Zapping Storms: Camp, Parody, and Queer Video Activism

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This article analyzes the parody response to "Gathering Storm," an anti-gay marriage ad released in April 2009, as an early YouTube video meme. Focusing on the literal excess of the storm metaphor, its low-grade visual aesthetic, and what I term as the ad's heterofragility, the parodies collectively use camp humor to critique the homophobic campaign. Based on interviews with some of the parody creators, the article also connects the impulse, organization, production, and distribution of the parodies—those that were shot as in-person group productions—to historical modes of queer activism, arguing that the digital parody phenomenon represents a digital adaptation of zaps, traditionally disruptive and theatrical demonstrations from earlier feminist, LGBTQ, and AIDS-era activism.

Keywords: camp, parody, humor, satire, zaps, queer, LGBTQ activism, video meme, Gathering Storm, gay marriage, participatory culture, YouTube

On April 7, 2009, the National Organization for Marriage (NOM) released an anti-gay marriage ad uploaded to YouTube and broadcast on television in several northeastern states (Montopoli, 2009). Founded in 2007, NOM (n.d.) is a non-profit political organization and lobbying group, operating, per their website at the time, "in response to the growing need for an organized opposition to same-sex marriage in state legislatures" (para. 1). Titled "Gathering Storm," the ad featured several subjects—hired actors—standing amid ominous clouds, warning the audience of the dangers same-sex marriage posed for them: "My freedom will be taken away" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009, 0:13). The video received an instantaneous backlash online as YouTube users uploaded their own video reactions, remixes, and parodies in the days and weeks that followed. These proliferating responses largely satirized the visual aesthetics of the ad, the tone and delivery, and/or the rhetorical and legal content of the arguments. Although many of the immediate video responses were vlog-style solo videos or annotations of the original ad, within a few days several full-blown parodies appeared with groups of people who performed and recorded their own versions in-person and uploaded them online.

One of these parodies was spearheaded by New York City–based artist and writer Katharine, who saw the original ad and thought, "This needs to be parodied immediately" (personal communication, February 2, 2018). She added, "I remember saying to my friend Calen, who is my coproducer, this is going to be parodied within 24 hours. We have a day. Let's do this." In an interview, Katharine told me,

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"I had access to a camera and a lot of creative friends, and when I saw it, I was so mad." She recounted how quickly it all came together: writing the script over a coffee meeting and then reaching out to friends, fellow actors, and improv peers to be in the production. As she described it, "We went to a rehearsal studio [and] rented this room for two hours. We had them do the script. Then we did it improv-style. We edited it in three hours and had it up." What resulted was hilarious satire, including accusations that "the gays took my lunch money" (HappyCousin, 2009, 0:42), "they want to end baseball" (HappyCousin, 2009, 1:02), and "they're going to turn tampons into rocket ships" (HappyCousin, 2009, 1:03). As Katharine revealed, their parody circulated online and even made it onto a segment on CNN. Both the impetus and the assembly of Katharine's production were echoed by creators and participants of several other parody videos.

In this article, I use textual analysis and interviews with content creators to analyze the in-person, group-produced parodies of "Gathering Storm" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009) to argue that these productions did not just represent a momentary YouTube meme but rather one of the early forms of online video actions that served as a bridge between queer activism of the past and the ensuing digital LGBTQ advocacy that rose to mainstream prominence in the 2010s. In his assessment of historical responses to offensive, homophobic content, Joel Penney (2015) briefly singles out these remixes and parodies of "Gathering Storm" as a recent move to iconophilia, a practice of transforming the meanings of offending images by broader online participation—as opposed to traditional, iconophobic approaches of taking the original video or media content down. This article expands on Penney's (2015) argument to assert that through camp humor and compelled organizing, this subset of parody videos is a digital adaptation of traditional zap actions of past activist movements. This article specifies the collective camp critique of the parodies as undermining the performance of heteronormativity—what I term heterofragility—and demonstrates how the politics animating the digital video activism in 2009 are tied to a lineage of queer, campy responses to homophobia and persistent attempts to police gender and sexuality.

Methodology

This article combines a historical review of zap actions and camp humor with textual analysis and interviews to construct a throughline between historical modes of queer activism and the parody phenomenon following "Gathering Storm" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009) in the early YouTube age. The literature review sections on camp and zaps double as the historical antecedents instrumental for building the analysis of the contemporary videos that follow them.

The original "Gathering Storm" ad prompted thousands of video responses (Penney, 2015). The subset of 10 videos analyzed in this article (Table 1) is from a larger sample that was collected in 2017 and 2018 using YouTube searches, Google searches, and personal archives.

Table 1. Sample of In-Person Group Productions.

