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The Cowboy and His Shadow:
Queering Masculinity in the Reagan-Bush Era

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

by

Peter Joseph Carpenter

2013
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Cowboy and His Shadow:
Queering Masculinity in the Reagan-Bush Era

by

Peter Joseph Carpenter
Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance
University of California, Los Angeles, 2013
Professor David Gere, Chair

Ronald Reagan’s appropriation of cowboyness as a defining factor in his successful bid for the presidency in 1980 intersected with complementary trends in popular media. In the wake of mainstream enthusiasm for the frontier, gays and lesbians formed their own country-western dance spaces. This cowboy renaissance has been discussed as a reclaiming of American conservatism that helped heal wounds inflicted upon the U.S. imaginary in the wake of failures in Vietnam; through this lens, gay dancing cowboys can be seen as acquiescing to assimilationist impulses. However, this study argues that queers find numerous recuperative possibilities in Western-themed choreographies, frequently subverting heteronormative nationalism by taking on a cowboy swagger. Through ethnographic fieldwork at a gay country-western bar in Los Angeles and analyzing dances on the concert stage, the author theorizes cowboyness as an articulation of masculinity, Americanness, and queerness. The introduction posits President Ronald Reagan’s performance of cowboyness as foundational to connections between normative
masculinities, the legacy of Manifest Destiny, and the homophobic rhetoric and polices that marked Reagan’s presidency. The first chapter looks at the political potency of female cowboyiness in the two-step at Oil Can Harry’s—a country-western bar in Los Angeles—and in a dance by Marianne Kim and Lee Anne Schmitt called Making a Disaster: The Many Deaths of John Wayne, Part II (2005). Chapter two analyzes Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders (1984) arguing that choreographers Fred Holland and Ishmael Houston-Jones usurp the assumed whiteness and heterosexuality of the Hollywood cowboy, creating a utopia of queer possibility. The third chapter looks at The Shadow as a choreographic incursion upon the two-step that speaks to sex practices of gay men in an atmosphere of neoliberal permissiveness sans equity for queers. Chapter four looks at the line dance “Walk the Line” alongside Joe Goode’s The Maverick Strain (1996) to show the potency with which camp can disrupt heteronormative claims to nation. The concluding chapter compares the film Brokeback Mountain (2005) with Adam and Steve (2005), showing how the latter used the cowboy as a symbol of queer possibility in ways that the critically lauded Brokeback Mountain failed to imagine.
The dissertation of Peter Joseph Carpenter is approved.

Blake Allmendinger

Susan Foster

David Roussève

David Gere, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013
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Other faculty that significantly influenced my work during my time at UCLA include: Victoria Marks, Dan Froot, Cheng-Chieh Yu, and Peter Sellars. I was also fortunate to work with Marta Savigliano during my time at UCLA, and I credit her with providing foundational guidance on early ethnographic essays. The important presence of my graduate classmates at
UCLA are too many to name here, but astute feedback from Harmony Bench, Carolina San Juan, Cindy Garcia, Claudia Brazzale, Kristen Smiarowski, Sri Susilowati, Marianne Kim, Esther Baker-Tarpaga, Sandra Chatterjee, and Kevin Kane have especially shaped the pages that follow.

In 2005 I received financial support from the UCLA Graduate Summer Research Mentorship Program. This allowed me to travel to New York from Los Angeles to conduct research at the New York Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center where I became acquainted with the sizable collection on Ishmael Houston-Jones and Fred Holland. Also in 2005 I took a tenure-track faculty position at Columbia College Chicago. There I entered a rich environment of collegial support from colleagues Bonnie Brooks, Richard Woodbury, Darrell Jones, Lisa Gonzales, Raquel Monroe, Dardi McGinley-Gallivan, Margi Cole, Taisha Paggett, Pam McNeil, Onye Ozuzu, and Carmello Esterrich. Further, Columbia College sponsored my attendance at numerous conference presentations from 2006-12 where I was able to gain precious feedback on this research.

Finally I am grateful to friends and family who helped nurture me through this long process. Both of my parents found numerous ways to support me during my graduate work and my sister, Amy, functioned as an especially accomplished sounding board to many of my ideas here. Though a list of friends risks leaving out important allies, I must mention Lynn Johnson, Allison Kenny, Suzy Grant, Jyl Fehrenkamp, Jonathan Keiser, Matthew Dontje, Edward Alvarez, Donnell Williams, Atalee Judy, Lowell Jaffee, and the many women and men with whom I danced at Oil Can Harry’s. Thank you.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Peter Carpenter is a choreographer whose dance and physical theater performances have often intersected with critical theory, queer politics, and activism. He received his undergraduate degree from the Theatre Department of Northwestern University in 1992. While there he studied with Lynn Blom (choreography), Dwight Conquergood (non-fiction performance), Timothy O’Slynne (modern dance technique), Paul Edwards (performance of literature), and Frank Galati (performance aesthetics). Upon graduation he worked in the storefront theater and independent dance scenes in Chicago, maintaining company affiliations with XSIGHT! Performance Group and Street Signs Theatre Company. His work as a choreographer for theatre earned him a Joseph Jefferson Citation in 1992 and his collaborative with XSIGHT! Performance Group was awarded a Ruth Page Award in 1997.

Carpenter earned his M.F.A. in dance from UCLA’s Department of World Arts and Cultures in 2003. While there he studied choreography with Victoria Marks, David Roussève, Dan Froot, Cheng-Chieh Yu, and Angelia Leung; he also took courses in dance and performance studies with David Gere, Marta Savigliano, and Susan Foster. While at UCLA he received the Clifton Webb Award from the School of Arts and Architecture and the Glorya Kauffman Award from the Department of World Arts and Cultures. His thesis concert, titled Bareback Into the Sunset, premiered at Highways Performance Space (Santa Monica) in 2003 and has since been performed in evening-length and excerpted forms at numerous festivals and conferences.

In 2005 Carpenter returned to Chicago to take the position of Assistant Professor of Dance at The Dance Center of Columbia College Chicago, where he was awarded tenure in
2010. His independent work has resulted in numerous repertory pieces and six evening-length works including *My Fellow Americans* (2009) and *The Sky Hangs Down Too Close* (2008)—which was named one of the top dance events of the decade by *Time Out Chicago*. Carpenter's work as a choreographer has received support from the Chicago Dancemakers’ Forum Lab Artist Grant, The MetLife Foundation New Stages in Dance Initiative, the Illinois Arts Council, and the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. He is also a two-time nominee for the Alpert Award in the Arts and was nominated for the Alpert/MacDowell Award in 2013. Commissions include: The Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center Dance Movies Commission (Troy, New York), the Ackland Art Museum (Chapel Hill, North Carolina), Lucky Plush Productions (Chicago), Out North Performance Art House (Anchorage), and SPDW Dance Theatre (Chicago).
Introduction: Cowboy Shadows/Queer Moves

This project has several beginnings, and this is only one:

This project began during an alcohol-fueled summer night with friends in one of Chicago’s gay neighborhoods. In my (somewhat shadowy) memory the story goes like this: On a Friday night in the summer of 1997 I had just watched a dance performance at Links Hall, produced by colleagues of mine in Chicago’s modern/experimental dance community—something vaguely release-based, decidedly virtuosic, and politically disappointing (residues of modern dance’s universalist tendencies took a long time to leave the Midwest as evidenced by the concert I saw that evening). I was walking from Links, near Chicago’s “Boystown” neighborhood, to the Red Line train that would take me home. I ran into some friends who were on their way to Charlie’s, the city’s gay country-western bar. I said I hated country music and that there was no way that I was going. They said the guys were really hot and that I should come for just one drink. This detour from my intended destination has been ongoing.

I walked into Charlie’s. The men (and in my memory they were almost exclusively men and almost exclusively white) were dancing like cowboys. They wore boots and big belt buckles and cowboy hats and danced partner dances with each other. I remember being struck by how different this dancing was from anything else I had ever seen before. I remember laughing. And I remember thinking it was absolutely beautiful, though I had no idea why.

Leif, one of the friends with whom I walked in, was a dancer, like me. Also like me he had never tried to dance country-western. We identified as aspiring concert dancers, trained a bit in mid-century modern dance, release-based techniques, contact improvisation, and other
disciplines self-assembled to prepare us for the ever-changing demands of postmodern aesthetics and sensibilities. (In truth, I earned a living primarily as a waiter, working consistently with a small modern dance company and producing my own choreographies independently. In retrospect, I'm not sure how I justified such a decadent night out.) Leif boldly asked someone to show him how to dance despite the fact that he was wearing sandals. I remember how silly he looked going around the floor with the other men who were wearing cowboy boots—a bit like a penguin walking backwards on a sand dune.

I remember being struck by how friendly everyone was (I didn’t think cowboys would be so polite) and how well the men danced. The whole scene seemed really sexy and, despite the friendly interactions, really uncomfortable. I was uncomfortable in the presence of so many masculine symbols—the hats, the boots, the jeans, the belt buckles, and the dances conjoined to form a specific kind of masculine discourse that I desired and feared simultaneously. The men I remembered in cowboy boots from my days growing up in a small town in rural Michigan were never this friendly to me.

I did not try to learn any of the dances.

And I remember how strange the dancing seemed to me at the time. This strangeness did not spring from a lack of exposure. By that time I had already played within the active gay leather scene in Chicago, frequented upscale and experimentally subversive drag events, and attended transgender reviews and competitions. I had dabbled in hipster gay and professional gay communities and mingled with lesbian burlesque performers in a variety of contexts (as roommates, as costume assistants, etc.). Excuse the cliché, but I had been around. And this was just in my social life. In informal professional development activities to further prepare me for a life in concert dance, I sat astonished by the queer spectacle of a pearl necklace pulled out of Ron
Athey's ass, watched Bill T. Jones dance on stage naked, observed Tim Miller bathe his naked body in a bucket of water while discussing the politics of queer memory, and witnessed the transformative power of a queer dance-storytelling hybrid by David Rousséve. In my movement practice I writhed around numerous dance studios in a mixture of corn starch and all-purpose flour attempting to replicate the phenomenon of Butoh, experimented in Expressionistic dance theater processes that bordered on psychoanalytic anarchy, functioned as the token symbol of patriarchy in more feminist performances than I can remember, and ranted, sang, danced—naked and clothed—in my own attempts to choreographically subvert compulsory heterosexuality. Yet the performance that I witnessed at Charlie's was profoundly different—different because of the context within gay social space, different because of the casual and upbeat comportment of the performers, and different because hypermasculine signs and gay social codes seemed to commingle with relative ease. It was the lack of hipness, the lack of overtly subversive edge, and the prominent presence of twang that I found so compelling. Swiftly traveling, turning, softly stepping, and contained grace replaced the edge and irony I had become comfortable with in my early adult years in queer dance.

And I remember thinking that they were reclaiming something. This is the thought that I kept/keep coming back to, though it is somewhat unclear to me how I thought of the claiming then and how I think of it differently now. (Indeed how and what the dancers claim—as well as how and what the dancers refute—in and through their movement continually surfaces as a question in the pages that follow.) I think I thought they were reclaiming something lost from their personal past. I imagined them journeying to the Midwestern gay-Mecca of Chicago to reclaim something of their previous lives as rural dwellers and re-inscribe it with their urban, gay identities. I realize now that I did not ground these assumptions of a rural identification in
anything but my own experience—I had heard country-western music and seen men dressed as cowboys growing up as a child in a small, economically depressed rural town in Michigan in the 1970s and 80s. Such symbols from my past stuck hard to this project as I began to take this research on in earnest several years later; I had to acknowledge that many of the men at Charlie’s were likely brought up as urban sophisticates, and that their dancing is not just an exercise in recreational nostalgia.

In the midst of this night as I watched the men two-step and line dance, I remembered Dwight Conquergood, an old professor of mine from my time as an undergraduate at Northwestern University. I knew that he was an ethnographer, though his field of study was not the subject of the class I took with him. He was my professor for a course in the performance of non-fiction texts. I was at Northwestern first as an actor, and then became more interested in choreography—certainly not, at that time, focused on scholarship. But I remembered how he used to talk about ethnography and, from those only partially comprehended lectures, I understood that there was something at stake here—for the men in their dancing and the for the other men on the margins of the floor who watched them dance—myself included as I wavered a bit in my stance on account of the beer I had been drinking through the night. And I understood, a little, why someone would want to spend their time understanding “the why” of a field like this, why “the why” might engage, confuse, and frustrate the researcher. And then I remember thinking that if I were in graduate school, this would be a great topic for a paper, maybe even a dissertation?

**Destabilizing Queerness and Cowboy ness**
This project pays attention to choreographies where queerness and cowboyness meet, and straddles two of the queer spheres I describe above: a gay and lesbian country-western bar (not in Chicago, but in Los Angeles) and experimental, queer dances on the concert stage. My interest revolves around choreographies within the U.S. that deal directly or tangentially with Americanness as represented by the figure of the cowboy. As a provisional definition that I develop throughout these essays, Americanness can be understood as the assumption of the weight of U.S. national identity by an individual or group. Americanness, as it relates to cowboyness, could involve tying a single cowboy dance to the history of U.S. imperialism via Manifest Destiny, critiquing cowboy presidents through the production of queer dances, or simply inserting queer identity within the stoic masculinity that cowboyness invokes. All of these instances will be discussed here. In these queer cowboy dances, I have tried to track various alignments, congruencies, contradictions, and conflicts between these two realms, and have used sustained attention to movement composition as a primary methodology. In this, I try to understand some of the uneasiness that I first experienced at Charlie’s, the political and social implications in queer cowboy dances, and the ways such dances in social spaces and dances on the concert stage might speak to each other.

The uneasiness that I felt at Charlie’s and the uneasiness that I have experienced in much of my research in this project stems from a distinctive identitarian destabilization that, I argue, occurs consistently within such dances. By identitarian I mean not only those means by which a subject locates himself or herself in the social world with regard to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class, but also the means by which he or she is located by other identities.¹ Further, identitarian concerns might relate to the ways in which these concerns shift in relationship to other bodies in the room, or in the world. What can be read, in the above narrative from
Charlie’s, from the masculine boots and hats worn by the men at the bar? In the dances I study, I argue that cowboyness and queerness continually destabilize the integrity of the other when brought into close proximity. At times, the queerness of the cowboy dancer (as evidenced by dancing with a partner of the same gender, for example) destabilizes the presumed heterosexuality of the cowboy icon from western film and literature. Inversely, the cowboy dances the queer dancer performs (via these same presumptions to heterosexuality propagated by the domination of Hollywood film upon the U.S. cowboy imaginary) destabilizes the anti-heteronormative political position that defines the queer subject. By the adjective heteronormative, or the noun form heteronomativity, I mean all discursive modes of representing, enforcing, and patrolling compulsory heterosexuality.\(^2\) Do the queer subjects dancing to country-western dancing enforce and patrol hegemony? Does this enforcement necessarily prohibit queer possibilities in the room? My research is steeped in these uneasy questions.

I locate the queer cowboy dances for this project within a distinctly postmodern historical and social context. I confine the historical scope of this inquiry roughly within the Reagan-Bush Empire (1980-2008). The beginning of the Reagan Administration in 1980 intersected with the apex of a re-emergence of enthusiasm for the cowboy in film and television, music, and fashion, and it is in the wake of mainstream enthusiasm for the cowboy that gays and lesbians first started forming their own country-western social dance events and spaces. Numerous scholars have written about this cowboy renaissance as a conservative reclaiming of American traditions of military force, independence, bravery, and honor that helped heal the trauma from the U.S. failure in and withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973.\(^3\) In the wake of this trauma, conservative America re-embraced the ideality of the cowboy hero, while other spheres of the U.S. population
looked at nationalistic, heroic narratives skeptically, disregarding such discursive moves as nothing more than nostalgic propaganda intended to increase support for U.S. empire-building in the Cold War era.

