity, that pulls out of me.

MW: [To Guard Inya] Did you want to take on that one?

GI: Sure. Well, actually, when the San Diego house formed they had three initial Guards, one of whom left very quickly. The two initial Guards that stayed both wished to become Sisters. So they were actually looking for Guards, and I was asked. It took me a few months to ponder it, because if I was going to do this it was going to be something that I was going to have a commitment to. It wasn’t something that I felt as something that I was destined to, or that was a calling for me, but it has over time very definitely become something that is, it’s very much a part of me. And it has become something of a calling, and a deep commitment for me.

Themes of religion and a sense of calling were not unique to my conversation with Sister Kali, Sister Trystina, and Guard Inya. As a nonreligious order, the Sisters attract members of many religions as well as a high proportion of the “spiritual but not religious” who have captured the
attention of sociologists of religion over the past few decades. They also attract a number of atheists and secular humanists. As Sister Edna Daze explained to me in an interview during her novitiate, “If I felt like it was a religious organization, I probably wouldn’t have had any interest in it.”48 Like many both in and beyond queer communities, some Sisters have quite dismissive opinions of religion. Others, however, see in the order an important expression of their spirituality, the source itself of their spirituality, or even the focus of their Christian ministry.

There are also those who join because they feel they have taken too much from their communities in the past, and they need to give back. This is particularly the case for the small number of interview participants who spoke openly with me of having struggled with drug use, particularly crystal meth, in the past. Having succeeded in reaching sobriety, they found justice, sustenance, and strength in giving back to the queer community from which they felt they had taken so much at the height of their addiction.

And, last but far from least, quite a few Sisters told me at one time or another that being fun and pretty is a fantastic way to do community work. Sister Anna Wrecks-Ya, a founder of Portland’s Order of Benevolent Bliss, spoke of her immediate reaction to the idea of becoming a Sister:

My very first knee-jerk reaction was, “Wow, I can still be a boy and wear makeup and dresses and have a good time.” Knee-jerk. And the moment I spent a minute talking to them, asking who they are, what they do, and what’s their purpose, why are they doing this, and they laid the, you know, the condom outreach, and community service and raising money for people who need help, and generally making your fellow man, you know, as a generic term, fellow man’s life better, “Whoa, oh, wait, wait, I’m sorry, that was a chest pain I just had. You mean I can dress like this, have as much fun as you do, and do community service and work with my people, in that capacity?” “Oh, yeah.” “Whoa.” Oh yeah, that sealed the deal.49

Sister Nadia Ahnwilda, of Seattle’s Abbey of St. Joan, had a similar story. She had lost her best friend Matt to AIDS complications a few years earlier, and she told me, “I’ve always wanted to do something, to give
something back, in Matt’s honor. And talking with the Sisters and knowing what they do, then it just clicked. This is what I’m supposed to do. And so that kind of led me into being a Sister.” She then added, “I gotta tell you, though, the glitter pulled me right in. That got me. That put me right over the top. I get to wear glitter! Yaay!”50

Family Ties and Community Ethics

It is not unusual for people in LGBTQ communities to form kinship networks based on shared identities rather than, or in addition to, blood relationships.51 The adoption of Sister Sledge’s “We Are Family” as an unofficial anthem and the use of the word “Family” as a coded reference to LGBTQ people are just two indicators of the importance of what some LGBTQ people call “chosen family” in these communities, whose members still experience familial rejection or disapproval all too often when their sexual and/or gender identity becomes known. For many Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, the order plays a similar role in their lives, and quite a few interviewees called the order a family or likened its dynamics—for good and for ill—to those of a family. Drawing their structure from that of Roman Catholic nuns’ orders certainly encourages this dynamic, as members speak of “my Sisters,” of “my mother in the order,” and so on; thus, the Sisters come by their familial model through both the LGBTQ culture around them and their emulation of nuns’ orders.52 Many Sisters and Guards spoke of their houses as their families, but many who spoke of the Sisters as family clearly also had the worldwide order in mind. It is understood within the order, for instance, that a member can travel to any region where there are Sisters and always find an open door and a welcoming host. Some Sisters joked about no longer having to pay for hotels when they travel, and some spoke of their delight in knowing that they had friends around the world whom they did not even know yet, or whom they knew only through social media.