Video ID	Title of Video	Author	Uploaded
Parody 1	The Darkness Is Coming	rootsofequality	4/11/09
Parody 2	Gathering Storm Spoof	Andrew Keenan-Bolger	4/13/09
Parody 3	The Best Parody of NOM's "Gathering Storm" Ad	djm8djm8	4/13/09
Parody 4	Colbert's Anti-gay Marriage Ad	Comedy Central	4/16/09
Parody 5	Response to NOM's Gathering Storm	HappyCousin	4/17/09
Parody 6	A Gaythering Storm	Funny or Die	4/21/09[1]
Parody 7	The Crimson Tide Is Coming	offchanceprod	4/21/09
Parody 8	Gathering Storm Spoof—Auditions	Andrew Keenan-Bolger	4/23/09
Parody 9	Equal Rights: Weathering the Storm	FFreeThinker	4/26/09
Parody 10	The Best Response to NOM's "Gathering Storm" ad	Victor Oliveira	11/6/09

Engaging with insights from everyday content creators follows in the methodological mold of recent scholarship that considers the labor, creativity, and politics of everyday media practitioners (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). I contacted creators and any credited participants involved in these 10 videos using information found at that time on the YouTube pages for the accounts affiliated with the uploaded videos and the description text for each video. I received responses from five participants involved in four separate parodies. I conducted semi-structured in-person, phone, and Skype interviews with the five participants— Mike, Katharine, Victor, Teresa, and Sabrina—in early 2018 that each lasted between 25 and 50 minutes. All interview subjects were comfortable publishing their first names. The data collected from the interviews helped corroborate the textual analysis and were instrumental in detailing the creative and production process of making the parodies, which informs the following analysis.

Historical and Theoretical Framework

Zaps as Historical Context and Antecedent

Zaps emerged as public forms of disruptive direct action employed by a variety of social movement groups and activists in the second half of the 20th century. Zaps are familiarly associated with the Gay Activist Alliance, who used them to target anti-gay media and news coverage in the 1970s, but they have lesser-known roots in the antiwar and free speech movements of the 1960s and pre-Stonewall lesbian feminist protest actions. Sara Warner (2012) provides a detailed history of artists, activists, and dissidents in the 1960s "answering the call for a participatory democracy" through zap actions, "designed to foster pleasurable communion through daring displays of ribald humor and acerbic wit" (p. 81). Lesbian and feminist groups during this time followed suit, planning high-profile political performances often targeting the institution of marriage as a foundation of patriarchal oppression. These included a February 1969 zap at the first annual Bridal Fair at Madison Square Garden in New York City and a similar action staged months later at the New York Marriage License Bureau.

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[1] "A Gaythering Storm" was uploaded to Funnyordie.com on April 21, 2009 and later to YouTube.

Once the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) arrived on the scene, they used zaps to target the media's negative representation and reporting of gay issues and plotlines, disrupting filming and news broadcasts to draw attention to the cause (Capsuto, 2020; Connolly, 2018; Gross, 2001). In 1971, a couple of years after The Feminists zapped the NYC Marriage License Bureau to protest the institution of marriage, the GAA organized a zap there, though this time to advocate for *inclusion* into marriage. Members of the GAA were documented on video, from rehearsing at their headquarters to invading the office, where they arrived in formal attire, bringing invitations, cake, and coffee urns to hold a mock engagement party for two male couples. They sang songs with altered lyrics and occupied space until the police arrived (Franke-Ruta, 2013).

Two key features help cohere various actions as zaps. The first is their use of performance and play as a mode of political critique. Per Warner (2012), "zaps combine physical comedy, symbolic costumes, expressive gestures, and farcical timing in brief, improvised skits that are designed to shock and awe people, jolting them out of their complacency and fixed frames of reference" (p. xi). The public, confrontational, and playful ethos of zaps was also a prominent component of AIDS-era activism, predominantly in the protest events staged by ACT UP. In chronicling some of these actions, Joshua Gamson (1989) notes, "One hears and sees in ACT UP a constant reference to theater" (p. 355). Among the well-known demonstrations during this era was the "die-in," where "activists draw police-style chalk outlines around each other's 'dead' bodies, giv[ing] death another meaning by shifting the responsibility" (Gamson, 1989, p. 361). For another action, activists in 1991 singled out North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms to protest his stance on gays and AIDS by covering his home in a 15-foot inflated nylon replica of a condom. As reported, a printed message read, "A condom for unsafe politics" (Associated Press, 1991, para. 2). The AIDS-era zaps utilized camp and deliberately trespassed the bounds of good taste to challenge stigmatization and "deviant" labels (Gamson, 1989, pp. 355, 362).

The second salient feature common across zaps—whether anti-establishment or assimilationist—was using or attracting mainstream media attention. As Warner (2012) contextualizes, "The purpose of zaps was to ensure that the revolution would be televised . . . to create a media circus, drawing attention to underrepresented causes and unpopular viewpoints" (p. 80). Media—coverage, disruption, utility—was a central organizing function of zaps. In a press article recounting the history of zaps in gay protest, Fred Fejes is quoted as claiming, "The whole action was organized around getting the media to pay attention to it" (Lilly, 2014, para. 8). In the same article, GAA member Richard Wandel reiterates, "We liked humor, but the aim of course is to be on the news, that's the whole point here . . . You've got to get on the 6 o'clock news" (Lilly, 2014, para. 17). Gamson's (1989) work on AIDS activism echoes the same sentiments as he asserts that ACT UP usually treated the media as allies in the practical function of gaining coverage. He cites an interviewee asserting, "The media aren't the enemy, the media are manipulated by the enemy, and we can manipulate them too" (Gamson, 1989, p. 360). This demonstrates the centrality of media in zaps both as a target and a tool.