In the late 1970s and early 80s, cowboyness emerged as an entertainment destination not confined to western or rural America, nor concerned, as were past cowboy incarnations, with heroism. Rather, country-western music, films, television shows, and dancing became a mainstream commodity, and film and television provided audiences with a contemporary, urban West, replete with sex, sin, and electric guitars. The blockbuster film *Urban Cowboy* (1980), starring Debra Winger and John Travolta, has been widely credited for beginning a country-western music and dancing craze, from which the queer cowboy dances I describe spring. 4 Similarly, the television show *Dallas*, which ran from 1978-1991, became the number one Nielson-rated television show in the U.S. in 1980, and held the number one or number two Nielson-rating slot from 1980-85. 5 Both *Urban Cowboy* and *Dallas* display an ambivalent relationship between moral polarities that include: sexual fidelity/promiscuity, greed/altruism, and forgiveness/revenge. I read these destabilized moralities as reflecting and even feeding America’s ambivalent relationship to such concerns in the wake of Vietnam, the lingering shadow of the sexual revolution, and the advent of the Reagan presidency, which became known for a fervent advocacy for and enforcement of socially conservative, or “family,” values.

My engagement began in earnest at the beginning of the end of the era that circumscribes this project, just after the election of the second George Bush. I first attended Oil Can Harry’s in Los Angeles’ San Fernando Valley in 2001, weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attack upon the World Trade Center Twin Towers, and I remember how oddly the dancers at the bar looked in response to the cowboy politics being enacted on global stages of political power. The vengeful military
response deployed by George W. Bush against Al Qaeda—with the support of the vast majority of Congress—paired in chilling harmony with televised images of the president in blue jeans, cowboy boots, and western shirts entertaining fellow conservatives and CEOs of globalized corporations from his ranch in Crawford, Texas. The second Bush was a polarizing figure from the beginning of his term. While some Americans stood with jaws agape as Bush encouraged citizens to go shopping to support the national economy in response to the attacks, others took comfort in his Texas drawl, the stubborn conviction of his beliefs, and his lonesome, unilateral pursuit of revenge. Simultaneously with post-9/11 revenge fantasies via military decree, a distinct mode of patriotism could be seen throughout the nation, and the U.S. flag was no longer reserved for flag poles, but was also stuck on the back of Sport Utility Vehicles and in the windows of convenience stores. At the same time, Toby Keith’s jingoistic anthem “The Angry American” rose to prominence on country-western music charts, speaking to the terrorists from the heart of America and saying that “we’ll put a boot in your ass” for revenge because, “it’s the American way.”\(^6\) While I knew that the America Keith described was not the America I subscribed to, it was certainly an America that I remember from the conservative Midwestern town I grew up in, and I struggled to understand the choreographic distinction between the rhetoric of Keith’s violent lyrics and the country-western dancing I was practicing on a regular basis. These pages attempt to mark and make sense of that struggle.

I recognize that presidential politics from 1980-2008 also contains the Clinton presidency and first Bush presidency, neither of which utilized cowboyness as key components of their image creation. While I don’t intend to allow the cowboyness of the Reagan-Bush presidencies to stand in for the whole of national politics during this era nor reduce this historical/geographical scope to be solely about presidential politics, I also refuse to limit the
potential synergies between the social dance floor, the concert dance stage, and platforms of political power in the U.S. My project focuses on the dances of the queer cowboys at Oil Can Harry’s and the cowboy-inflected choreographies of Lee Anne Schmitt and Marianne Kim, Ishmael Houston-Jones and Fred Holland, and Joe Goode. How have the cowboys on these dance floors and concert stages all ascended to, assumed, and critiqued cowboyness? How do these performers and choreographers cooperate with notions of cowboyness, and how does cowboyness figure in the production of Americanness? How do the dancers of this study make these queer moves?

Methodological Confessions

This project has several beginnings, and this is only one:

One version of the story goes as follows: I was enrolled in the first semester of an MFA program in dance at UCLA and decided to enroll in a graduate seminar in folklore. The final assignment included an option for ethnographic research. Remembering my interest in attending Charlie’s in Chicago several years before, I wondered if there was a cowboy bar in town. I found out that there was. I went to a lesson one night and started my research.

Here is another version: I met my first informant before I had clearly identified my field. We had just finished having sex. As we put our clothes back on in the confined space of a booth in a sex club in Los Angeles’ Silver Lake neighborhood, we exchanged names and smiled at the odd ways gay male cruising prioritizes sexual intimacy over social comportment. He had a nice smile. He asked me where I usually hang out. I answered that I had only been to a few bars in the city as I just moved to LA for the graduate program I was attending, and was open to suggestions. He told me that he went to a country-western bar in the Valley. I said I had been
considering going to a country-western bar as research for one of my classes—a folklore seminar taken on a whim. We exchanged numbers and made a date to go for lessons the next week. I had met my first informant—I worried that I was off to a pretty complicated start with my potential site of field research, having breached the anthropological code even before my first site visit.

As it turned out, my relationship with, let’s call him Steve, was one of the simplest relationships I had at the bar. We enjoyed a sporadic dating relationship for a few months before things drifted off—as far as I know there were never any hard feelings on either side—and every time I saw him at the bar (even after we stopped dating) he was funny, friendly, and kind to me. He asked about my research, what I thought about this dance or that person’s style of dancing, and was always happy to dance with me. While this was my first time doing ethnographic research, this situation was, in some ways, familiar. As gay men, both in our early thirties, both of us were familiar navigating casual, sexually intimate friendships. We were both open about the fact that we dated other people while we saw each other, and I chose early on to diminish the amount of time we spent talking about the bar, in an attempt to balance the amount of import my feelings for him had on my research, and to avoid exploiting him for his expert opinion. I do not know if I got the dynamics of this right, or if there is any right way to sleep with an informant, but I will say that this was one of the simpler exchanges I had at the bar.

Despite the disclosure I make above, the culture of the bar is much more focused on dancing than sex. This is not because people don’t find each other sexy or attractive or because desire fails to circulate in the field. It circulates plenty. But rather, because the patrons at Oil Can Harry’s get something at the bar in the intimate dancing with partners that they don’t get anywhere else, whereas the opportunity for sex, via other kinds of bars, sex clubs, bath houses,
online chat rooms, pornography, etc. are much more available. The fact that San Fernando Valley has been dubbed the pornography capital of the world by virtue of the vast number of adult media products created and distributed from the area—dubbed San Pornando Valley by some locals—testifies to the sex-as-commodity culture surrounding the bar. The risk of alienating all of the good dancing partners in the room far outweighs the potential for sexual exchange, particularly when sex is so available in the culture of Los Angeles nightlife.

A far larger challenge than negotiating these social dynamics involved the prioritization of dancing in the field over what people said about the dancing. The decision to read bodies over texts shuffles and flattens hierarchies of knowledge. As a product of western culture and a person who loves reading and writing, I find myself attached to words despite my training in dance. Ethnographer Dwight Conquergood discusses this prejudice at length in “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research” (2002). He probes the ways in which the “subjugated knowledge” of bodily action stands at a lower level of knowledge than the spoken word, which exists at a lower level than the written word and the static, visual image. Even when scholars do—and he argues that they do this rarely—pay attention to bodily action, they look at such movements through the lens of textual referents. He writes:

- Only middle-class academics could blithely assume that all the world is a text because reading and writing are central to their everyday lives and occupational security. For many people throughout the world, however, particularly subaltern groups, texts are often inaccessible, or threatening, charged with the regulatory powers of the state….

The hegemony of textualism needs to be exposed and undermined. Transcription is not a transparent or politically innocent model for conceptualizing or engaging the world. The root metaphor of the text underpins the supremacy of Western knowledge systems by erasing the vast realm of human knowledge and meaningful action that is unlettered.
Conquergood critiques the ethnocentrism of such a culture-as-text model and, methodologically, critiques notions of a fieldwork-as-reading. I agree with his assessment of such models that reduce gesture, movement, and choreography to static, textual referents.

Yet I would suggest that a latent meaning of the word “read”—the discernment of meaning from sources of action—stands as a potent alternative to purely textocentric methodologies. What if reading actions meant that spoken text, codified dance, and pedestrian gesture all carried equal valence? This model of reading-as-discrimenent-of-meaning-from-action acknowledges the high level of educational attainment and professional status of the majority of the field I study. It is from this kind of reading that I find meaning in dances; conversations within and around the dances; and the gestures, walks, and bodily postures surrounding the dance event. Such readings attempt to account for the position of my body within the many bodies in the field. This reading, or discerning, also maintains a way of balancing the relationship between 1) recognizing my own privilege in the field, 2) identifying with the dancers I dance with, 3) noting the difference between these bodies and myself, and 4) detaching from the dance event to the extent that it might be understood in other cultural contexts. I offer that this is a component of what Conquergood described as the “radical intervention” of performance studies scholarship wherein performance and text are approached laterally rather than hierarchically. My addition to this theory would be that my “readings” center on choreographic discourses as much as the performance of those choreographies, and in this model of choreographic discernment, textual writing via the action of speech, gesture, posture, and dance all bear close attention. In my experience such readings require attention not only to visual and aural information, but also touch and proprioception: How am I holding him? How is she holding me? Are we too close to them? By what means are we drawn
together? Could we move together differently? Attention to such questions, I argue, offers further potential developments in the radical intervention Conquergood describes.

I write about Oil Can Harry’s based on three years of consistent attendance (two to three times a week) and participant observation in the field beginning in September of 2001. I also went back several times to visit the bar from 2004-07 and throughout this time have visited ancillary field sites via country-western bars in Chicago, Washington D.C., Austin, Oklahoma City as well as rodeos in Los Angeles and Reno. As I danced two or three times a week with the patrons of Oil Can Harry’s to learn the country-western two-step, The Shadow and a long list of line dances, I sweat a lot. I stumbled a lot, apologized numerous times to dance partners when I stepped on their toes, smiled despite my clenched jaw as my own toes—literally and figuratively—were stepped on, and watched broodingly (even jealously, I admit) from the margins of the dance floor as more experienced dancers executed flourishing turns and stepped smoothly through the meters that I found difficult to master. (So much for the universalist aspirations of U.S. modern dance training.) Also during this time I conducted a number of interviews to bring context to my observations and asked the men and women a lot of questions, while dancing, while on the margins of the dance floor, and while grabbing a late-night snack at a local diner at the end of an evening. Such interviews provided valuable context for my writing, yet after years of revision and filtering, these interviews figure rather lightly in the product of this process, as subsequent drafts have attempted to value the dancers movements, gestures, and dances equally with their speech.

This holistic approach to discerning meaning from choreographies on and around the social dance floor informs my reading of dances on the concert stage. The three concert dances that I look at in this project are evening-length (as opposed to repertory) works that use text as a
primary means of contributing to the meaning of the dance event. I attempt here to read these dances in a non-hierarchical relationship with the texts that surround them, while not discounting the choreographers’ deft creation of meaning through layering dance with text, and text with dance. In this, I attempt to pay attention to bodies in action, whether moving or still, in shadow or light, silent or speaking. Throughout, I pay attention to the composition of the work, and allow the composition of bodies in motion to teach me what demands attention most. These rubrics for discerning what matters from moment to moment, reveal themselves within the composition.

The ways in which I discern composition has been founded, developed, and challenged by my own choreographic methodologies, and during the time of this research, many of my dance compositions have centered on the cowboy. Throughout these supplementary research modes (which have, in fact, been the primary modes of research in my professional life), I gave myself particular parameters for experimentation. At times I worked on decoupling values of movement from the set vocabulary of steps that I learned in country-western field settings. Working on such choreographic values of smoothness, boundness, and quick shifts in weight and direction challenged the release-based modern dance values upon which I relied as a choreographer. Other times I played with the syntax of the movement, parsing together idiosyncratic and even nonsensical sequences of movement from the available vocabulary. Other times I tried to isolate the subtle shifts in the torso without moving the feet—decidedly against the values of the form. Still other times, I composed a series of tableaux based on action off of the dance floor, or in between sets of dancing. Working as a soloist in the studio provided valuable reflection time for my fieldwork and enhanced my ability to learn the values on dancing particular to this field. These labors produced two evening-length dance works, *Bareback Into*
the Sunset (2003) and My Fellow Americans (2009). Further, I found that allowing the labor of choreography to commingle with the labor of scholarship produced a corporeal methodology that aptly navigated the challenges of conducting an ethnographic study within a dancing field.

Throughout this project, I assume the inextricability of the body’s materiality, bodily actions, and subjectivity. Beginning in the 1990s as a continuation of a growing trend in Humanities-based scholarship on human enterprises that elude textual documentation, dance studies scholars theorized unified body/subject formations as corporeality. An anthology edited by Susan Foster titled Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power (1996) epitomizes the base from which I understand both dances on the concert stage and dances on the social dance floor. The collected authors present writing in refutation of the Cartesian split between mind and body, advocating for a conception of the body inextricably tied to its social/historical/cultural context. Through such a lens, “the body” becomes synonymous with thought, action, and personhood. Rather than sole reliance upon “corporeality” as a term through which to explain this concept, I describe these values through language such as: kinesthesia, choreography, embodiment, dance, dance improvisation, performance, and movement. In this I attempt to modulate the specific prioritization and conceptualization of embodied subject-hood depending on factors that may include: the formal, social, and political values of the composition; the historical context which informs the dance; and the perceived identity of the performing subject. Looking at the country-western two-step in chapter one, for example, requires attention to the subversive performance of the presumed heteronormative choreography in regard to the same-gendered pairing of the dancers, whereas choreographers Ishmael Houston-Jones and Fred Holland in Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders (1984) perform an extended, highly structured dance improvisation that locates queer men of color within the matrix of cowboyness
while attending to artificial contradictions between the intimate and the civic. The Shadow dance in chapter three, I argue, warrants a conception of identitarian concerns in relationship to the choreography with regard to its redeployment of the two-step’s compositional values. Throughout this study, I look at queered cowboy dances and pay attention to the particulars of bodily action—the weighted stomp of a boot, the lifting chug of a thigh, the broken wrist of an outstretched arm—to think critically about naturalized cowboy masculinities and the way such masculinities move.

**Queer Commentary/Collective Promise**

Predominantly, I use the word queer to identify the dancemakers and social dance practitioners whose work I analyze, and my decision to describe them as queer, as opposed to gay and lesbian, warrants consideration here. With the identifier of queer I value three related political ideas: a socio-critical response to hegemonic sexual and gender identities, coalitional community formation, and a recognition that queerness exists in the present only as potential—that is, queerness doesn’t yet exist in the present moment. I use the word queer to describe an anti-heteronormative subject formation—or put another way, a sustained dissent of straightness. The choreographers and social dance practitioners I attend to mark themselves as apart from and/or against compulsory heterosexuality. Given the assumed masculine straightness of the historical cowboy and the rigidly patrolled, ruggedly stoic masculinity of the Hollywood cowboy, articulations of queerness and cowboyness often rub each other in complex and even contradictory ways. The complex contradictions of these queer cowboy discourses articulate themselves changeably and particularly from dance to dance.
I choose to write about queers rather than lesbians and gays for the purposes of advocating for a politicized community formation rooted in coalition across difference. As someone who came of age at the moment that queer was reclaimed from a derogatory slur against non-normative sexualities to a politicized interrogation of binaries pertaining to gender and sexuality, the difficulty of building coalition across parameters of identity (including race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality) has been an ongoing inquiry in my choreography, scholarship, pedagogy, and citizenship. Queer scholar Lisa Duggan’s influential essay, “Making it Perfectly Queer” (1992) provides an early and elegant articulation of the kind of queer coalition I describe. She writes of a queer community whose formation is “no longer defined solely by the gender of its members’ sexual partners. Rather, this new community is unified only by a shared dissent from the dominant organization of sex and gender.”15 I have tried to model this coaltional politics in the selection of this project’s archive, looking at choreographies by women and people of color to complement, confirm, and challenge the approaches to queer cowboyness articulated by the predominance of white men at Oil Can Harry’s. Further, I attempt to look at the assembled dances through different identitarian concerns—not only sexuality and gender, but also race and class. In this, I hope to perform the kind of coalition I look for in these choreographies.