Being part of such a tight-knit community has its rewards, but it also brings challenges whenever members attempt to sort out difficulties such as the ethical dilemmas faced by advocates of a joyous, guilt-free existence who also promote safer sex. In their various regions of the world the Sisters are part of communities that were originally defined, both internally and externally, by sexual attraction and sexual activity.
This definition has played an important role in shaping LGBTQ communities in all of the cities in which the Sisters are active, and is part of the reason why the Sisters’ intervention in public health discourse with a wry, sexy, and sex-positive guide to safer sex was so critical in the early days of the AIDS epidemic. It also means that ethical questions around sexual activity and around the use of intoxicants arise for members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence with far more frequency and complexity than in any other order of nuns.

During the course of my fieldwork I saw three key ethical questions arise time and again, not only in different houses but in many different orders around the world. Sometimes they arose as active questions for a house to sort out; sometimes they came up through condemnation as members of one house or order gently poked fun at or flatly decried those of another for perceived violations; and sometimes they came up through the absence of concern, as when a member of a house would say something like, “Well, we’re far less uptight than X house. That sort of thing really doesn’t bother us.” These key questions addressed the appropriateness of and limits to alcohol and recreational drug use when in habit, the appropriateness of and limits to sexual activity when in habit, and whether members of the order have a duty to adhere to or avoid particular practices when having sex out of habit.

The questions regarding appropriate activity in habit come, to be sure, from a very different set of values than they might in other nuns’ orders. This is not a question of whether the Sisters approve or disapprove of alcohol and drug use. While there are a number of sober Sisters and Sisters in recovery, neither they nor the order as a whole takes any negative stance on substance use, legal or illegal. Even Sisters who disapprove of such use in their secular lives spoke of reminding themselves, “No guilt!” when they put on their habit and stressed that while their secular persona might disapprove, such is not the proper role of their Sister or Guard persona. Furthermore, most houses are unconcerned by their members having a few drinks while in habit, and many bartenders will offer members of the order free drinks out of respect for the work they do and in gratitude for the clientele they draw.

However, Sisters and Guards around the world are also keenly aware that they publicly represent the entire order, particularly among members of their communities who don’t know the Sisters well and to whom
they all look alike. Thus, they are quite sensitive to behavior on their own part or on the part of fellow members of the order that may meet with public disapproval. Drinking while in habit may be just fine, but visible intoxication is not. Several Sisters in different houses told me of their distress upon hearing public denouncements of the Sisters for being drunk or high while in habit, and stressed that the commentary attacked the order as a whole even when in most cases the critic had seen only one or two Sisters in such a state. In another context, I witnessed anonymous and frankly cruel derogation of a Sister who had become known for disappearing into the men’s room in bars toward the end of a night and returning with her makeup in disarray from performing fellatio. While sexual activity in habit is generally discouraged within the order, in other houses I heard similar and even much more involved sexual activity in habit clucked over with knowing smiles and shaking heads. In this particular house, on the other hand, it was considered—at least by one member, and I gathered more—to be an appalling source of embarrassment to the miscreant’s entire house.