Camp as Operational Context

A key component in making sense of the nearly simultaneous parody productions of the original ad and analyzing their common targets is to understand the instrumental role of camp as instinctual, queer response. The scholarship on camp is as rich as it is contentious. Some of the overarching tenets of camp as queer critique most relevant to analyzing the parody phenomenon here are that camp (a) is not an inherent quality but a relation, (b) originates from gay male culture, (c) is informed by power dynamics, (d)

provides communal belonging as a social function, (e) undermines hegemonic ideologies of gender and sexuality that oppress queer people as a political function, and (f) has a form commonly expressed through an emphasis on artifice, surfaces, and incongruity.

In her seminal essay, Susan Sontag (1999) remarks that camp is a way of looking at things, discoverable in objects and behavior. Both Jack Babuscio (1999) and Esther Newton (1999) further clarify that camp is not a thing but "a relationship between things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality" (Newton, 1999, p. 102). Newton (1999) elaborates, "Camp usually depends on the perception or creation of *incongruous juxtaposition*. Either way, the homosexual 'creates' the camp, by pointing out the incongruity or by devising it" (p. 103). Camp is thus a process. Fabio Cleto (1999) adds, "Both camp object and subject are made into a *situation*, a theatrical setting and scenes" (p. 25). Sontag (1999) asserts that naïve camp comes from a seriousness that fails. Yet there needs to be a subject that reads this failure. Cleto (1999) explains, "The naively camp object can only be seen as an outcome of the intervention of a camp(ing) subject" (pp. 25–26). This interplay between object and subject is the relation at work with the "Gathering Storm" ad and its parodies.

Uses of camp arguably expand along with the rise in visibility of gay movements in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, especially in response to hostility and derision in popular media. As one of the tools of protest, art, and survival against the oppressive environment of the AIDS crisis, camp humor and aesthetics proliferated in activism. Per Daniel Brouwer (2010), "gay men employed camp humor as a means of personal and collective survival, as a way of expressing publicly one's queerness, and as a performative critical stance against domination" (p. 222). Crucial to camp's longevity is its function to bring its audience, its interlocutors, together. In a study interviewing gay men's taste and consumption, Steven Kates (2001) concludes, "Camp sensibility unites gay men, for example, by allowing them to denigrate the allegedly 'low-class' tastes of heterosexuals" (p. 339). Camp humor serves as a powerful indicator of in-group identification—being in on the joke—and confirms a shared culture, a communal language.

Among the consistent critiques of Sontag's article is her contention that camp is apolitical when in fact camp humor frequently serves a critical function of highlighting and exposing the artifice of the taken-for-granted dominant order. This is often achieved through parody. As Judith Butler (1999) cautions, "Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetition effectively disruptive" (p. 365). Camp parody, explicitly or implicitly, routinely targets the performance and practice of gender and heteronormative assumptions. Per Katrin Horn (2017), camp "disrupts normative notions of gender and sexuality, oppressive ideologies more generally, as well as any given pretext's status as 'original' or 'natural'" (p. 21). This critical function operates through camp's many forms and articulations, most consistently a reliance on irony and incongruity to perform—reveal, efface—the contradictions and fragility of "natural" conventions like masculinity and femininity, practiced through an emphasis on style. Dyer (1999) explains:

> Because we had to hide what we really felt (gayness) for so much of the time, we had to master the façade of whatever social set-up we found ourselves in . . . we have developed an eye and ear for surfaces, appearances, forms—style. (p. 114)

This form, and its repetition through parody, is most clearly deployed in the video responses analyzed later, where I argue it is the performance of heteronormativity and its attendant gender and sexual essentialism that is ultimately satirized.

Contemporary Context: 2009

NOM's prominence by 2009 was fueled by the immediate political effects of Proposition 8 in California in November 2008, where the state narrowly voted to remove same-sex couples' right to marriage. Much like Stonewall, which resulted in a groundswell of gay, lesbian, and queer organizations in the 1970s, the national reverberations of Prop 8 triggered a new wave of LGBTQ organizing. As several other states moved to legalize same-sex marriage through the courts or ballot vote in 2009, opposition also grew more visible. In addition to an increasingly public movement for LGBTQ rights at this time, what made "Gathering Storm" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009) such a lightning rod also needs to be understood through contemporary media contexts informed by a peak in political humor and satire in popular culture and a rising tide of user-generated video content by and about LGBTQ people.

Although scholarship on parody and political humor in popular media culture in the 2000s has predominantly focused on cable news satire or animated comedies (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009), the turn to participatory online political video practices deserves more attention. From the pre-YouTube flash-animated sensation "This Land" (JibJab, 2004), posted on Jib Jab in 2004 (see Baumgartner, 2007; Jenkins, 2008), to the 2006 U.S. midterm elections and the 2008 presidential season with user-generated mock ads targeting the McCain, Clinton, and Obama campaigns (Jenkins, 2008; Tryon, 2008), online video became a major destination for distributing and consuming political humor.