I also use the word queer as an acknowledgement that some of the dances in this project fail to achieve the progressive coalition and attention to anti-heteronormativity that I describe as queer in the preceding paragraph. This move comes from José Estaban Muñoz’s theory that queerness will not be attained in the present. In Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (2009), Muñoz tells us, “Queerness is not yet here.”16 This foundational thesis—alternately stated as “we are not yet queer”—grounds his exploration of queer potentiality in
performance events surrounding the Stonewall era. In contexts ranging from music to visual art to dance to literature, he theorizes queerness as a potentiality—a hope and a possibility that exists only on the horizon line of the future.\textsuperscript{17} Muñoz’s work stands as an odd companion to many of the dances I describe here. Particularly, I suspect that Muñoz might question my attribution of queerness to the men and women at Oil Can Harry’s—and find more support for attributing the space to a pragmatic gay and lesbian perspective.

Muñoz’s critique of such pragmatism founds itself in lesbigay liberationist rhetoric of the late 1960s and early 1970s and reacts against what he describes as “the anemic political agenda that dominates contemporary LGBT politics in North America today.”\textsuperscript{18} He points to a 1971 issue of Gay Flames, in an article written by the Third World Gay Revolution, as evidence of “the performative force of the past” in order to vivify the concept of the power of “the no-longer-conscious.”\textsuperscript{19} He cites the authors as desiring a new, revolutionary, socialist society devoid of bourgeois privilege, devoid of capital punishment, devoid of oppression from institutional religion. He commends a call to action against commodity capitalism—the very means by which gays and lesbians had gained a degree of independence from heteronormativity beginning in the post-war era.\textsuperscript{20} In the present day, Muñoz sees such radical interventions as all but eviscerated by pragmatic anxiety regarding gay marriage, gays in the military, and other such aspirations to heterosexual privilege. I believe that this is a privilege that many of the men and women at Oil Can Harry’s would be happy to obtain and even work actively to acquire. The majority of the men and women at the bar are professional class, and I have seen numerous instances of class discrimination, race discrimination, and gender discrimination occur at the bar commensurate with aspirations to bourgeois norms.
My caveat to Muñoz’s theory of queerness’ futurity comes from Duggan’s earlier and less reactive ideas concerning queer community and collectivity. She writes that it is the very work of queer politics and theory to create coalition that transverses difference while recognizing difference—and the inequity that often emanates from difference—simultaneously. Duggan writes of differences attributed to class, race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity as part of this perspective. She asks, “Can we hold out a vision of (and aspiration toward) a time when structural inequalities will not divide us, while honoring the fact that right now, they do? Can we avoid the dead end of various nationalisms and separatisms, without producing a bankrupt universalism?”

I read this text to advocate for the kind of collectivity that Muñoz espouses, but then Duggan quickly develops her commentary on queer collectivity beyond the polemic Muñoz offers over a decade later:

…. I think queer politics and theory offer us promising new directions for intervention in U.S. life—though in different ways in differing arenas. Lesbian and gay liberal politics offer us the best opportunities we have to make gains in courtrooms, legislatures, and TV sit-coms. Queer politics, with its critique of the categories and strategies of liberal gay politics, keeps the possibility of radical change alive at the margins.

While I support Muñoz’s critique of gay/lesbian pragmatism, and the aspirations to hegemonic norms that such strategies infer, I also wonder if Muñoz’s queer potentiality at the horizon line doesn’t remain out of reach in part because of the rifts between queer subjects and gay and lesbian strategies for civil rights. What would it mean, I wonder, to comprehend—precisely as Duggan suggests—lesbian and gay liberal politics as one of multiple routes toward the possibility of radical change? What if such pragmatism were part of the methodology of hope Muñoz describes?

This reasoning has brought me to recognize that this project is less a work of queer theory and more predominantly a queer commentary on gay and lesbian subjects. While the concert
dance choreographies I have chosen for this study were picked deliberately with the intent of diversifying the project’s scope with regard to gender and race, this assemblage of works largely addresses the desires, concerns, and interests of white gay men. In my attribution of these interests as queer concerns, or concerning queer subjects, I offer queer commentary about what is—certainly to the majority of people who attend Oil Can Harry’s on a regular basis—a gay thing and not a queer thing. My rationale for exercising a queer commentary comes in part from my own politics and desires for radical collectivity intersecting, at times, with more conservative viewpoints, and also from the work of queer scholars Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. In “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?” the authors argue that the majority of what passes as queer theory is actually queer commentary through other theoretical frameworks. Their critique of “queer theory” as a discipline is as follows: 1) most of what has been “called queer theory has been radically anticipatory, trying to bring a world into being”; 2) queer theory has sought to legitimate queer activist experiments, the majority of which did not engage in “rigorous, abstract, metadisciplinary debate”; and 3) queer theory values a pragmatic fixity, which queer commentary seeks to destabilize. Perhaps most importantly, Berlant and Warner advocate for a multi-pronged approach to “making the world queerer” and do not discriminate based on political content. In this, they consider multiple kinds of political views—including more conservative viewpoints—as part of a wide context of particularly queer transformations. Throughout this text, I consider ostensibly gay and lesbian subjects through rubrics of queer commentary. My queer comment is to consider the possibilities of their queerness beyond, at times, the progressiveness of the political ideology of the subjects I study.

I also use queer as a verb. In this instance, to queer something means to make a situation or agreement strange and also to wreck or spoil a situation or agreement. The queering of
cowboyness, I argue throughout these essays, destabilizes the hetero-masculine paradigm of cowboys of power. Queerness makes cowboyness strange and defaces the presumed heteronormativity of cowboyness. Put another way, to queer cowboyness is to trash and vandalize the cowboy’s linkages with patriarchy and hegemony commonly associated with iconic cowboy masculinity. My engagement with such queering follows Alexander Doty models in *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (1993) wherein he writes about the “intense tensions and pleasures generated by the woman-woman and man-man aspects” of popular culture. He writes that these tensions and pleasures “create a space of sexual instability that already queerly positioned viewers can connect with in various ways, and within which straights might be likely to recognize and express their queer impulses.”

I argue that looking at the destabilizing aspects of queer/cowboy intersections in movement makes the world a little queerer in a way that I believe Duggan, Muñoz, Berlant, Warner, and Doty would approve of. Indeed, the queer potentiality of wrecking hegemonic agreements and heteronormative imperatives associated with conservative cowboyness maintains my scholarly attention to and interest in this assemblage of choreographies.

**Are You a Real Cowboy?**

This project has several beginnings, and this is only one:

In the 1980 film *Urban Cowboy*, Sissy, played by Debra Winger, introduces herself to Bud during a busy night at a large country-western bar. She opens with a question: “Are you a real cowboy?” Bud, played by John Travolta, responds hesitantly, “Well, that depends on what you think a real cowboy is.” This begins the romantically turbulent love story that drives the plot of the film that ushered in a nation-wide interest in country-western influenced fashion, music,
and dancing. Watching the film again recently, I was struck by the ambivalent treatment of the cowboy in this and other moments of the film. In the face of a desire for an unequivocal declaration of cowboy authenticity—“a real cowboy”—the film evades commitment, offering only that the cowboy’s realness pertains more to the asker than the asked. Similar probing in regard to the realness of the cowboys in this project has shadowed my work. When I say that I write about queer dancing cowboys (my shortest response to inquiries about my research at cocktail parties and in elevators), I am sometimes asked if I am doing fieldwork in some rural, gay separatist ranch/compound. My short answer to such inquiries is, “No, they are not real cowboys.”

A more nuanced version of the answer goes like this:

The queer cowboy choreographies I study for this project are not consonant with the laborers from which the figure of the cowboy emerged in the late nineteenth century western United States. Yet the sustained attention to movement I describe not only relates to the choreographies in this project, it also echoes the physical acumen required of historical cowboys who performed skilled, hard labor in the West. Western literary scholar Blake Allmendinger supports this claim in his study of artistic self-representation stemming from cowboy work cultures. In *The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in an American Work Culture* (1992), Allmendinger describes the nineteenth-century cowboys in his study as being defined through the labor they perform. He discusses the cowboy’s work culture both in terms of material production (what they accomplish on the ranch or range) and the self-representation regarding the process and product of the labor. Throughout Allmendinger’s theorizations regarding the cowboy’s skilled labor (such as castration of cattle, branding, and cattle rustling) the economically disenfranchised and unattached social status of the cowboy marks his place in
society—a byproduct of uneven work cycles and remote locales. Allmendinger positions the cowboy’s isolated and itinerant existence—prone to a boom-bust work cycle in seasonal dependence on the cattle drives—in stark contrast to cattlemen, or ranchers, who owned the means of production and employed the cowboys. In the cowboy songs and poems that Allmendinger studies, the cowboys portray the cattlemen as exploitive employers, frequently capitalizing on a cowboy’s bachelor status as an opportunity to enforce cheaply maintained shared living quarters and lower wages. Meanwhile, even as the cowboys recorded such exploitation in their cultural production, they simultaneously refuted their own economic and social disenfranchisement through self-aggrandizing rhetoric. Selectively in this project, I will discuss the historical cowboy, who performed hard labor in the context of economic disenfranchisement on the ranches and ranges of the 19th Century, through the lens of physical labor and work culture. I contrast this conception of cowboyness to the cowboys of the present study, who are more a product of popular culture, myth, and imagination.

I use the word cowboyness as an umbrella term to describe the multiple strategies and tactics by which associations with cowboy identity are produced and maintained. Examples of producing cowboyness could include: the particular cadence of a swaggering walk; the display of a gritty, anti-intellectual world view; the donning of a pair of cowboy boots, a hat, or a large belt buckle; displaying an alliance with country-western music; or simply by a stated affinity for the western United States as a distinctive socio-cultural/geographic region. While the consideration of cowboyness I describe could apply beyond the world of dance—politicians from both side of the aisle have done so since the beginning of the twentieth century—this study attends to instances and states of cowboyness long after the real cowboys ceased contributing to the U.S. economy as a substantive work culture. Artifacts from this culture of work—such as
Western-style saddle and a lasso, certainly, but also a snap-front shirt, or even worn blue jeans—linger stubbornly past their functional utility at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. Such function transforms to fashion, evoking masculine traits such as rugged determination, fierce individualism, and stoic courage, as a style sign for procurement, purchase, and display. The work culture of the cowboy, the artifacts of this work culture, and these masculine traits conjoin to form a potent icon, recognizable both in the U.S. and abroad as prototypically “American.”

While this project does attend to women, lesbians, and feminisms, particularly in the first chapter, I do not write about cowgirls or cowgirlness as part of this study. Rather, I write about women, lesbians, and feminisms that intersect with cowboyness. My rationale is based partially on maintaining a realistic scope, and also concerned with writing from a pro-feminist viewpoint. From the film Urban Cowboy to the dance Rodeo choreographed by Agnes de Mille in 1942 (which I cite briefly in chapter two), cowgirlness has been a dead end road to feminist representation. De Mille’s Rodeo begins with feminist promise as the lead character, a cowgirl who yearns to show the chorus of cowboys that she can ride and rope as well as a man, overcomes trappings associated with the domestic sphere. Yet, by the end of the work, the cowgirl’s most masterful move is to transform precisely into the role of love object for the lead cowboy—abandoning her previous claim to masculine power in favor of a well-worn, submissive femininity. Similarly, Debra Winger’s role in Urban Cowboy shows that temporary ascensions to power via cowgirlness end with returns to heteronormativity. In the opening of the film, Sissy’s refusal to be controlled by Bud fuels the fiery romance between them, but later the film’s narrative posits her rebellion as an abandonment of the bonds of their fragile marriage, rendering Sissy an outcast and thrust into the arms of the film’s villain, who abuses her. Their
relationship resolves at the film’s end, with both Bud and Sissy acquiescing to conservative gender norms.

Related to cowboyness, *Americanness* and *mythic cowboyness* are the interchangeable terms I use to describe the ways in which the icon of the cowboy has functioned emblematically as a signifier of cultural, social, and ideological life in the United States. U.S. western historian Richard White writes in depth about the relationship between conceptions of the West in relationship to myth and history. In “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: *A New History of the American West* (1991), White discusses the potency of the western frontier in the U.S. imaginary in the mid-twentieth century. A key generator of Western myth, White tells us, comes from Hollywood, and he describes the power of such discourses from film (and previously from literature) as powerful symbols that, in turn, shape the West for its inhabitants. He describes the West as a location of both “public and private fantasies” articulated by “a store of metaphors of violent conflict and confrontation that became…basics of male popular speech. Showdowns, last stands, hired guns, round-ups and the like became metaphors by which American men characterized and understood more mundane personal and public worlds.”

While I take exception to White’s hegemonic assumptions regarding how “American men” understood their lives (I have not identified myself in a “last stand” or a “showdown,” and the only time I was a “hired gun” was as a paid, last-minute replacement for an injured dancer in a small, experimental dance company in Chicago) I do concur with the weight of western metaphors in the construction of masculinity. White describes the mythic West as a story “that explains who westerners—and who Americans—are and how they should act.” Drawing from cultural theorist Richard Slotkin, White points out that myths are a way of understanding ourselves as Americans—as the beneficiaries of the U.S. imperialist domination over the West,
the legacy of Manifest Destiny represented symbolically by cowboyness. White also points out, again drawing from Slotkin, that in myth,

past and present are not only connected, they are also metaphorically identical. The lessons of a story from the past apply equally well to the present. Myth rips events out of context and drains them of their historicity. How a cowboy acts in myth is how an American male should act regardless of time or place. A man has to do what a man has to do.28

While I again rankle against the underlying assumptions within White’s argument—mainly that “an American male” understands a singular way of acting regardless of factors such as race, ethnicity, class, or sexuality—the dances I study here offer striking resonance with White’s assessment of the cowboy’s lingering influence on the U.S. imaginary, even as queer subjects choose to refute the legitimacy of such influence through their dancing. I use both the term Americanness and references to mythic cowboyness as ways to describe the production of masculinities peculiar to the U.S. nation building via the cowboy figure.

If the Cowboy Did Not Exist, America Would Have to Invent Him

The achievement of Americanness through cowboyness has been a significant trend in U.S. presidential politics, and this project posits a synergistic relationship between the dances described within these pages and politics at both identitarian and national scales. While identitarian concerns will occupy each chapter—in relationship to sexuality (throughout) and also in regard to gender (chapter one), race (chapter two), and class (chapter three)—I invoke a more national and/or presidential politic throughout these chapters, and a rehearsal of this phenomenon bears explaining here. Western historian Byron Price’s 2008 essay “Cowboys and Presidents” (composed as a literary companion to the art exhibit he curated at the Autry National Center) provides a thorough and concise survey of the ways in which cowboyness and the
presidency have intersected. Prior to the scope of my study, Price credits Theodore Roosevelt at the beginning of the twentieth century as the first president to successfully navigate a campaign and implement policy while achieving cowboyness simultaneously. Roosevelt’s claim to cowboyness comes from a short time in his young adulthood when he executes the hard, skilled, physical labor that Allmendinger describes as fundamental to cowboy self-definition in the nineteenth century. Yet Roosevelt’s extreme privilege subsidized this hard labor as a right of passage for a member of the financial and political elite, rather than as a result of being financially destitute, and he later proceeded to buy himself a ranch in deference to the lifestyle he came to love. While the cowboys that Allmendinger describes labored for ranchers in a state of financial distress, Roosevelt—and every other cowboy president described in Price’s survey—possessed the means to acquire cowboyness as a purchasable commodity.