More complicated still is the question of whether the ethics of the order should extend into the secular lives of its members. On the one hand, Sisters and Guards are very clear that one takes vows to this order for life, and I heard numerous stories of people striving to meet the values and ideals of the Sisters even when not in habit and not with the order; in fact, many people described their Sister or Guard persona as being a better person than their secular self. On the other hand, many also explained to me that part of what made the time-intensive and emotionally draining volunteer work of the Sisters sustainable was the ability to “take off” the Sister or Guard persona and live as one’s secular self the majority of the time. Because the habits and whiteface or sunglasses aid in preventing the community from associating a Sister persona (less so for many Guards) with the secular person, it is possible for many Sisters in particular to take a complete break from the constant availability to the community that is their hallmark when in habit. So do they take a break from the Sisters’ values too? When it comes to the promulgation of universal joy and the expiation of stigmatic guilt, everyone I spoke with would answer a clear “No.” But what about when it comes to the safer sex that the Sisters advocate? Here the central tenets of the Sisters’ mission appear to clash with their concern over public image in the
midst of an ethical debate that has preoccupied communities of men who have sex with men at least since the advent of reliable antiretroviral medications: the debate over barebacking.54

“Barebacking” is one of the slang terms used to refer to unprotected anal sex between men. Because anal sex between any two people carries a fairly high risk of transmitting infections, especially when the penetrative object is a sex organ rather than a sex toy, public health workers and others who advocate safer sex practices are particularly concerned about the health risks of unprotected anal sex. On the other hand, some gay activists have rightly countered that far more attention is being paid to such sex between men than between men and women, and have argued that the concern (some say panic) over barebacking perpetuates the homophobic association between male-male sex, illness, and death.55 And while some feel that barebacking is acceptable within a monogamous couple or even a trio, as long as the partners are all HIV-negative or all carrying the same strain of the virus, others argue (as in most safer-sex discourse) that anyone making such a choice is putting his health in the hands of his partner(s) when he trusts them not ever to have sex with someone else without using condoms and without disclosing it. Those male-identified Sisters who have sex with men are in many ways at the center of this debate, being not only a part of the community around which it storms but also part of an order that advocates and educates around safer sex and that has focused much of its work on HIV and AIDS since their discovery.

There are no clear answers to be had, which perhaps is an indication of the complexity of the debate and the honesty of the Sisters’ engagement with it. They are clear that when they work with community members who bareback, their task is neither to shame nor to scold but to accept, to educate, and to take a harm reduction approach such as encouraging the person to be regularly tested for HIV or for re-infection with a new strain of the virus if already HIV-positive. And they are clear that as Sisters they do not advocate barebacking, even as they do not condemn those who partake in the practice. But in their own lives, when not in habit, the ethics of the situation are far trickier. I have spoken with Sisters who flatly stated that they would never bareback, Sisters who said that it is a Sister’s right to do what he wishes when out of habit but that they hope he will do it quietly so as not to cause a scandal involving the
order, and Sisters who privately confided that they do bareback with their partners, in the context of an established and closed relationship. Far from being cloistered nuns, the Sisters are deeply embedded within their communities and experience the same struggles those communities experience, sometimes in heightened ways because of their public prominence and the focus of their work.

Beginning to work with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, either as a member or as a researcher, entails a rather steep learning curve when it comes to terminology and procedures. For someone becoming a Sister or a Guard, this learning is part of the reason for the carefully delineated stages of training, along with the challenges of learning the sartorial and performative aspects of the role. Induction into any new community can be a lengthy endeavor; in the Sisters, with their serious parody of Roman Catholic orders, that process is carefully codified and monitored even as some in all ranks chafe at the constraints imposed by such structure. So how did this serious parody begin, and how did it develop the myriad and often structured forms it takes today? While the Sisters have their roots in the random acts of three bored men in San Francisco, they are also the result of a constellation of factors, from artistic and activist precursors to new religious movements to an epidemic to politics within and beyond gay communities from the 1970s onward. As early member Sister Loganberry Frost put it, much to the amusement of fellow early Sister Mary Media: “Well, it was like this asteroid belt came into the local universe and landed in San Francisco. Didn’t really know what was happening. And there were various asteroids, there was the spiritual asteroids, and the political asteroids, and the showgirl asteroids, and the big ego people.” The story of those asteroids, and the corners of the universe from which they came, is the focus of the following chapter.