With the advent of video platforms and easier and cheaper modes of making and distributing content in the mid-2000s, LGBTQ users also quickly caught on and used these platforms for communication, expression, and community (Gross, 2007). By 2009, various LGBTQ communities had already built networked video enclaves. Alexander and Losh (2010) and Bryan Wuest (2014) track the gay online cultures and generic conventions of coming out videos. Meanwhile, Laura Horak (2014) and Tobias Raun (2016) chart the emergence, prominence, and variations of transition videos for trans people online. Such strong affiliations among a multiplicity of niche queer communities—on YouTube in particular and growing video publics in general—made this space the go-to for uploading commentary on gay politics.

Analysis

The following analysis is split into three sections. The first section relies more heavily on textual analysis of the parody videos to make a case for their collective turn to camp via aesthetic critique. The second section combines analysis of the parody videos alongside interviews with participants to argue that the underlying camp critique of the parodies reveals what I term heterofragility, a failure to uphold approximations of heterosexuality and traditional marriage as natural. The third section relies predominantly on interviews with participants to argue that collectively, the organization of the in-person group parodies are digital adaptations of zaps.

Camping—With a Chance of Raining Men

The easiest targets of parody were the visual exaggerations of the storm metaphor coupled with the awkward, low-quality postproduction work of the original "Gathering Storm" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009) ad. Together, these components of the ad and their respective parodies highlight an aesthetic flop that is at the center of the shared camp response. The ad's opening line, "There's a storm gathering" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009, 0:01), is matched with a digital backdrop of dark clouds, frequent strikes of lightning, faint thunderous sound effects, and a somber piano score. The use of this visual embellishment brings a literal excess to the scripted metaphor of same-sex marriage as the impending storm. This visual repetition of the storm metaphor is among the first quips in the parody videos. After the first line in Parody 6, actor Jason Lewis, pointing his thumb backward, says, "That's why there are these clouds behind me. They represent a storm that's gathering" (Funny or Die, 2013, 0:04). In Parody 3, two of the early lines describing the coming storm claim, "Just like Katrina, but worse. Soon, it will be raining men" (djm8djm8, 2009, 0:06). In Parody 10, one of the participants explains, "Every time it thunders, it represents when gay people have sex" (Oliveira, 2009, 0:06). In Parody 4, lightning strikes one of the actors, who then exclaims in a distinctly more femme intonation than he had before, "Oh no! The homo storm got me" before he death drops below the frame (Comedy Central, 2009, 5:06).

Whereas the previously mentioned productions all managed to use a green-screen backdrop, a couple of other more DIY productions without this technology still managed to mock the visual hyperbole. In Parody 1, participants taped paper cut-out lightning bolts on the windowed balcony doors behind them. The parody opens with the following three lines, each performed by a different speaker: "There's a darkness coming. It's really dark. It's *super duper* dark" (rootsofequality, 2009, 0:01). After one participant exclaims, "And I'm afraid," a hand holding a paper lightning bolt comes down on the speaker who ducks in exaggerated fear (Figure 1). Parody 5 takes a different approach. The first participant says, "There is a rainbow forming" (HappyCousin, 2009, 0:03), followed by another speaker yelling to emphasize, "A RAINBOW" (HappyCousin, 2009, 0:06). Next, we hear, "The colors are colorful, and the arches are archeful." (HappyCousin, 2009, 0:08). Without needing to recreate the digital backdrop, this group production expertly uses script and delivery to skewer the repetition and literalization of the storm metaphor.

Figure 1. Paper lightning bolt in parody 1 (rootsofequality, 2009, 0:08).

A secondary shortcoming of the original ad was its awkward physical arrangement of actors digitally superimposed behind each foregrounded speaker in most of the shots (Figures 2 and 3). All the parody productions, including the ones without green screens, emulate this configuration with campy flourish. As one of my interviewees, Katharine, noted, "I was just amazed at the weirdness of how they'd put it together: who's standing where, what they're doing, what position they're in—where'd *they* come from." In her version (Parody 5), they made excellent use of physical space to heighten both the silliness and awkwardness of having so many people as background props on screen. Using mostly medium close-ups and a shallow depth of field, this parody includes three different shots with five of the participants uncomfortably crowding the screen (Figure 4). A few other shots have two participants standing behind the speaker, close enough to interact and whisper in the speaker's ear (Figure 5).

Figure 2. Original "Gathering Storm" ad (Human Rights Campaign, 2009, 0:27).

Figure 3. Original "Gathering Storm" ad (Human Rights Campaign, 2009, 0:23).

Figure 4. Cramped background subjects in parody 5 (HappyCousin, 2009, 0:56).

Figure 5. Whispering background subject in parody 5 (HappyCousin, 2009, 1:15).