The next sustained presidential allegiance with cowboyness came from another Democrat, Lyndon B. Johnson in the sixties. Price writes that Johnson’s strategic utilization of the cowboy image broadened the southerner’s appeal to the West. The ranch he acquired in the 1950s in Texas reflected his wealth, power, and status, but also connected him to mythic cowboyness as the popularity of Western film and television genres peaked. Ultimately, John Kennedy’s selection of Johnson balanced the successful 1960 Democratic ticket with a seasoned politician and rancher who appealed to the South and the West. In his role as vice-president and president, following Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, Johnson used the location of the ranch as an honored destination for U.S. government officials and visiting foreign dignitaries. While this allegiance with the ranch worked more or less consistently for Roosevelt, Price notes that the cowboy affiliation worked against Johnson, at times, in foreign policy perceptions. Overseas press frequently located their nuclear weapon-inspired anxiety on the cowboy from Texas, and
with the U.S. prolonged occupation of Vietnam, “the president increasingly came under attack in political cartoons and anti-war posters as a reckless and overbearing cowboy.” French President Charles de Gaulle scathingly critiqued Johnson’s cowboy disposition: “Johnson, he’s a cowboy, and that’s saying everything. The very portrait of America. He reveals the country to us as it is, rough and raw. If he didn’t exist, we’d have to invent him.”

If he didn’t exist, we’d have to invent him. What other figure in U.S. history carries such an enigmatic ambivalence? This last line of de Gaulle’s rant strikes me as an apt reflection of the ways that cowboy masculinity was a ready-made mold into which heroism, political ambition, and presidential comportment could be neatly poured. At the same time, the idea of a masculinist identity edited, refined, scrubbed, scoured, molded, and ultimately invented as cowboyness holds equal sway as a theory of the cowboy’s ascension to a privileged position in American political life. This duality of mythic cowboyness that White refers to—a reflection of history in myth and conflation of myth as history—functions precisely as the mechanism by which President Johnson utilized cowboyness in the post-World War II era. Price also points out the ways in which, to lesser degrees, President Dwight B. Eisenhower (in office from 1953-60) and the Nixon administration (1969-74) also deployed facets of cowboyness. This said, eventually, the fallout from U.S. involvement in Vietnam would erode public trust in grand narratives of the U.S., and the cowboy would fall out of favor beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s.
Queering the Cowboy Post-Vietnam

American studies scholars Christopher Le Coney and Zoe Trodd write that in the wake of the death of America’s most famous cowboy—Western film actor John Wayne, who died in 1979—Hollywood and the administration of President Ronald Reagan worked to rejuvenate Americanness out of a sense of the masculinist defeat that stemmed not only from Wayne’s death, but also from the trauma of the Vietnam War and feminist and gay incursions upon patriarchal pretensions to naturalized masculine dominance. In “Reagan’s Rainbow Rodeos: Queer Challenges to the Cowboy Dreams of Eighties America” (2009), Le Coney and Trodd offer that by 1980, Vietnam had dissolved America’s sense of the frontier. Significations derived from Western films had been a key component of understanding the losses of Vietnam, and America’s defeat to the Vietcong warranted a disillusion with the fantastically limitless possibilities of the wide, open spaces. For the first time since World War II, America’s influence, resources and power had met the end of its reach. Such disillusion turned hostile against those seen as agitating for war in representational and political spheres, and John Wayne’s vocal support for Vietnam made him a target of the anti-war movement. Angry soldiers-turned-writers specifically named Wayne in many a post-Vietnam polemic, and “John Wayne Syndrome” was the name given to post-traumatic stress disorder in the post-Vietnam era.

Wayne’s overt negativity toward homosexuality was simultaneously challenged by discourses and political movements in areas of feminism and gay liberation that usurped the white man’s naturalized entitlement to dominance. His persona appears as a trope in several dances studied in this project, but also in films that predate my study. In 1969, two films came out that established the trope of gay filmic cowboys, Warhol’s Lonesome Cowboys and Midnight
Cowboy, directed by John Schlesinger. Le Coney and Trodd note Wayne’s hostile defamation of the two lead characters in Midnight Cowboy—he describes the plot as a “story about two fags,” in an interview with Playboy.36 The charged figure of John Wayne similarly plays a part—to varying degrees—in the three concert dances studied in this project, and he functions here as a double referent between mythic and filmic cowboys. As the most popular western movie actor to work in the genre, Wayne’s widespread visibility as the cowboy hero from the late 1930s to the mid-1970s afforded him a cowboy legitimacy through which “John Wayne” and “cowboy” became synonymous terms. Resultantly, the convergent demise of the traditional western film genre and the end of Wayne’s life nod symbolically toward each other as an end to an unquestioned masculinity in cowboyness.

Le Coney and Trodd note how Hollywood and the Reagan administration approached the post-Vietnam disenchantment with cowboyness in different ways. While Hollywood largely ignored the cowboy and reclaimed masculinity through re-enactments of Vietnam-esque scenarios paired with victorious heroes such as John Rambo in the immensely successful Rambo films of the 1980s, Reagan defended cowboyness as a facet of the appropriate comportment expected of the U.S. president. Le Coney and Trodd write, “Part of Reagan’s post-Vietnam masculine appeal was his carefully cultivated image as a Western president. Frequently photographed in cowboy attire riding around Sky Ranch, he was a staunch defender of Wayne’s tarnished cowboy myth.”37 Facets of Reagan’s cowboyness included the numerous references to the West in political speeches and the repeated staging of photographic opportunities with Reagan wearing cowboy gear or otherwise framed by the rustic setting of the 700-acre ranch he and his wife, Nancy Reagan, bought outside Santa Barbara in 1974. Yet Le Coney and Trodd also posit that the notorious U.S. military build-up under Reagan amounted to a repudiation of
anti-Vietnam sentiment—evidencing that U.S. failure in Vietnam was not due to an overreach of U.S. imperialism, but a failure to reach, act, and command with enough military force.

Le Coney and Trodd see the work of the International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA) as an incursion upon the rhetoric and policies Reagan enacted, and I see the history of the IGRA and the history of gay and lesbian country-western dancing as inhabiting independent, yet interconnected historical trajectories. As such, the historical trajectory of the IGRA bears some rehearsal here. My recounting of the history of the U.S./Canada rodeo circuit is influenced both by Le Coney and Trodd’s essay and from online sources, largely provided by the IGRA as well as printed materials acquired at various IGRA events. Significantly, the establishment of a national gay and lesbian rodeo circuit occurred in the years leading up to 1985, when the IGRA was formed out of rodeo movements in Colorado, Texas, and California. According to Le Coney and Trodd, “In 1979 a man named Philip Ragsdale was looking for an innovative way to raise money for muscular dystrophy, and came up with the idea of a gay rodeo.” Alternately, the IGRA website describes Ragsdale’s quest for a gay rodeo as beginning several years earlier. According to this source, on October 2, 1976, the first known gay and lesbian rodeo was held at the Washoe County Fairgrounds after almost a year of planning and amidst difficulties with raising funds and finding local ranchers who were willing to donate livestock to a gay event. Ragsdale is credited both with having the idea to hold the rodeo as a means to raise funds for the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA)—he is also credited with performing the year’s worth of planning and groundwork necessary for the event to happen. And through Ragsdale an unlikely alliance began between the national gay rodeo circuit and the International Imperial Court System.
In 1975, Ragsdale was the reigning Emperor representing the Reno Chapter in the International Imperial Court, an organization established in 1965 and dedicated to raising money for charity through a variety of fundraising activities—the most prominent of these are Inaugural Balls, wherein an Emperor and an Empress are judged in a pageant-style event featuring formal wear and talent competitions. Not surprisingly given the Imperial Court’s roots in the urban gay male culture of San Francisco, the contestants vying for the coveted title of empress are not coquettish young women, but rather, men in “high drag”—with sequins, layers of makeup, and talent entries that often feature highly dramatic lip-synched routines to popular music or show tunes. The qualifications for the role of emperor, on the other hand, do not similarly involve cross-dressing. Rather, the emperor is judged on his success or failure at performing comportment consistent with gentlemanly conduct and his ability to make his partner (the drag queen with whom he competes in tandem) look and feel like a queen, as it were.

From his rights and responsibilities as the reigning emperor came Ragsdale’s desire to create a rodeo event to demonstrate, in the words of the rodeo program and IGRA website, “both our existence and our concern for our neighbors” through the raising of funds for the MDA. Indeed, repeatedly through the literature of the IGRA and the Imperial Court, the desire to contribute to charity is described both as altruistic and strategic—“The gay community has found many creative ways to become involved with America in efforts to overcome the walls of prejudice.” Further, the literature states that the establishment of a gay rodeo was intended to undo gay stereotyping, offering an alternative perspective to gay culture other than the one produced by the Imperial Court. Yet traditions of the Imperial Court System remain within the gay rodeo circuit as many gay rodeos crown some version of a queen in the form of a drag performer. Similarly, while some gay rodeo events evenly reflect the values of straight rodeo
events (in the form of barrel racing, bull and steer riding, etc.) some events, such as the Drag Race, require cowboys to lasso a steer only to allow a drag queen to saddle the steer and cross a designated finish line.\textsuperscript{42}

Citizenship emerges as a theme throughout the history of the IGRA. In the early days of its existence, following the initial interests of Ragsdale, proceeds from gay rodeos benefited the Muscular Dystrophy Association. However, beginning in 1983 proceeds began being channeled toward AIDS related funds. Today, funds are primarily directed toward AIDS and “other emerging GBLT health and social welfare needs.”\textsuperscript{43} By 1984, the National Reno Gay Rodeo begun by Ragsdale had grown to bring over 10,000 people to the rodeo grounds and, by providing a competitive venue, had encouraged the formation of gay rodeo associations in California, Texas, Colorado, and Arizona. These four organizations then formed the IGRA which, as of 2011, sponsored a year round circuit of gay rodeos and country-western dance conventions with twenty-seven member associations representing twenty-five states, the District of Columbia, and four Canadian provinces.\textsuperscript{44} Supporting this assessment of the organization’s concern for citizenry, Le Coney and Trodd offer models of cowboyness that refute the stubborn, jingoistic rhetoric for which John Wayne became notorious. In the shadow of Wayne’s irrefutable hegemonic masculinity, “the rodeoers shake off that shadow and perform a new cowboy role.”\textsuperscript{45} Specifically, the “rodeoers” Le Coney and Trodd describe see themselves as decidedly apart from Wayne’s toughness, Reagan’s conservatism, and more recent aspirations to cowboyness as articulated by George W. Bush. To this last cowboy president, the rodeo cowboys that Le Coney and Trodd interview have little affection. They write that the gay rodeoers decry Bush for giving cowboys a bad name, such that overseas denouncements of cowboyness have—at the time of the essay’s publication in 2009—become synonymous with
admonishment of the United States’ unilateral military action against Iraq and general disregard for global citizenship. The authors note one gay rodeo cowboy as believing “that the gay cowboy might in fact rescue America’s global image.”46 Such aspirations certainly fly in the face of the moves of the cowboy’s most well known representatives in the late-twentieth century.

**Cowboys Dancing in the Shadow of Reagan**

Both the queer rodeo riders and queer country-western dancers can be considered as cowboys who were defined in the era of Reagan, and in addition to the performance of cowboy-ness that the queer dancing cowboys, the gay rodeoers, and Reagan share, all three corners of the identitarian triangle I theorize similarly occupy foundational and/or particular relationships to the phenomenon of AIDS. The gay rodeo riders devoted the majority of their fundraising efforts toward this cause—indicating the importance of the disease not only in urban enclaves of gay men, but also reflecting concern and impact amongst the more rural demographic from which the rodeos frequently drew. Emblematically, Phil Ragsdale, who is credited with beginning the queer rodeo movement, died of AIDS in 1992.47 Similarly, the queer dancing cowboys that I discuss in this project, to varying degrees, dance in the shadow of AIDS. As I mentioned earlier, the history of queer country-western dancing and the queer rodeo movement intersect—though the history of queer country-western dancing currently exists with far sparer documentation—and one history notes that by 1983, country-western dance served an important auxiliary function to the rodeo arena in the form of recreational dancing, exhibitions by local groups, and competitions. While I am hesitant to conflate the distinctive yet relational histories of these two movements out of convenience, I feel it safe to infer that the documentation of AIDS affecting the gay rodeo can speak to the impact of AIDS in queer
dancing communities. Certainly, many of the men and women that I danced with in Los Angeles in the months and years after 9/11 still recognized, in distinctive and singular ways, the negating influence of AIDS upon their lives. And some recognized AIDS as the premiere traumatic phenomenon of their life to which all other traumas—such as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Towers in New York—compared. I also argue that the queer concert dance choreographies of this study queerly evoke the context of AIDS. Most prominently, Joe Goode’s *The Maverick Strain* (1996) considers AIDS from the perspective of the overwhelming and traumatic loss that accompanied the phenomenon of the disease from the perspective of survivor fatigue.

But of the cowboys I write about within this project, none has such a singular and foundational relationship to AIDS as Ronald Reagan. Reagan’s failure to lead during the early years of the AIDS crisis has been soundly criticized by queer scholars, AIDS activists, and public health policy makers. Reagan infamously avoided any mention of AIDS over the first years of the disease, refused to approve funding for clinical research, and—once he finally did engage with AIDS as a public health crisis—suggested mandatory testing of gays and IV drug users. This strategy of mandatory testing for so-called “high risk groups” was less concerned with providing care and advocacy for the sick and more interested in preserving the purity of “the general population.” Public health worker Jan Zita Grover reads this disproportionate concern for the general population as “the repository of everything you wish to claim for yourself and deny to others.” Indeed, numerous critiques of Reagan’s ineffectual presidential performance surrounding AIDS cite his failure to advocate for those who were different than he. Playwright Larry Kramer similarly recounts that queers were never part of “the American People” that Reagan addressed in his elegantly performed speeches: “Year after year of his
hateful and endless reign we knew we were not a part of the American People he was President of." Kramer’s criticism of Reagan’s exclusion of queers in Americanness comes in a polemical essay published in the Advocate titled, “Adolf Reagan.” The article appeared in print weeks after Reagan’s death from Alzheimer’s disease. In this essay, Kramer compares Reagan’s treatment of queers with Adolf Hitler’s treatment of Jews in the Holocaust. While I find the parallel between the early years of the AIDS pandemic and the Holocaust to be a somewhat sloppy and ahistorical treatment of both eras, I do find credibility in facets of Kramer’s argument. Chiefly, I concur with Kramer that Reagan viewed queers and drug addicts as less than human—a population apart from “the general population” or “the American People” he swore to protect and represent in office.

While Kramer posits this othering of queers as inspired by hatred, Reagan’s biographer, Edmund Morris, paints a picture of mild disinterest bordering on moral disapproval. Morris writes that the death of Rock Hudson in 1985 led Reagan to ask his doctor about the disease for the first time. Morris’ account paints Reagan as an innocent child rather than a malicious dictator: “It’s like a virus, like measles? But it doesn’t go away?” Yet this disinterested quasi-innocence reveals a sharp edge in Morris’ brief, almost perfunctory treatment of AIDS in the Reagan era. He writes that Reagan found AIDS to be “a fit subject for humor as late as December 1986, and five months after that waxing biblical in his opinion that ‘maybe the Lord brought down this plague’ because ‘illicit sex is against the Ten Commandments.’” Morris writes, in a contrasting opinion to Kramer, that Reagan did not judge gay sex any differently than he judged heterosexual promiscuity or abortion, “All three were abhorred by God in his opinion.” Regardless of Reagan’s motives, the effect of his inaction is irrefutable. Reagan
only intervened into the progress of AIDS at a point when its threat to the people he imagined as his constituents was impossible to ignore any longer.