Those with access to digital postproduction effects used these tools to exaggerate the unnatural and staged element of the superimposed background actors. In the original ad, full shots expose a murky digital floor that makes the background figures seem to be hovering in abstract space, some with their feet and shoes cut before "meeting" the ground (see Figures 2 and 3). Most of the green-screen parodies mimicked these features, with some accentuating the rough digital tracing of the actors' silhouettes. In Parody 2, for instance, there are no full shots—no "floor"—and thus it looks like all the people in the background are simply floating in the stormy clouds. Further, the outline of the digital "cutout" of each of the background actors is glowing—calling more attention to them (Figure 6). In an interview with the author, Victor comments on his own work in Parody 10: "You can see the lighting wasn't perfect because you can still see the blue outline of the actors, which is fine because it adds another layer to it" (personal communication, January 22, 2018). In doing so, I argue the imitated low-quality postproduction work emphasizes the artificiality of the original ad, undermining the insinuated "natural" order of marriage and heterosexuality.

Figure 6. Floating background subjects in parody 2 (Keenan-Bolger, 2009a, 0:45).

Several parodies also utilized the background figures to satirize the threatened parties—stand-ins for heteronormativity—as static, bored, or "stuck" in repetition and loops. In Parody 7, participants in the background are seen biting their nails or posing—with both hands on their hips or one leg prominently in front of the other—and others are serving smoldering faces or simply looking away (Figures 7 and 8). Parody 2 most aptly captures this critique of heteronormativity because closer inspection reveals that each of the background participants are moving but in short digital loops—like a GIF—"stuck" in action or making awkward gestures. I argue the prevalent use of the background figures in the parodies to display disinterest or a fixed, even captive status approximates the routine and normative compulsion of heterosexuality that are needed to perpetuate itself. This calls back to camp's aim to deconstruct the performance of gender and heterosexuality. The parodies thus make full use of camp's faculties to undercut the earnest dramatization of heterosexuality and its purported vulnerability.

Figure 7. Bored background subjects in parody 7 (offchanceprod, 2009, 0:54).

Figure 8. Bored background subjects in parody 7 (offchanceprod, 2009, 0:15).

Parody 6 combines all these elements—the storm metaphor, the background formations, and shoddy postproduction—to ratchet up the literalism of the storm metaphor. "That's what's up there. Married gay people and they're doing all this," exclaims an indignant George Takei (Funny or Die, 2013, 1:21). A series of participants follow up with, "Soon gay people will start falling out of the sky. Onto our homes. Onto our churches. And onto our family" (Funny or Die, 2013, 1:27). Suddenly there is a downpour of miniature digital cutouts of "gay people" falling from top of frame behind the central speaker. Shot after shot, the background participants try to duck, block, and shoo them away in panic and disgust (Figures 9 and 10). Camp is an act of transformation. The parodies, thus, astutely—intuitively, even—use its tools, from exaggeration to incongruence and juxtaposition, to ridicule the ad's contrived earnestness about the harms gay marriage poses to freedom.

Figure 9. Gay rain army in parody 6 (Funny or Die, 2013. 1:40).

Figure 10. Gay rain army in parody 6 (Funny or Die, 2013, 1:54).

Heterofragility

Collectively, the parodies also enact a more incisive critique of "Gathering Storm" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009), revealing what I term is its heterofragility. Here, I adapt "flawed masculinity," one of the features central to inspiring video memes in Limor Shifman's (2012) analysis. In her study of YouTube video memes, Shifman (2012) defines the memetic video, distinct from viral videos, as "a popular clip that *lures extensive creative user engagement* in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work" (p. 190, emphasis in original). According to Shifman's (2012) findings, there are six common features that largely determined memetic value. Five of these—"ordinary" people, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness, and whimsical content—are easily recognizable in the parodies, while the sixth one, flawed masculinity, is not as easily discernable. For Shifman (2012), flawed masculinity calls back to the imperfect sitcom men "who fail to fulfill basic functions in their personal and professional lives" (p. 195). Instead of flawed masculinity, I argue what made "Gathering Storm" ripe for camp parody is an inherent fragility apparent in the argument that same-sex marriage threatens heterosexuals' freedoms and way of life, thus questioning the naturalness or stability of heteronormativity. The invited parodies, then, ultimately camp up the original ad by teasing out its heterofragility and highlighting the failing performance of vulnerable heterosexuality on display.

One of the tactics the parodies employ to make this point salient is satirizing the notion that exposure to queer content is in and of itself damaging to heterosexuals. This is best lampooned in Parody 2 when the subjects warn that seeing gays on your TV screen will automatically turn your son gay, turn your daughter into a vegetarian, and make your wife go back to college, forcing the presumed patriarch to resort to gay sex work to survive. Several of the other parodies have short quips speaking to the dangers of gay marriage: "They're going to turn my father gay" (HappyCousin, 2009, 0:57); "They won't stop until all of us *and* our kids are gay married" (Funny or Die, 2013, 1:52); "They're forcing me to be gay with them, but I love Jesus" (Oliveira, 2009, 0:33). In discussing his approach for Parody 10, Victor addresses his script's references to Christian faith and the second amendment to signal a type of imbricated right-wing politics that is often marshaled in conjunction with the supposed threat of LGBTQ rights. This is echoed in the

increasingly outlandish claims that build in Parody 3: "They want to bring the issue into my life and take away my guns" (djm8djm8, 2009, 0:22), "I'm a proud Iowan watching helplessly as public schools teach my children gay marriage will replace corporate farming" (djm8djm8, 2009, 0:29), and "If gays and lesbians are allowed to marry, we will have no choice but to switch to digital TV" (djm8djm8, 2009, 0:48).

Another tactic the parodies use to satirize this fragility is by insinuating that the subjects in the ad are repressed or closeted gay characters. In Parody 2, one subject claims, "A pink triangle of people are coming together to sing Judy Garland torch songs against gay marriage" (Keenan-Bolger, 2009a, 1:17). In Parody 9—an outtakes parody—we hear the director ask one of the actors if he could "read it more grounded and masculine" (Keenan-Bolger, 2009b, 0:28), to no avail. This video, comprised of mock audition outtakes, is a nod to leaked audition tapes from the original "Gathering Storm" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009) featuring the actors stumbling and struggling to deliver their lines as the affected parties (Terkel, 2009; Wolfson, 2009). In Parody 5, one of the featured participants claims, "I'm barely straight" (HappyCousin, 2009, 0:37) and follows it up later in the video in deadpan, "I didn't go to camp to get not gay just to get gay again" (HappyCousin, 2009, 0:50). In the case of Parody 6, several out gay celebrities, including George Takei, Lance Bass, and Jane Lynch, deliver homophobic lines, highlighting an air of hypocrisy. From these examples, the parodies expose layers of artifice not simply in the script's rhetorical arguments but in the actors' struggle to perform heteronormativity. The critique is not just that this is poor acting in the professional sense but more significantly that this is a failure to pass (i.e., uphold, reaffirm) heteronormativity as natural. This brings us squarely back to camp and its political, subversive potential. As Babuscio (1999) explains, "The experience of passing is often productive of a gay sensibility. It can, and often does, lead to a heightened awareness and appreciation for disguise, impersonation, the projection of personality" (p. 124).

One of the more implicit but widely incorporated critiques in the parodies that adds more contextual nuance to heterofragility is the role race, religion, and the modern conservative movement play in defining and policing sexuality. This builds on Ann McClintock's (1995) and Cathy Cohen's (1997) analysis of both the historical—Western colonial—and contemporary function of whiteness as the foundation of the legal and ideological institution of heterosexual marriage. This comes into play in "Gathering Storm" when NOM's New Jersey director Damon Owens appears to assert, "a rainbow coalition of people from every creed and color are coming together in love to protect marriage" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009, 0:46). Relatedly, the ad features several subjects of color, including Owens, which some of the parody creators I interviewed say they read as a cynical exploitation of the perceived conservative stereotype of communities of color when it comes to issues of gender and sexuality.

In recollecting her first impression of the ad, Katharine (from Parody 5) said, "At one point, it was like 'get all the multicultural people.' It was like very ethnically diverse. Like, they really went there. It was their top priority." Mike, who cowrote Parody 6, told me:

> I think what they were doing was so clear to us. . . . It was like, "Oh they're clearly doing that," and I'm Mexican—people trying to manipulate Hispanic people knowing that they're large part Catholic, and they're gonna manipulate their Catholic faith to get them to jump on board with this anti-gay shit. So that's pretty disgusting. Do you think we don't see this, how transparent this is? (personal communication, January 25, 2018)

One of the hallmarks of the original ad was a climactic moment right before Damon Owens delivers the "rainbow coalition" line when a man with a Hispanic accent punctuates the preceding script by a final dramatic refrain of "A storm *is* coming" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009, 0:43) Nearly all the parodies caricatured this moment and accented delivery. Mike adds, "That's why I played him in the end. I did a crazy accent and wore a weird wig to call so much attention to myself."

Most notably, in Parody 5, Sonya, a high school friend of interviewee Katharine, follows up all the proclamations from other participants about who they are—mothers, doctors—to announce, "I'm Asian" (HappyCousin, 2009, 0:40). The simple declaration with no other context plays up the critique that the subjects of color in the original ad are tokens, included only for their racial or ethnic diversity. Later in the same parody, when all the characters are discussing what same-sex couples are going to take away from them, Sonya delivers her only other line in deadpan: "They're going to take away my Asian-inity" (HappyCousin, 2009, 0:46). This once again reinforces the notion that the actors or participants of color are used in these anti-gay campaigns only as stand-ins to signal ambiguous harm same-sex marriage will bring to them and their representative communities. All the hired actors of color in the original ad deliver single, generic lines, while white actors are stand-ins representing specific arguments the ad relies on, such as a mother against gay marriage in public school curriculum. This juxtaposition was not lost on my interviewees. In his interview, Mike made a point to assert:

> The original is also such an amazing example of white fragility, especially with that "*I'm a Massachusetts mother struggling* . . . I'm victimized by this gay thing." They showed so much of themselves and how they think without even knowing it. (emphasis in original)

Many of these insights from the creators of the parodies thus demonstrate a deep knowledge of how homophobic rhetoric is interlinked with racial and religious politics. It exposes this approach as another transparent performance, and thus one that lends itself to camp's deconstructive function. This emphasis on heterofragility goes beyond the specificity of same-sex marriage animating NOM's campaign. Rather, it speaks to familiar anti-gay fear tactics and tropes that have been met with camp, humor, and theatrics for decades. The 2009 video meme is thus an adaptation of these queer tactics for activism in the digital age.