In response to Reagan’s inaction, queers advocated for the subjectivity of people living with AIDS in a variety of performance settings. Theatre scholar David Román positions queer performances as calibrated interventions in the face of altruistic, and ultimately benign platitudes of hope offered by Reagan. He describes theatrical performances as critiquing “the cultural production of the hope for compassion” and denigrating the Reagan administration’s inaction in response to AIDS. Similarly, dance scholar and AIDS activist David Gere analyzes the presence of burning effigies of Ronald Reagan as part of 1988 ACT UP occupation of the Food and Drug Administration in Rockville, Maryland. Gere discusses the protest as a choreographic response to the FDA’s conservative approach to experimental drug therapies in the early years of the disease. He writes that the burning of Reagan images—central to the visual and symbolic potency of the protest—were fueled not only by Reagan’s ineffective leadership, but also by the perception that Reagan was openly hostile to queers and people living with AIDS. The image of Reagan was central to a number of ACT UP protests, and his image appeared in numerous placards as part of these performances. One of the campaigns ACT UP staged indicted Reagan’s altered image in AIDSGATE; this campaign was named to co-opt Contragate, an informal name for the congressional hearings investigating the scandal of arms sales to Nicaragua Contra rebels. Similarly, a demonstration at the New York City main post office, staged on tax day to capitalize on a forced audience of last minute tax payers waiting in line, included passersby receiving a letter from ACT UP—addressed to President Reagan. After a salutary “Dear Mr. President,” the letter identifies the sender as a taxpayer questioning the administration’s handling of the epidemic. The letter questions the administration’s failure to implement funded AIDS
education programs as well as the high price for AZT in spite of dubious accounts of the drugs effectiveness, and in the face of funded research at taxpayers’ expense. The letter goes on to indiict the President’s failure to read a report on AIDS prepared by his own surgeon general. ACT UP ends with the following: “In all, your administration has witnessed almost 20,000 deaths from AIDS. When will you see fit to have your first meeting with the surgeon general to discuss the epidemic? HOW MUCH LONGER MUST WE WAIT??” Such urgent and calibrated responses to Reagan’s inaction provide key evidence of the importance of Reagan in queer life in the same era that queer cowboy dances were being created and performed on social dance floors and concert stages in the U.S.

I argue that in the same way that Reagan produced cowboyness as an aspect of his performance of the American presidency, the men and women dancing as cowboys assert their Americanness through their kinesthetic productions of cowboyness. While the dances I write about here overtly address a variety of political concerns—related to issues of sexuality, gender, race and class—I argue that these dances always also address nation, and redress the exclusion of queers from visions of the American Public and the general population. Put another way, these dances move in the shadows: in the shadow of AIDS, in the shadow of Reagan’s performance of cowboyness, and in the shadow of nationhood from which queers have been historically excluded. These dances move in the shadows of such oppression while, in a best-case scenario, also advocate for the participants who dance them. Here the choreographies say, “I am here—cowboy, American, citizen.” In my reading, these choreographies always signal Americanness, while they also address attitudes, values, and beliefs in regard to other aspects of the cultural realities of the queer subjects who perform the dances.
**Cowboy Mimesis**

This one still puzzles me: How does a dance critique a thing without reproducing the very thing the dance hopes to critique? Or, more to the point of this project, how do the dancers I analyze simultaneously posit themselves within the matrix of cowboyness without inadvertently advocating for the same kind of hegemonic ascension to heteronormative power by which the dancers find themselves constrained? Just as the dances I describe move within the shadows cast by Reagan, AIDS, and nation, I also believe that the dancers of this project cast shadows of their own. In this, I argue that they risk a cooption of the queer subjectivity the choreographies endeavor to champion.

The relationship between a body and its shadow appropriately describes the social and political discourses the queer cowboy dancer performs. In literal terms a shadow is the mark left by a body as it blocks access to a source of light. The resulting image moves around the body, but cannot leave it, nor can the shadow exceed the contours of body that cast the shadow. The corporeal shadows I describe mark the body’s subjectivity in the same way. The shadows mark the socio-political position of these subjects as they dance. Related to the queer subjects I write about here, the figure of the cowboy—with historical, mythic, and political associations intact—portend their queerness. The cowboy dictates the contours of the queer cowboy dancer’s mimesis.

The relationship between camp, mimicry, parody, and pastiche blend, blur, and overlap in this project. Ascension to hegemonic norms embed themselves within these concerns surrounding the production of cowboyness as representational strategies and tactics. Yet queers resist these ascensions to hegemony within the same step. For example, in chapter one I argue that the two-step at Oil Can Harry’s stands apart both from heteronormative, country-western
paradigms and the dominant gay club scene of Los Angeles. The men and women who dance
the two-step engage complexly with both of these discourses in their dancing and attendance at
the bar. While the men and women find ways to queer the heteronormative trappings of the bar,
such rough play with hegemonic norms does not, I argue below, necessarily dilute the negating
effects of assumed straightness for queer subjects. I focus here on the way that the aspirations of
some gay men to conserve the benefits of gender hierarchies negatively affect women at the bar.
In the face of inequitable distribution of spatial resources, unacknowledged collisions on the
dance floor and backstabbing comments, the majority of women model a sustained presence and
deft articulation of improvisational tactics to quietly resist such hostility. Chapter one balances
considerations on the two-step with a dance by Marianne Kim and Lee Anne Schmitt (The Many
Deaths of John Wayne from 2005). I read their work as potently oscillating between a critique of
and homage to the film actor most commonly associated with the classic Western film genre.

Chapter two looks primarily at Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders, the 1984 choreography
by Ishmael Houston-Jones and Fred Holland. I argue that Holland and Houston-Jones usurp the
assumed whiteness of the cowboy as both Hollywood and presidential cowboys have constructed
it. Through compositional improvisation; reflexive comment on film and modern dance;
practiced artifice; exposition of alternate historical narratives; and a visceral, risk-taking
vocabulary, Cowboys, Dreams, and Ladders exposes the racialized construction of the cowboy
imaginary in the U.S. while positing the queerness and African American identity of the creators
as central to the performance. I read the work of Holland and Houston-Jones as recuperating the
traumatic history of queer subjects in the U.S. through a recognition of identitarian concerns such
as race, sexuality, and gender.
Whereas the first chapter looks at the two-step as a performative incursion on the heterosexual original, the third chapter looks at The Shadow dance as a *choreographic* phenomenon. I consider a metonymic reading of the cowboy boot at Oil Can Harry’s and deploy metonymy’s additive associations to propose that the gay country-western dancer’s participation in The Shadow strategizes its displacement from heteronormativity’s entitled domination over queerness. The metonymic reading I propose will begin with the cowboy boot the dancers wear and extend to the composition of the dance. In this, I utilize Michael Taussig’s concept that the poorly executed copy has the power to assume the power and likeness of that which is copied through a sensuous knowing of the represented. I read The Shadow not as a development of the performative style of the two-step’s precursory choreography, but as a choreographic reflection of deeply embedded cultural beliefs. This reading draws support from Susan Foster’s critique of debates regarding the performativity of gender. I argue that The Shadow can be read simultaneously as a choreography of sexuality and a performance of a desire to act politically, and in these simultaneous readings, the dance embraces conflicting aspects of identity with regard to sexuality and its erasure within the market driven conceptualizations of queerness that became increasingly prevalent in the mid-1990s. Finally, I assert that The Shadow affirms and vivifies gay male sex practices in the historical context of the continued presence of AIDS.

Chapter four places itself within the context of AIDS choreographies. Through a close reading of a line dance at Oil Can Harry’s and a 1996 dance by San Francisco choreographer Joe Goode, I intend to demonstrate two related claims. First, I show the men and women dancing at Oil Can Harry’s as a model of collectivity that resists contemporary trends toward a polarized, reactive political conversation. Next I posit that in embedding an AIDS choreography within the context of cowboyness, Goode vivifies an affective map that ambivalently locates cowboy
masculinity at the nexus of longing and contempt. In this chapter, both campy send-ups of the cowboy and more earnest depictions of cowboy masculinity are given equal valence.

The concluding chapter compares two films in which gay cowboys figure prominently—Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), based on the short story by Annie Proulx, and Craig Chester’s *Adam and Steve* (2006), both released at the tail end of the Reagan-Bush era. I argue that both films depict an anxious relationship between cowboyness and queerness, but whereas *Brokeback Mountain* shows tragic consequences at the nexus of this intersection, *Adam and Steve* leverages the cowboy image in order to celebrate campy humor in support of a gay love story.

In all of these chapters, I argue that cowboyness and queerness destabilize themselves and each other when brought together on the alchemic field of the dancing body. In choreographic depictions of John Wayne by the team of Schmitt and Kim and also Joe Goode; in the two-step, The Shadow, and line dances at Oil Can Harry’s; and in Holland and Houston-Jones’ incursions to the cowboy’s whiteness, the mythic cowboy’s swagger deviates from its hegemonic entitlement. Here, I argue, opportunities for the recuperation of Americanness and masculinity lay themselves bare to the potentiality of queerness, and show us not only our attachments to West, but also our resistance to the radical futurity queer potentiality portends. The precarious steps of such a compromised cowboy masculinity fills its viewers, on the margins of the social dance floor and in the seats of the concert hall, with an anxious yet energized ambivalence—an ambivalence that this staggering, swaggering, tip toeing, and sashaying cowboy notices, looks toward, and winks at before ironically disavowing his acknowledgement of this exchange. He quickly draws down the brim of his cowboy hat to hide his gaze from these viewers and then locks his thumbs in his belt loops, deftly continuing his skittering cadence. He
continues to step and swagger unpredictably, inviting his onlookers to watch a bit closer how he
dances, or even to join him for a spin.
Chapter One: The Two-Step Glides and *Making a Disaster*

At Oil Can Harry’s in Los Angeles’s San Fernando Valley, the men and women walk an oval pattern, counter-clockwise, in time to the music. They hold each other in an embrace that resembles the European carriage of the waltz, but this dance struggles, within its deceptively smooth and gliding cadence, for balance. The many variations of hand clasps, turns, and occasional bumps skew, complicate, and (to use the delicious verb form of an old epithet) queer this incarnation of the two-step, but so also do the same-gendered pairings of the dancers. This dance adheres neither to the heteronormative paradigm of country-western dancing nor the ecstatic abandon of club dancing that represents the dominant nightlife kinesthesia of urban gay culture. Rather, this dance quotes elements of both culturally produced choreographies. The paradoxical accompaniments to this dance evoke rugged cowboy masculinities. Dancers wear western gear in the form of hats, cowboy boots, and big belt buckles and these accoutrements position the dancers well outside of the more popular gay discos that can be heard pounding their synthesized beats across the hills in West Hollywood. At the same time, the presence of designer tank tops clinging to muscularly sculpted torsos places this dance within the gym culture of gay Los Angeles.

On any given beat, half of them walk backwards. Each pair of dancers faces each other with one pair of arms outstretched, the other arm wrapped around each other’s torsos; the following dancers walk backward to the two-step’s choreographed footwork—slow, slow, quick, quick—while the leading dancers walk forward with their trusting partners in front of them.
They travel smoothly in space, shifting through turns, direction changes, and promenades. The momentum of each pair of dancers, as decided by the lead, negotiates a path within the maze of other pairs who are similarly searching for an obstacle-free trajectory within the overriding counter-clockwise-oval-pattern of the group. They dance smoothly and with small steps to the sound of singers with voices thick with earnest twangs, regretful howls, and lustful vibratos. They shift, they choose their path, they attempt to glide amidst the friction of the other pairs of dancers, within the contradictions of the multiple referents that this scene connotes, and against, perhaps, the societal constructions that make the phrase “gay country-western dancing” a joke to anyone who hasn’t tried to glide.

But then, gay men and lesbians partner dancing to country-western music in the metropolis of Los Angeles (in "the Valley," no less) remains a funny prospect to many of the men and women who are on the floor. Indeed, humor is a part of the pleasure of the dance—the humor of making mistakes, of watching other dancers make mistakes, and of queerly interacting with the most self-avowedly straight of mass cultural productions. Certainly, executing the choreography of the two-step to the melodic strains of Rascal Flats, Shania Twain, and Toby Keith in a room full of gay men and lesbians is funny. More importantly, for the people who show up week after week, they dance for fun. And the fun of the dancing cannot be reduced to a joke. Surveying the facial expressions of the dancers in any given moment of the two-step reveals heads held back in laughter and breathless smiles, but also furrowed brows, held jaws, and mouths quietly repeating the words "slow, slow, quick, quick" into an inexperienced partner's ear. The men and women work hard to have fun and dance toward the pleasure of the two-step's gliding cadence. They labor to successfully execute a choreography that exists at Oil Can Harry's and, for most, nowhere else in their lives.
The labor of leisure I describe exists in the midst of a rushed work schedule and hectic commute. Dancing doesn’t go late into the night, which reflects four starting assessments: 1) the majority of patrons are older; 2) most identify heavily with their professions and thus prioritize their work week over late nights out; 3) a loyal minority of patrons attend recovery programs and thus easily resist the seduction to stay out for one more drink; and 4) a significant number of patrons don’t attend Oil Can Harry’s as their final destination of the evening. For these latter mentioned cowboys, a change of venue only requires a change of shoes (many dancers keep their boots in their trunk) and a drive over the hill to begin the late night revelries. A study of Oil Can Harry’s requires a post-twilight ethnographic methodology—positioned between the workday and the wilder, more nocturnal activities of West Hollywood’s gay ghetto.

A discrete allocation of time choreographs a rushed entrance. The men and women walk briskly into Oil Can Harry’s for lessons on Tuesdays and Thursdays that start promptly at 7:30 p.m. The traffic in the Valley has barely recovered from rush hour, and for the first hours of the dance, the participants still carry the energy of daytime on their tensed shoulders. Distracted and hurried dancers greet partners on the floor with apologetic embraces and say, “What have I missed? I got held up at work.” Or, “Oh my god! The traffic is awful on the 101! Shouldn’t all those people be home with their kids already?” Gradually through the evening, a rhythm of nighttime emerges that peaks and fades before midnight. This post-twilight space operates at a time when the circuit boys of West Hollywood take disco naps, drink coffee, or dine alfresco, and generally prepare for a nightclub scene that doesn’t begin until after midnight. The remnants of this more dominant nocturnal subculture can be seen lingering with cigarette butts outside of after-hours clubs as many of their country-western counterparts begin their days and their morning commutes on Santa Monica Boulevard.
Oil Can Harry’s maintains a consistent schedule that promotes the needs of its mostly professional clientele. The bar hosts dancing to country-western music only three nights a week and, on two of these three nights, closes shortly after midnight. This time constraint provides a specific economic supply to the limited demand of its relatively few (but tenaciously loyal) patrons. This stable allocation of time allows patrons to enjoy a full evening of dancing and to be home in bed with enough time for a full evening of sleep before morning rituals of the gym, the commute, and the beginning of an eight-hour (or longer) workday awaken them early in the morning. The workday is a frequent source of conversation among dancers, "So, what do you do?" or "How's the new job working out?" are questions used to induce small talk while waiting in line for a drink or entering the bar from the parking lot.