Zapping in the Age of YouTube

The production process of the in-person group parody videos conveys an adaptation of zaps not simply due to their shared camp impulse but because they also bear a striking resemblance to the organization and centrality of media animating zap actions of the past. Interviews with five participants involved in the parody videos revealed a shared sense of urgency to respond to the original ad, a common investment in humor as a release, and a related understanding of cause-oriented video activism that shapes political action in the digital era.

In his book, *Queer Political Performance and Protest*, Benjamin Shepard (2010) interviews a Stonewall-era activist who, in describing the zap actions of the past, recalls, "You just called people up on the phone and had them just show up somewhere" (pp. 39–40). This is essentially the same dynamic at

work with these group parodies. Elaborating on her sense of urgency referenced in the introduction, Katharine details:

> I remember saying we had to do this right now. We can't sit on it for a week. The parodies hadn't come out yet, but I just knew, based on Facebook comments and Twitter, this was in dire need of a parody.

In terms of how quickly she and her collaborator assembled the group, she discloses,

> We asked our friends to be in it. Most were actors. . . . People we knew were available, funny, and game—ready to show up anywhere. In New York City, it's not hard to find an actor willing to do anything at the drop of a hat if it's for a good cause. Either money or a good cause. . . . Everyone was interested in getting involved and putting their creative hands on it. . . . People brought costume options because they're all professional. Everyone was so on board.

> Similarly, Teresa, who spearheaded Parody 1 and was involved in grassroots organizing in Los Angeles after Proposition 8 passed, told me:

> The video was just a bunch of people who were in the movement doing stuff cause we were friends. We just saw this ridiculous commercial, and I was like, "Let's do something." I just wrote something up really quick, asked who was available, and got together and did it in like an hour. (personal communication, February 14, 2018)

This was corroborated by Sabrina, one of the participants featured in Teresa's parody. Sabrina recalls,

> We all basically showed up at her living room and said, "You should read this, and *you* should read this." . . . It was literally a camera on a tripod and Teresa's laptop and paper cut-up lightning bolts taped to the window. (personal communication, February 11, 2018)

> In a different part of Los Angeles, comedy writer-actor Mike, who cocreated and wrote Parody 6—produced and distributed online by Funny or Die—practically had the same story as Katharine. Mike recounted first seeing the video online and sending the link to Liz, a lesbian friend also working in comedy:

> I just sent it to her, and I was laughing at it, and I sent some parody lines mocking what they were saying and was doing it back and forth. And we were like, "We should do a video." And this happened within five minutes, and we contacted our friend who works at Funny or Die.

Because their friend at Funny or Die was also a lesbian, Mike thus situates the genesis of their parody through this queer networking: "We were just young gay people in comedy [and] wanted to make stuff." As he put it, there was no formal pitch to Funny or Die; rather, they knew queer people there who would be interested in collaborating but had access to a network of celebrities.

Given the published dates of the other group parodies whose participants did not respond to my interview requests, it is reasonable to assume that the same type of quick turnaround and grassroots networking was also at play with theirs. The only outlier in terms of timeline of production was Parody 10, which happened to be a component of Victor's senior thesis project on television satire shot in late summer 2009. More in line with the other parodies, though, Victor's production was also a one-man crew, mostly his own equipment, and populated by marshaling several networks of friends. Despite varying backgrounds that informed participants' production experience and access, the instinct to respond to the homophobic ad with a call to personal and community networks, and with shoestring, do-it-yourself resources, with the goal of online distribution expressed from all my interviewees signals a callback to media tactics animating pre-digital zaps.

The interviews also shed more light on the specific turn to humor and camp for nearly all the parodies. All interviewees mentioned at one time or another that the ridiculousness of the original—both its production quality and its rhetoric—was what animated their response. Victor, for instance, expressed shock when he saw the original ad: "I just remember thinking it was a fake commercial. . . . I was thrown back [by] the absurdity of how small-minded this way of thinking was." Mike additionally discloses:

> It was such a parody on its own that it deserved to be skewered, and I think that's such a great thing to do in the face of hate. To just laugh—here's how ridiculous you are, here's a mirror, here's how you look to us, and here's how you look to people. . . . And our mocking of you is better than your sincere hate message. The parodies became more important than the original.

When asked about the environment during the shoot, Mike recalled there was a lot of excitement— "It's rare that everyone on board is so on the same page and interested in making it funny. None of us were paid aside from the Funny or Die staff [the PAs]. It was a thing of passion." Similarly, Katharine described the mood on set as giddy. Although "there was absolutely a sense of anger," she divulged, "in times like these, if you don't laugh, you cry. I think that was our outlet. It was our way of expressing our sadness and fears and our anger."