**Those America Songs**

The labor of leisure that the men and women perform intersects with country-western music, a stridently straight component of popular culture. I describe this engagement as a queer encounter with “the straight mind.” I take this phrase from feminist scholar Monique Wittig’s seething assessment of patriarchy, and I connect her critique of binary sex/gender systems to queers dwelling in the possibilities that exceed heteronormative templates for living. Wittig's concept of the straight mind and its “tendency to immediately universalize its production of concepts into general laws which claim to hold true for all societies, all epochs, all individuals” can be readily found in the lyrics and music that accompany the two-step. As the country-western music assumes heterosexuality and conservative reinforcement of gender roles, the dancers refute such negating assumptions through their skillful dancing. Through their queer interpretations of the two-step, the dancers at Oil Can Harry’s compose a dissident relationship
to the “totalizing interpretation of history, social reality, [and] culture,” which Wittig describes in her intervention to pragmatic and assimilatory feminisms.³

Frequently, the conservatism found within the lyrics expands beyond the parameters of gender and sexuality. For example in November 2011, Alan Jackson’s “It’s Alright To Be a Redneck”⁴ rose to the fifty-third spot on the Billboard country charts before being pulled—presumably to make way for the release of Jackson’s “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning),”⁵ which is a romantic and mournful response to the 9/11 World Trade Center bombings. In my assessment, such political conservatism in the song lyrics is met unevenly by the patrons. One of my informants, when I asked him what he liked least about dancing at Oil Can Harry’s said, “It’s either all those car songs or all those America songs.” Those America songs bugged me too; a survey of the DJs repertoire includes patriotic melodies by Brooks and Dunn, Billy Ray Cyrus, and Kenny Chesney with lyrics characterized by Phil Vassar’s, blithely enthusiastic belief that “dreams can grow wild, born in an American child.”⁶ Yet country-western artist Toby Keith provides the most potent example of the kind of conservatism that existed in country-western circles at the time I conducted my fieldwork. One song released in the early 2000s stridently defended America’s right to declare war upon what George W. Bush described as the “axis of evil” after the 9/11 bombings of the World Trade Center. In “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)” (2001) Keith sings the following:

Now this nation that I love
Has fallen under attack
A mighty sucker punch came flyin’ in
From somewhere in the back
Soon as we could see clearly
Through our big black eye
Man, we lit up your world
Like the 4ᵗʰ of July⁷
Later in the song, Keith sings, “We’ll put a boot in your ass/It’s the American way.” I never heard the song played at Oil Can Harry’s (doesn’t have a great beat and not so easy to dance to), but I frequently listened to the song as I listened to Los Angeles country music stations to become more familiar with the genre. While these lyrics came under limited scrutiny by the mainstream press, the inclusion of the song on the album *Unleashed* (2002) is largely credited for the album’s strong sales. Communication Studies scholar Lori Henson discusses the tension between criticism of the jingoism and violence on the one hand and the expansion and deepening of a fan base on the other. She argues that Keith’s staunch conservatism must be seen within a spectrum of political ideologies. Her essay, “The Dixie Chicks vs. Toby Keith: Country Music’s Ideologies and the Culture War in America” (2007) posits Keith and the Dixie Chicks at far ends of country music’s pluralistic political viewpoints.

The Dixie Chicks controversially articulated opposition to President George W. Bush’s unilateral call to war in 2003. During a concert in London, Texas native Natalie Maines said, “Just so you know, we’re ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas.” Her statement drew cheers from the London crowd and jeers from many country-western fans when the statement was reported in the U.S. Here I want to point out the asymmetry in the effect of the responses to the Dixie Chicks vs. the responses to Toby Keith. While Toby Keith had several appearances cancelled by major media outlets, many country-western music stations boycotted the Dixie Chicks’ music for up to a year after Maines’ *faux pas*. As Toby Keith won numerous audience awards for the video and the song, country-music fans booed the Dixie Chicks at the 2003 Country Music Awards. I believe that in addition to locating the political leaning of country music decidedly to the right of center, such asymmetry also speaks clearly to a discrediting of women who dare to resist patriarchal authority.
The above examples emblematize the extreme political conservatism that can be articulated in country-western spheres. How then can queers encounter products of mass culture without being co-opted into the straight mind’s ideology? Alexander Doty’s queer reading of mass culture illumines the relationship with the straight mind that I have observed at Oil Can Harry’s. Doty suggests that queers find pleasure in numerous kinds and genres of discourse that seem to deny the possibility of such enjoyment. He similarly notes that straight culture’s readings of texts are “alternative” to queer viewers, and straight culture’s resistance to queer readings “often seem like desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly a part of mass culture.” What such “queer reception” does, he tells us “is stand outside the relatively clear-cut and essentializing categories of sexual identity under which most people function.”

The gay country-western dancer at Oil Can Harry’s seems to read the songs of popular country-western music and twist them at the same time. These queer encounters with texts produced by and presumably for the straight mind are glided across with seeming ease, rendering once solid texts malleable and fluid to multiple interpretations, and specifically, queer interpretations.

I argue that the nuanced gliding across the floor, a key component of a proficient two-step, exists as one of multiple available tactics that queers use to derive pleasure from lyrical texts. Rather than stepping on the beat, this polyrhythm slides the foot across the phrasing and the heteronormative lyrics contained within the phrasing. The choreography of the steps (slow, slow, quick, quick) results in a three-beat step sequence against a four-beat bar in the music—the dancers accent the downbeat of the music only once every three measures, maintaining the tempo but not the meter of the song. This glide and polymeter combine to allow gentle steps across lyric texts. Dancers can move to the music or slide across texts that are often simultaneously loved and laughed at by the dancers. In another tactic, queers textually refute the
gender pronouns and heteronormative labels that pin the lyrics in the straight mind’s domain. This discursive relationship to lyrics can be heard audibly from the margins of the floor where patrons loudly and jokingly replace the words wife, girl, and woman, for example, with husband, boy, and man. I read this as a form of serious play with the dance floor historically inscribed against same-gendered partnering. While some patrons of Oil Can Harry’s substitute lyric texts vocally, many of the dancers on the floor have already subverted the lyrics through their presence and participation. In such cases, the queer country-western dancer offers a pleasurable and elegant model for contesting compulsory heterosexuality in popular culture. The glide operates as a kinetic counterpoint to popular country-western music’s assumption of straightness, questions its unquestioned authority, and does so without skipping a beat.

**Gliding Hierarchies**

When my first partner taught me to dance, he told me that I should feel like I am gliding. Virtuosity within the two-step requires the ability to glide, and for my purposes will be discussed as a kinetic mode of travel for the material body as well as a destabilizing strategy regarding a dancer’s identity. Glide can be defined as the successful physical execution of the country-western two-step in accordance with an individual dancer’s desire for the dance. This individual desire is constructed within the field of Oil Can Harry’s (as influenced by a national network of gay and straight country-western dance communities that include dance halls in other cities, rodeo associations, dance competitions, and dance clubs) and values kinetic concepts of smoothness, maneuverability, and synchronicity with one’s partner (being a clear lead or a perceptive follower). Glide within the two-step also intersects with dancing competence as accomplished through the ability to improvise through quarter, half, full, and double turns,
reverses, and the switching of hand clasps to accomplish a variety of facings while maintaining the forward traveling motion of the steps and avoiding collisions with other pairs of dancers. And glide refers to the performed subversion of heteronormative assumptions with regard to gender on or off of the dance floor. Distinct performances of glide in this manner can include: moving from a leading role to a following role from song to song, moving from queer to cowboy through gesture and dress, stepping across lyric texts through the two-step’s polyrhythm, disputing lyric texts vocally from the dance floor (or the margins of the dance floor), and subverting heteronormative assumptions regarding gender within the dance.

I define grit as anything that prohibits glide and can similarly be thought of in regard to corporeal and identitarian concerns. The sticky rub of a running shoe on the wooden floor can be thought of under the umbrella of grit, but so also can a misstep by the inexperienced dancer or following an overly aggressive lead. I also theorize grit in terms of the True Grit valorized in Hollywood westerns.¹³ Many men, as I will show later in this essay, seem to take their performance of cowboy masculinity with frightful seriousness. This grit, this inability to glide between pedestrian and dancer, or between queer and cowboy, has the potential to captivate the participant at Oil Can Harry’s in a matrix of heteronormative imperatives.

Kinetic and identitarian manifestations of glide and grit do not occur independently at Oil Can Harry’s. Rather, facets of both grit and glide most often conjoin. A dancer’s inexperienced, stumbling steps, for example, may disallow the successful execution of the two-step, thereby limiting her or his ability to legitimate the cowboy boots that she/he wears. In such cases, the identifier of urban dweller (and by extension queer urbanite) interferes with the identity of country-western (and by extension cowboy). In the dual identity of queer-cowboy a hybridized identity is temporarily constructed on the floor that continuously shifts through grit to achieve
glide. Similarly, glide can be seen as contingent upon the presence of (or attempt to avoid) grit. Through such a lens, the two-step provides a corporeal puzzle within which the sliding of the boot, the communicative tension between partners as manifested in the embrace of their arms and torsos, and successful navigation between other pairs of dancers labors toward the achievement of glide. Grit and glide exist not in simple opposition but in coexistence with, and in contingency upon, each other.

With each dance, whether an individual leads or follows a particular two-step, the men and women display the product of their dancing labor; they practice to improve their skills, to engage with other skill sets, and to showcase their current capabilities simultaneously. Each dance testifies to the dancer’s placement in an unspoken hierarchy, both to the dancer’s partner (as in, “You should want to dance with me again.”) and the resting or waiting dancers on the margins (“You should want to dance with me at a future time.”). A porous, or gliding, hierarchy, determined by skill level and experience, exists at the bar. Dancers who have practiced country-western dancing for years and who can display their competence through skillful executions of partner dancing vocabularies in both leading and following roles across the two-step, the shadow, the shuffle, the eastern and western swings and the country waltz, occupy the top echelon. These dancers can access the greatest number of partners as they can accommodate any other dancers’ preferences with regard to role of leader/follower across any partner dance in the Oil Can Harry’s repertoire. The DJ controls the kind of dance performed through song selection, and the best dancers at Oil Can Harry’s—I would estimate this to be less than ten percent of the crowd on any given night—can easily respond to these shifting demands. Less experienced dancers might be able to lead a shadow dance, but not accommodate another dancer’s request to lead a shuffle, or follow a two-step. While this hierarchy, with regard to
dancing skill and access to partners, is clearly evident within the bar, I must note that this hierarchy does not prohibit dancers of a lower skill level from dancing with upper-level dancers.

Less experienced dancers can move up from lower levels in the skill hierarchy through several strategies. Most commonly, new dancers move up through attractiveness. In some cases this attractiveness is produced through youth. Other times, dancers produce this attractiveness through hours, days, weeks, months, and years of exercise and stringent attention to diet to produce a lean, muscular frame. For a gym-boy cowboy, hours of labor spent pushing through rigorous workouts develops the body as a commodity that gains him access to skilled partners at Oil Can Harry’s and in many other spheres of gay male leisure. Some dancers assemble attractiveness and desirability through careful procurement of clothing items and hairstyle (sometimes including subtle dyeing, and facial hair adjustment) to produce a distinctive look, marking them simultaneously not only as rugged cowboys, but also as savvy consumers of fashion; in this, they skillfully erase any perceived paradox between masculine ruggedness and fashion-setting gayness. These fashionista cowboys produce attractiveness through a rigorous craftsmanship of the body into a hybridized commodity of queer cowboy authenticity.

Attractiveness can exist in many forms (a preference for a specific body type, skin tone, jaw line, eye color, spoken accent, etc.), but in terms of a cultivatable commodification of attractiveness, I see gym-boy cowboys and fashionista cowboys as dominant themes. As important as I see the production of attractiveness in the gliding function within the hierarchical structure of dancing competence, the vast majority of patrons at Oil Can Harry’s do not then engage with these partners outside of the bar. Attractiveness and sexual intimacy remain largely disconnected phenomena.
Other labors can grant access to the top echelons of the hierarchy. Inexperienced dancers can access other dancers through connections obtained beyond the field; many dancers’ stories of coming to Oil Can Harry’s involve being dragged there by friends, and the network of dancing colleagues intersects with other queer networks to cultivate a newcomer’s first set of dancing partners. In some cases, these networks prove insular, as a few longstanding, if largely unspoken, hostilities simmer in various corners of the club. Overwhelmingly, however, these pre-existing friendship networks invite more connections than they prohibit. Inexperienced dancers can also work toward dancing competence through regular attendance at the lessons twice a week, staying at the club through the evening and saying yes to every single opportunity to dance, and inviting dances with known and unknown partners. Newcomers might also listen to country-western music and practice the two-step’s unique polyrhythm, tapping their fingers on the steering wheel as they navigate the maze of Los Angeles traffic. In some cases, dance experiences tangential to country-western aesthetics (ballroom, industry/jazz, hip-hop, aerobics, etc.) might accelerate the learning curve that newcomers undergo when learning the idiosyncratic nuances of the two-step.¹⁵

I have described this hierarchy in relationship to glide to highlight the relatively democratic fluidity that many of the patrons enjoy. Yet I also can attest to ways in which dancers attempt to reach up beyond their own, or their partners’, dancing capacity. Such gritty incursions upon the two-step’s glide can be heard between partners in tersely enunciated instructions (“When I press on your shoulder, I want you to move back. No, Straight back.”), exasperated questions (“What the hell was that?”), and nervous, laughing apologies. Often the relative skill that I achieved in my dancing (over several years of regular practice that did not get me anywhere close to the upper-echelon) came from much more gentle instructions that came
after a dance. Such corrections began with a question (“Would you like some feedback?”), or began with a compliment (“You are getting so smooth. Do you want to know the trick I use to get through that turn?”). Other times, communication breaks down altogether.

He wears a black cowboy hat and leads me through a two-step despite his disclaimer that he’s a bit rusty and mine that I’m still new to this. We achieve scarce moments of glide within the bumps on the crowded floor. Occasionally the other dancers jostle us, but, more often, we interrupt ourselves. “Oh, we’re off,” Hal tells me, and for a moment we stop our steps, both of us look down, and he cues me to start again. This is not uncommon – the polymetric glide can be difficult to maintain and we laugh at the way we are both caught looking down to sync our steps to each other in hesitant, stuttering corrections. “As long as we don’t both look down at the same time and bump foreheads, we’re fine,” he assures me (though I’ve barely missed knocking the brim of his hat with my downward gaze several times). We both laugh. Over the second half of the song we lock into each other’s cadence and I aptly read his rusty lead without anticipating or lagging behind. Emboldened perhaps, by our synchronicity, Hal turns me out and then back and we lock arms to change places in a forward, twisting promenade. Our performance testifies that we each hold this moderately difficult sequence of turns securely within our repertoire, and I carefully lift my arm high enough to miss knocking his cowboy hat. He spins me out again and says, “Take two on this one.” He means, I gather, for me to turn twice before coming back into the closed country-dance position. I barely make the two turns within the three beats allotted and, as I look for his face and open hand he reverses my momentum for one last spin. I’m dizzy, a bit out of my league, and as I struggle to find the comfort and familiarity of a closed-partner stance, I rush a bit, our synchronicity falters, my arm does not arc over his head as it should, and my arm knocks his black cowboy hat onto the floor between us. Still dizzy and now embarrassed, I
laugh and reach down to pick it up. He reaches down at precisely the same time and we bump foreheads—hard. I hold my head and walk off the floor, laughing at the manifestation of the just articulated taboo made real and apologizing to Hal who follows me with hat in hand. He doesn’t laugh, but rather glares at the floor, attempting, I think, to regain his composure. He fixes his hat, and his downward gaze reveals a large bald spot. I continue to apologize and laugh nervously, waiting for him to see the humor in this situation. How could this not be funny? The song ends and couples on the floor hug and part ways to find another partner, a bottle of water, a beer, or a spot by the fan. He fixes his hat on his head, says, “Thanks for the dance,” in a tone that does not sound thankful, and walks away.