This framing of the impulse to parody as an outlet was further solidified with Teresa and Sabrina's accounts of putting Parody 1 together. Both were deeply involved in the wave of LGBTQ activism in Los Angeles in the wake of Proposition 8. There was widespread critique of the TV ads against Prop 8 not featuring any gay or lesbian couples. As Teresa explains, "They weren't telling us to have conversations. They were telling us to be careful . . . it felt very closeted." After Prop 8 passed, a groundswell of new organizations led to a much more public movement on the ground. As a result, per Teresa:

> It was messy but . . . we continued to coordinate different marches and events. That's how we met a bunch of the women who were in the video. . . . We did it 'cause we enjoyed it ourselves. . . . During that time, it was a lot of work, a lot of discussions, conflicts sometimes, and a lot of uncertainty. And anything we could do to have fun with it, we would do. And we were younger. We had time.

Sabrina confirms:

> So many people felt what happened on [2008] election day and had very little outlets, ways to express themselves, so I think we just wanted to do something silly . . . We wanted our friends to see it, and we wanted people to know that we didn't have to take everything seriously. Here's a little satire in your face.

The revelation that uploading this parody online was more for their friends and themselves was echoed by others like Katharine and Mike, who claimed that their first audience—in the context of comedy—is always themselves and whether they are ultimately happy with the final product.

Yet it is hard to separate personal satisfaction from the politics at hand in the age of social media. And that is where the online distribution—the centrality of media as a tool—intersects with finding that outlet, particularly during this post–Prop 8 moment. For instance, Mike spoke at length about the various celebrities, both gay and straight, that came on board the Funny or Die parody during a time when "if it's political, if it has a message, people are more likely willing to be part of it." He described the limited free-for-all shooting window that demonstrated some people's determination to be involved. Per one anecdote:

> We were trying to get Jane Lynch, and her representation said she was too busy shooting *Glee*. But on the day of, we got a call from Jane. She said, "I'm done shooting, I can come right now." And I was like, woah. That's why I say when it's a message, people connect to those. . . . People see the parody by then, and they're angered and any opportunity to be a part of saying, "This is fucked up"—things take off like that because you're taking on so many people's voices.

Katharine had a similar take when discussing the ultimate impact she thinks the videos had:

> When I make a bold choice to go public—outing an abuser or talking about something that is difficult—I never think about changing minds. I think about supporting the minds that are too scared to come out and say something because they think the bullies are winning.

These sentiments speak to the continued role media activism plays—whether it's making media or getting the media's attention—to broadcast your message, especially in response to a campaign like "Gathering Storm." I call these parodies an adaptation of zaps because how politics are expressed in the everyday now—notably on social media, through profiles, followings, and platform economies—is more akin to cause-oriented activism (Norris, 2009) or commodity activism (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012), both of which acknowledge the effects of neoliberalism on how politics and activism play out in the networked era. The parodies did not just read the original ad as camp; they demonstrated the power of meme culture, YouTube distribution, and social media spread in 2009 to call out and critique brazenly anti-gay campaigns, much like how queer and feminist movements used the media tools then at their disposal to enact their activism. As Mike said at one point, "Everyone should do it and do a terrible one with their iPhones and post it."

Conclusion

The in-person group productions analyzed in this article represent a small fraction of the thousands of online responses to "Gathering Storm" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009), and it is worthwhile to analyze larger samples of varying production approaches, from animated videos to solo parodies and mashups, not

only to observe the variety of different modes of rebuttal and critique but also to map a broader network of digital participatory practices and politics at a time when these networked movements and actions were just getting started. This article focuses on the in-group parodies to argue production affinities with historical zap actions. This is not to romanticize historical activism or to suggest that the in-person shot videos were "truer" forms of activism than the individually produced remixes, but to recognize the different contexts animating zaps in two different eras. Collectively, the camp parodies target a particular critique that puts into relief what I term as the heterofragility on display in the original ad. I focus on this term because the work of the parodies is not just a flash-in-the-pan meme, and they are also largely—or centrally—not about gay marriage per se. Rather, the underlying homophobic rhetoric, reliant on gender and sexual essentialism that has been around for decades, provides a through line that animates a mode of queer activism that uses camp and performance to meet oppression then and now.

The following year, in 2010, the It Gets Better Project launched after an explosive grassroots YouTube participatory phenomenon. In anticipation of the *Hollingsworth v. Perry* decision in 2013—overturning Proposition 8 in California—the Human Rights Campaign released a red and pink version of their equal-sign logo, which turned into one of the earliest organic profile change campaigns (followed in 2015 with the built-in Facebook rainbow filter in time for *Obergefell v. Hodges*). More recently, #TransIsBeautiful and #WillNotBeErased were popular hashtags fighting for transgender rights and visibility. This is not to say that there is a neat, linear progression from the "Gathering Storm" (Human Rights Campaign, 2009) parodies to all these multifaceted digital and networked LGBTQ campaigns in the 2010s. Rather, the reasons to document and analyze the myriad modes of media activism around LGBTQ issues are manifold: to preserve ephemeral media and movements, to understand how new platforms and technologies shape engagement with LGBTQ politics, and to map kinships and lineages of queer approaches to oppression, like camp as critique in this case. Fourteen years later, this video meme is itself now historical and renewed attempts to silence and legislate queer and trans people out of education and out of existence add imperative to look at how LGBTQ and allied communities use media to fight back.

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