In my reading of the above scenario, Hal might be quite right in assessing the situation and blaming me for failing to execute a standard component of intermediate-level, two-stepping repertoire. He may have felt that, in skillfully executing the previous serpentine sequence, I had signaled that the multiple turns with which he followed were at a similar level, and should have existed in my available portfolio. Perhaps he holds me accountable for a kind of unspoken false advertising with regard to my display of competence? An alternate reading of the above situation would be that Hal prioritized his desire to showcase his own skill level over the capacity of his own available repertoire, and my level of skill. I find more curious, however, the investment with which Hal seemed to feel our collective failure. I wonder if the other men there feel, at times, as strange in these cowboy boots as I do? I wonder if they feel, as I have, that the boots announce a particular kind of gendered presence that demands a substantially masculine performance of rugged bravado? I have seen at times, in interaction with Hal and other failures of cowboy dancing, the anxiety that the cowboy gear produces, and I wonder if this might not be
part of the labor of this dance—an engagement with a mythic cowboyness that I, at least, never felt I could really win.

**Gritty Divisions of Labor**

While dancers can assemble multiple options with which to glide across hierarchical divisions of skill level, a far less porous division exists with regard to gender. Here, I have observed much grittier relationships. As the glide of the two-step oscillates between slow and quick steps, between the successful navigation of traveling partners and rough missteps, dancers also navigate between different codes of comportment—a homosocial inclusiveness achieved, at times, at the expense of sociality across gender lines. Almost all of the country-western dancers cite the friendly crowd as an important factor that contributes to their continued participation.

The patrons view such friendliness in sharp contrast to behaviors in other gay bars: “I can ask anyone to dance here and no one’s ever said no because I wasn’t good looking enough.” Or, “I kept coming back to Oil Can Harry’s because it doesn’t have all the West Hollywood attitude bullshit.” Indeed, while attractiveness can be a mode of soliciting invitations to dance, very rarely do patrons refuse an invitation, regardless of attractiveness or skill level. The resulting sense of friendliness produces an important alternative to chillier venues (found over the hill) for many patrons. Yet the friendliness has another face when bumped into by those of the opposite gender, and this positions the two-step in a complicated choreography as it unravels and reinforces the straight mind’s bidding in the same beat.

“The lesbians don’t know how to dance!” says Vance over coffee at a nearby diner. “They have no rhythm, and they’ll just stop there in the middle of the floor with no idea of what is going on around them.” Interruptions of the glide have few physical repercussions on the
dance floor but expose a divide in gender that is visible in a number of ways. Most obviously, the women largely dance with other women and the men largely dance with other men. Men stand predominantly on one side of the dance floor while waiting for a dance or watching other dancers while the women stand mostly on the other. When participating in the two-step, however, this separation becomes exposed as self-imposed segregation. Dancers frequently bump shoulders, backs or hands on a busy night. Leading a two-step, on such nights, has been compared to driving on the Los Angeles Freeway or to participating in a roller derby competition. As I have been led by my partners and bumped countless times into other dancers, I have noticed that interrupting or being interrupted by a pair of men can be met with a more or less courteous smile and nod or a joke that is communicated to the other pair (“Who’s driving that thing anyway?”). Consistently, however, when the other pair is a pair of women (presumably lesbians) there is generally no communication with the other pair of dancers and remarks are made to me that have included, “Damn lesbians,” “There’s a beaver dam ahead of us,” and, “Poor lesbians, I guess it’s not their fault that they can’t dance.”

I have no doubt that the men intend these sniping remarks toward the lesbians to be funny. Yet I also read these comments as indicating an essentialist view held by some of the men at the bar. Their comments (usually in the form of jokes, usually made with the assumption that, as a man, I would agree with them without taking them too seriously) on and off of the dance floor indicate that the behavior of a specific pair of lesbian dancers stands as emblematic of all women who dance with women. In this logic, lesbians lack the “gay gene” deemed necessary to dance competently and co-exist harmoniously with the gay male country-western dancers that dominate the floor. One man I talked to perceived their inability to dance to stem from a lack of experience in leading. When I replied that I had no experience leading a partner dance before I
came here he said, “Well, most women aren’t as experienced in any leadership roles, not just dancing.” It is as if the dance floor really is the Los Angeles Freeway and the men are complaining that the women are bad drivers.

The women that I have talked to at Oil Can Harry’s echo some of the animosity toward the gay men with whom they share the floor. When I bring up the possibility that the men take up more than their fair share of space on the dance floor to Sarah, she looks at me, nods, and says, “I would definitely say that some of the men take up more space than they should. It’s not always the men and it’s not all of them, but almost every night someone is here who’s being an asshole—sometimes it’s one of us, but usually it’s one of them.” Sarah speaks somewhat diplomatically and in measured tones. She chooses her words carefully and, perhaps in the face of “one of them,” introduces the possibility of a statistical likelihood that the men most frequently fail to consider the spatial needs of other dancers. “I mean tonight there are six of us and maybe 75 guys.” Sarah and other women I have talked to complain less about the actual bumps on the floor but more about the fact that “the guys don’t even acknowledge that they’ve run you over.”

Another woman, Darlene, offers that the “dance floor is a microcosm of the outside world” not only in the relationship of men and women on the floor, but also regarding determinations of competence and the relationship of the self to the outside world.

This is a gross overgeneralization but…men are the same on the dance floor as they are off of the dance floor…they take up a lot of space. It’s kind of like their dancing says, ‘Fuck you, I’m here.’ Actually, no, maybe it’s more…it’s not ‘Fuck you, I’m here,’ as much as it’s ‘I’m fucking here.’

Her self-correction in this quote (“Actually, no, maybe it’s more…”) and additional conversations support the space-taking value evident in her lead. She has led me numerous times and, for a period of weeks, she and I would partner each other several times a night so that I
could get experience leading and she could practice following. But in the many times we danced together, I never got as good as she did. Of course, she'd been two-stepping for far longer than I had; it only makes sense that she would perform better in the leading role than I would. Easy to understand from a perspective of training, I question the difficulty with which some of the men comprehend leading as a skill set rather than gendered entitlement. My experiences on the dance floor verify that some men consistently fail to display the necessary awareness, navigational skills, and/or willingness to yield in order to avoid bumps and maintain a gliding cadence for themselves, their partners, and the dancers with whom they share (or compete for) space on the dance floor.

I want to be clear that the bumps on the floor are not the primary issue—it happens to everyone at one time or another. As the previous comments from Darlene and Sarah illustrate, the failure to acknowledge the interruption/trespass is the real offence. When I shared an early version of this essay with Darlene, she remarked to me that the hardest thing about reading this was the fact that her suspicions were correct—many of the men really didn't want her there. Though I don't think that interpretation is necessarily correct (and certainly not all of the time or for all of the men who attend), I find as curious the freedom with which many men have made jokes to me about the women within the intimate proximity of a closed partner embrace.

**The Straight Mind/Between Men**

Eve Sedgwick’s influential theories of male homosociality perform important work in understanding the sexual, social, and hierarchical dynamics at play between men at Oil Can Harry’s. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) she posits a connection between homosociality and homosexuality and notes the ways in which male
homosociality and patriarchy both function as systems patrolled by men to maintain dominance over women. She discusses the overwhelming degree to which contemporary Western society has conceived of patriarchal systems as necessarily homophobic and works to balance historical and structural concerns. As she posits that there is no evidence of a structural reliance between homophobia and patriarchy, I assert that homosocial relationships between gay men at the bar present a microcosmic example of the detachability of these two historically linked processes. A central tenet of her analysis stems from a feminist incursion upon psychoanalytic theory, which intertwines processes of identification/sociality and desire/sexuality. This then leads Sedgwick to ask, "What does it mean—what difference does it make—when a social or political relationship is sexualized? If the relation of homosocial to homosexual bonds is so shifty, then what theoretical framework exists for drawing any links between sexual and power relationships?" This shiftiness between desire and identification overtly sexualizes power, in complex and asymmetrically dynamic ways. For the patrons at Oil Can Harry’s who dance the two-step, I argue that this asymmetry has negating consequences for the women in attendance. As Sedgwick argues for rigorous attention to detail with regard to both the cultural and social consequences of discursive positioning, then it is not enough to simply let the assertion rest that the men and women dance together, predominately in same-gendered pairings, against heteronormative expectations. Rather, to fully consider the relationship between the kinetic and social discourses that I have described and the intricate relationship of homosociality, desire, and power that Sedgwick’s scholarship explicates, one must look at the way that dancers divide labor within the field.

In the ballroom dance tradition, the men direct women through the space. Be it a country-western two-step, a waltz, or an East Coast swing, the man unwaveringly decides what
steps will occur, when, and in what direction. Success in this role depends upon spontaneous decision-making processes that occur in response to the trajectories of other bodies in the space, the conventions of the particular form (often dictated by the music), and the leader's values within the available norms of the genre. The woman, in turn, responds to the man's cues: changing direction in response to his shifting weight, executing a turn gracefully and within the meter of the music, accommodating changes in hand clasps, etc. Most importantly, the woman’s job in ballroom dance is to get out of the man’s way. The PBS video series Dancing, which aired in the early 90s and is still used in introductory dance appreciation courses throughout the nation, makes this point clearly. In an interview conducted with dance historian Cynthia Novack on ballroom dance, Novack clearly enunciates the ways in which ballroom dancing communicates the expectation of heterosexuality with regard to the expectation that women will accommodate the will of men without question as a condition of the marriage contract. More recently, dance scholar Marta Savigliano, writing about Argentine Tango provides a thorough discussion of the ways in which tango choreographies reinforce femininity with frequently negating effects for the women who attempt to win the gamble of femininity on any given evening. Anthropologist José Limón in Dancing With the Devil, Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas (1994) discusses the ways in which women bear the brunt of racial and class oppression through the heterosexual constructions inscribed upon the mexicano polka dance floor.

I argue that the ideology behind the gendered division of labor described above reproduces itself upon the dance floor of Oil Can Harry's. Even though the division of labor shifts away from heterosexual norms with regard to the gendered assignations of pairing, some men still behave as though women bear responsibility to get out of men’s way. Incidents
wherein a gay male couple bumps into a lesbian couple are not the sole source of this interpretation. I draw this analysis also from numerous instances wherein disparaging remarks have been made in regard to a woman's gender when the critique would be more logically aimed at her dancing competence. These comments have been made to me numerous times in the form of a joke and posited as an opportunity for bonding between men. In these instances, male homosociality commingles with desire as we hold each other dressed in cowboy boots, jeans, and snap-front shirts. But in addition to this desire, I argue that a patriarchal, hegemonic patrolling of gender norms also occurs wherein men agree that feminist agendas for gender equity should only extend to the point before they infringe on the mobility and entitlement of men. From the narratives of some of the women that I have talked to, the failure to acknowledge a bump on the floor is perceived as a disavowal of the woman's right to embody the cowboy's mobility, agency, and legitimacy within the production of Americanness.

My interest in the ways in which this tense enunciation of difference relates simultaneously to social, cultural, and economic factors is directly influenced by materialist feminism as theorized by Wittig. In *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992) Wittig conceptualizes heterosexuality as a political order simultaneously dependent upon and in the service of the exploitation of women; lesbians escape the category of woman, while others negotiate with patriarchy in contracts of submission. Wittig impresses upon the reader that in this escape, there is no place to run to; the category of woman has no room, much less a land, of its own. As such, Wittig tells us, "The only thing to do is to stand on one's own feet as an escapee, a fugitive slave, a lesbian." She asks the reader to understand gender inequity as a matter of class conflict and argues that undermining such a system depends upon unraveling the categories of "man" and "woman." In her denial of the naturalness of the category of sex, Wittig
declares that there is no sex at all. Rather, "There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary." While this radical position seems crude (a point to which she accedes as she maintains its crudeness is a condition of ideological oppression) the contrary of this statement is to say that social oppression is constituted within biological imperatives—an essentialist position acceded to by the behavior of many of the men at Oil Can Harry’s even as these same men challenge biological essentialist connections between sexual object choice and gender performance.

Perhaps most germane to this project, Wittig points out that women who do not perform femininity are accused of wanting to be men, to which she responds, "To refuse to be a woman…does not mean that one has to become a man." She argues, rather, that the desire to become a man and that the desire to become a woman are equally influenced by constructions of the social world. For Wittig, a woman cannot become a man despite (in the case of the butch) her presumed desire to do so. "For becoming a man would demand from a woman not only a man's external appearance but his consciousness as well"—a consciousness that Wittig does not believe possible from one who has experienced the oppression under the sign of woman, and has fled from it in exile for the refuge of lesbian.

From this perspective, the allocation of space upon the dance floor at Oil Can Harry's reflects larger distributions of power. As the choreographic element of space is a valued commodity for the execution of the two-step, which requires forward momentum (from the position of the lead) for its successful production, then, for certain men that I have spoken with and danced with, bumps upon the floor are a necessary byproduct in the economy of gay dancing cowboyness that they labor to achieve. Yet it seems that for those in exile—who know the oppression of women as a class, as a social condition of oppression—this byproduct would
remain unacceptable. And by extending Wittig's theory, the oppression of the category of woman on the floor of Oil Can Harry's includes the following partner—regardless of their self-identified gender or their gender designation in any other aspect of their lives. After all, regardless of their social categorization as men or as women, the following partner's job is still to get out of the leader’s way. To risk the oppression of an other is to risk captivation in the straight mind's ideology, to risk oppressing the category of women from which they have attempted to escape, to risk losing their affinity for glide in favor of the grit of an oppressive power. Instead, the lesbians at the bar resist, or simply slow down, the forward trajectory of their steps, which allows more democratic access to the floor, for men, women, and lesbians alike. And in my experience, when men bump into women without apology or acknowledgement, the lesbians continue their gliding cadence, refusing to retaliate or otherwise reproduce the oppression that sometimes constructs their experience of the dance.

**Dancing the Lesbian Phallus**

Theater scholar Sue-Ellen Case, in "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic" (1988), theorizes the two-stepping lesbian pair in regard to a conjoined inhabitation of the feminist subject. Case follows feminist scholar Teresa de Lauretis, who names "the feminist subject" as one who is "at the same time inside and outside the ideology of gender, and conscious of being so, conscious of that pull, that division, that double vision." Case upholds the lesbian, butch-femme couple as uniquely poised to critique a phallic economy of power relations. For Case and de Lauretis the feminist subject distinguishes itself from a female subject as one capable of a dual habitation inside and outside of ideological imperatives in relationship to gender; it is a shifting, or gliding, position that requires a perception of woman apart from men. Case theorizes, "the lesbian roles
of butch and femme, as a dynamic duo, offer precisely the strong subject position the movement requires." This position is not a position at all, but rather a movement between the two, a calibrated gliding between possession and non-possession of phallic power. For Case, "The butch-femme couple inhabits the subject position together." She tells us, "These are not split subjects, suffering the torments of dominant ideology. They are coupled ones that do not impale themselves on the poles of sexual difference." Rather, they "constantly seduce the sign system, through flirtation and inconstancy." It is in this process of seduction and flirtation—this camp performance—that history is added to the sign, it is not a priori of the category of woman/female from which, as Wittig tells us, women have sought refuge in lesbianism, one by one. Rather this campy seduction acknowledges this history, this presumption of categorical difference and "articulates the lives of homosexuals through the obtuse tone of irony and inscribes their oppression with the same device."

Specifically, Case places a historical referent to this shifting phallic signifier within the lesbian two-stepping pair and emphasizes the theatricality of the roles in butch-femme formation, comparing them to character construction rather than reaction formation and allowing "at least two options for gender identification and with the aid of camp, an irony that allows her perception to be constructed from outside ideology, with a gender role that makes her appear as if she is inside of it." This movement, this gliding outside of ideology—at Oil Can Harry's, an ideology that values the signs of rugged, virile masculinity—while appearing inside of it is the two-step at its most potent. Or this is a best-case scenario—when it works, and I argue here that it works in different ways for the men and the women at the bar based on historical and not biological differences.
The anti-essentialist approach to theorizing gender I cite here has been widely espoused in both queer and feminist scholarship. Yet the anti-essentialism argued by Wittig has come under great skepticism in queer circles owing largely to her radical approaches to understanding lesbianism as a category outside of sex/gender systems. Diane Griffin Crowder in “From the Straight Mind to Queer Theory: Implications for Political Movement” (2007) posits that the number of “female queer theorists [who] impugn this one idea suggests…a rift between their acceptance of many of Wittig’s ideas and their rejection, or misunderstanding, of the materialist foundation upon which those ideas rest.”32 She notes Wittig’s anti-essentialist approach to gender and her approach to undoing gender binaries as crucial precursory moves that enabled the development of queer theory. Crowder also cites Wittig as diverging from recent developments in queer theory in that she never advocated for tactical critiques within the system of heterosexuality as potent enough challenges to the regime of the straight mind so as to create meaningful change.33

Crowder looks to Wittig’s early fiction of the 1960s and 70s in ways that enable such possibilities to emerge. She cites Wittig’s interest in creating epic narratives of resistance apart from heterosexual regimes. Wittig, in Les Guérillères (1969), chronicles Amazon-warrior lesbians who sacrifice their safety to fight the oppression of women. Crowder notes Wittig’s recognition of a role for biological males in radical disruptions to the sex/gender system:

If the guérillères initially glorify femaleness as a way to rediscover the history of female resistance to heterosexuality…. they soon realize that no part of any body should be valued over any other. In the war, they…are joined by any biological male who does not find the call to destroy all vestiges of the sex/gender system too radical.34

Crowder recalls such passages as fondly modeling a call to action, for “freedom fighters of the lesbigay movements,” that disregards biological sex as a condition of inclusion. She notes such
utopias have since been replaced by a settling for subversive pragmatism within existing sex/gender systems. Tellingly, Crowder attributes Wittig’s own departure from utopian possibilities to the conservatism of the following decades. She writes, “The Reagan revolution of 1980 and the rise of the religious right, followed immediately by the AIDS crisis, put an end to that optimism.” Rather than seeking recourse in pragmatic engagement with the straight mind, however, Wittig’s characters in Virgile, non (1985, translated as Across the Acheron) isolate themselves in a lesbian bar, knowing that the regime of patriarchy cannot be forcefully defeated. Crowder notes, “In a comic scene, Wittig makes fun of the image of a lesbian cowboy who can ride in to save the day. When the character ‘Wittig’ wants to get on a horse, her guide Manastabal is obliged to remind her that ‘we aren’t in a Western’ and that she is in the wrong genre.” Such doubts about the Western genre and the cowboy’s potency to incur upon the straight regime provide a poignant precursor to my own discomfort with the interactions I see between men and women at Oil Can Harry’s.

But what would it mean to recuperate the cowboy’s propensity for action? Could Wittig as the cow “boy” in a feat of posthumous, literary, revisionism—combine with the Amazon warriors of Les Guérillères? Could the earnestness of the lesbigay freedom fighters retain Wittig’s later humor in describing cowboyness without discarding the genre? I posit that the inclusion of biological males in such a project might offer some resolution to the tensions found between binary identities on the dance floor at Oil Can Harry’s. Put another way, from a materialist feminist perspective, it is the man’s job to get out of the woman’s way. Here is a try at a best-case scenario.

**Gliding with Darlene**
She asks me to dance and I say yes. She asks me, “lead or follow?”, and I tell her I prefer to follow. She tells me that I should feel that I am gliding. When I dance with Darlene, I feel as if I am gliding. To say that I feel “like” is not enough. I do not merely feel like my feet are enacting a mimesis of gliding upon the floor. Rather, my feet, sheathed in the phallic accompaniment of my low-end boots, are elevated by the corporeality of a motion that she initiates and drives and that indicates many meanings while maintaining its own kinesthetic logic. As our mixed-gender two-step misquotes a heteronormative carriage, we place ourselves in the socio-political margin of this post-twilight community while moving at the center of its geography. She’s a great lead, a great driver. And as she navigates my body through the mostly male patrons, I wonder if she sees her dance as a challenge. Darlene's deftly competent partnering challenges the authority of masculine authority through her ability to simultaneously duplicate and refute the two-step’s historically male lead. Dancing with Darlene sets my own masculine entitlement in motion. I am neither concealed nor fixed as butch or femme, effeminate or masculine. And I should add that Darlene’s small frame and somewhat androgynous attractiveness already negates clear definitions of a butch/femme dichotomy. I am not controlled by her lead as much as guided. As I imagine the misquoted phallic signifier of power being negotiated between us our small talk and easy promenade render the social reality of phallic power a bit too gritty for the corporeality of this dance. And then I feel the gentle pressure on my back, a lift of our outstretched hands timed with the rhythm of our steps, and she has turned me. And she keeps turning me—our arms forming a communicative tension that allows us to switch positions from side to side and I think that in a corporeal sense (that refuses a categorization of bodiliness apart from subjectivity), I am the phallus—an objected signifier of unconscious desire. Darlene’s moving me in space challenges the materiality of my masculinity.
Is my job simply to get out of her way? And in the next moment, I am aware again of the glide and of how this dance with this partner to this song choreographs a corporeal space that enlivens my gliding potential while encroaching upon my gritty phallic entitlement. She (Darlene) leads he (me), again. Dancing with Darlene, I feel that I am gliding.

And in the next moment, the song is over. Darlene and I hug with exclamations of “that was great” and “thank you.” And as she walks to the back bar to be with her friends and as I walk to the front bar to be with mine, I look for a familiar face and think I might try to lead the next two-step.

The Many Deaths of John Wayne

The women who lead the two-step at Oil Can Harry’s are expected to naturalize a relationship to cowboy masculinity through executing the leading role in adherence to values held by some of the men. As I have described above, the penalty for not adhering to these codes results in bumps on the dance floor, silent dismissals, and disparaging remarks behind the woman’s back. These patrolling measures, I argue, procure a naturalized female cowboyness while simultaneously protesting against the women’s assumption of masculine power. Like the performances of the two-step that I describe at Oil Can Harry’s, the 2006 concert dance titled Making a Disaster: The Many Deaths of John Wayne (Part II) by Marianne Kim and Lee Anne Schmitt conjoins signs of masculine power with female bodies. However unlike the two-step performances described above, the performers in Making a Disaster denaturalize connections between their bodies and cowboyness. In this, I argue that the dance invites a participatory approach to the creation of meaning as the audience discerns the shifting gender codes and referents created by the choreography. Further, the dance asks the audience to filter multiple and
at times contradictory perspectives on cowboyness as an emblem of nation building in the Cold War era.

Kim\textsuperscript{38} and Schmitt\textsuperscript{39} compose an ironic yet mournful homage to the iconic masculinity of John Wayne and provide multiple avenues for queer world making.\textsuperscript{40} Whereas Case and Wittig theorize the feminist subject exclusively outside of heterosexuality, Schmitt and Kim offer the possibility of the creation of queer performance from a heterosexual feminist subject position that does not discriminate, I argue here, from the lesbian subject position that Case and Wittig define. I categorize the performance as queer, and I base this categorization on potential audience reception, as well as my own interpretation of the dance's consonance with a coalitional, anti-straight political intent. This interpretation is not a queer reading of an ostensibly heteronormative performance text (as I have discussed above in my citation of Doty) but rather an interpretation that recognizes the anti-heteronormative political content intentionally inscribed throughout the dance.

Responding to the 1976 film \textit{The Shootist} (Don Siegel, dir.) as well as the story behind the making of the film, a multi-racial cast of six women embodies cowboyness while simultaneously distancing themselves from it. Utilizing techniques from butoh, an avant-garde Japanese theatre form, Kim and Schmitt show cowboys trembling with fear, contorting with masculine bravado, vulnerably protecting themselves against physical illness, and obsessively repeating symbolically violent actions that mimic the motions of the cowboy. By juxtaposing these extreme physical expressions with subdued monologues stripped of affect, \textit{Making a Disaster} remembers the cowboy's symbolic potency while simultaneously acknowledging the failure of the cowboy persona to "work" for the women who perform the masquerade.
The dance eschews linearity in favor of a circular structural arrangement wherein a striking image or sequence of movement is viscerally inhabited by the ensemble before transitioning into another potent image or movement sequence. Props and costumes evoke stark decay and illness: hospital gowns, white men’s underwear, teacups full of white dust, toy guns, photocopied cutout faces of John Wayne all appear on the stage at different times. On the back corner of the stage, a screen shows scenes from The Shootist that have been manipulated to match the texture of the grainy archival footage of Cold War nuclear experiments that intersperse the film selections. The dance opens with a post-apocalyptic tea party wherein a dancer blows into a small cup, which sends the talcum powder inside the cup stirring through the space like a mini-mushroom cloud. Subsequent scenes similarly play with tone and scale in order to make the smallest movement—a breath, a change in facial expression—a landmark event in the world of the dance. An extended movement sequence then evokes a stark frontier, and this is followed by a battle in which performers collapse to the floor as their peers rush to their sides to try to break their fall. The paper hospital gowns the ensemble members wear compromise the authenticity of the tea party, the frontier and the battlefield scenes—in this a stable sense of symbolic space erodes. Tearing free of the hospital gown a solo gunfighter battles an imagined foe, and this is followed by an extended sequence of postures that the ensemble performs with John Wayne masks in hand. Monologues (both pre-recorded and spoken live) and film sequences intersperse and layer atop of the action. Throughout, however, the moving body remains the primary conveyer of meaning.

An extended program note details the odd history of The Shootist, which was Wayne's last film before his death in 1979. In the film, Wayne plays John Bernard, an aging gunslinger dying of cancer, and in reality Wayne had already undergone surgery for lung cancer and was
seriously ill with stomach cancer by the time shooting for the film began. While Wayne was a
heavy smoker through a great deal of his life, his stomach cancer is commonly attributed to his
participation in the film *The Conqueror* (1956). The production was shot outside of St. George,
Utah, and downwind of the Nevada Test Range, ground zero for numerous nuclear tests in the
early Cold War era. An above ground test—named Dirty Harry—released a great deal of
radiation into the atmosphere, and it is this connection between a nuclear-induced, cold-war
paranoia, the illness and death of Wayne that it caused, and the uncanny conjoining of his
cinematic and real life illnesses from which Kim and Schmitt draw their source material.

The six performers, Ania Grenier, Jessica Hannah, Marta Juaniza, Cristal Sabbagh, Sandra Thomas, and Liz Winfield, begin the fifty-minute performance dressed in paper hospital
gowns with red bandanas tied around their necks. They wear white pancake makeup from head
to toe, signaling the Butoh-influence of the performance. The differences in their skin tones,
which range from Anglo- to African- to Latina-American, are oddly highlighted rather than
muted by the white powder that covers them. I also read the white pancake makeup as
estranging the female bodies from any possible consumption by the male gaze; the makeup and
the costumes conjoin to make their bodies strange. The vast majority of the performance is
accompanied by film footage taken from *The Shootist*, nuclear blast test footage, and Cold Ear
era educational films intended to prepare citizens for a nuclear attack. The combination of these
signs, cowboyness (bandana), illness (hospital gown), cold war fear (via film footage)
immediately bring into relief a cowboy image already in crisis. Rather than cowboyness marked
by stoic ruggedness, these cowboy(ed) bodies appear scared, sick, strange, and vulnerable to
attack.
As part of this representation of the cowboy in distress, the ensemble members execute a long series of actions marked by slowness, dramatic tension detached from linear narrative, and a potent inconstancy. While the character relationships in both *The Shootist* and *Making a Disaster* change from the beginning to the end of the film/performances, the relationships in the latter work are not bound by narrative or psychological concerns. Rather, the performance displays an inconstant approach to representation, perhaps most obviously at a level of the dancers' relationships with each other—at times they work against each other, at times they cooperate, at times they care for each other tenderly. These inconstant relationships require the viewer to accept a multitude of relationships in rapid succession, thus valuing states of aggression, nurture, compliance, fear, and nonchalance on equal footing.

An example of this inconstant representational maneuvering occurs in the scene I describe as the battle. Two ensemble members stalk each other with toy guns, menacingly staring each other down before a jerk of the wrist signals the firing of a gun. In response to this action, one part of the adversarial pair suspends her weight with arched back and on tiptoe before falling to the ground—signaling death. This recently terminated adversary then stands up, instantly rejuvenated and vengeful, to exact a reciprocal shot with her toy gun, felling her colleague, albeit for a similarly brief repose. At other times the performers assist each other tenderly. As an example of these instances, a soloist executes a long, exaggeratedly dramatic fall to the ground. Her companions assist her, bearing the full burden of her weight as she descends to the floor. No narrative plot turn signals the shift from violence to gentleness and no dramatic revelation evokes a change of heart. Instead, the choreographers organize themes into composed sequences that evidence continually shifting power dynamics.
At times the performers act as a unified ensemble, responding simultaneously, if not precisely in the same way, to cues from the music. This is to say that the dancers—in a scene that I describe as the frontier—may all respond to an instruction such as "roll on to your back on the fifth eight-count of the music," but the choreography does not reflect cleaning or ironing-out of the differences with which each performer accomplishes the given task. The performers respond individually to directives that apply democratically across the entire ensemble, contributing, even in unison movement, to the inconstancy I describe. In these moments, they execute the choreography presentationally, often focusing their attention in the direction of the audience or slightly outside of the performance frame but declining to acknowledge the audience's presence in front of them. Instead, the collected performers attend to their focus so as to indicate a horizon line before them or the presence of an unseen force in the direction of the audience. The ensemble may struggle to stand for an extended period of time, balancing on the balls of their feet as if in anticipation of some force or event that they strain to see in the distance. In the next moment, they may scrunch their faces menacingly while slowly moving to a squatting posture. In another instance they slowly transition through an extended sequence of gestural quotations—mimicking a clichéd, muscle-bound masculinity and ecstatic femininity alternately—morphing to arrive only for an instant in full embodiment of one gesture before they immediately begin the prolonged transition into the next. In this, no single image attains prominence over any other; rather, the sequence of movement gathers meaning through the overall accumulation of embodied images.

At other times a soloist or small group dominates the audience’s attention. An extended solo performed by Ania Grier evokes one of the many deaths of John Wayne. As a film loop image of Wayne falling from a gunshot plays on the screen behind the stage action, the ensemble
gently lowers Grier to the ground before tearing away the paper hospital gown that she wears to reveal white men's brief-style underwear and a form-fitting, ribbed tank top. The ensemble then fastens a number of belts to Grier's torso, recalling a child's play version of ammunition belts. Over this, text (read into a microphone by an ensemble member who simultaneously inhabits the stage picture) poetically describes the spectacular light radiating from an atomic blast. The ensemble stands, surrounding Grier's still supine body in a tableau reminiscent of a collection of mourners surrounding a coffin. With a new cue in the music, they assist her to standing. Her performing colleagues place a black cowboy hat upon Grier's head and stick a nametag to her chest upon which the word "JOHN" appears in block script.

As the ensemble migrates upstage to sit in chairs facing the audience, an increasingly menacing stare develops on Grier's face. Her fingers make the shape of a gun. She aims her stare to the left of the audience, suggesting the presence of an unseen opponent. Then the finger guns slowly disappear as her hands move to her sides. She slowly walks backward, balancing on the outside of her feet. Her hands tremble, ready to grab at one of the numerous guns she wears. Throughout this her body quakes visibly with muscular tension, suggesting fear of and readiness for this opponent that remains out of the frame. She quickly draws her finger guns in the direction of another invisible opponent, and then looks at her empty hands warily. Her focus then shifts slowly to the plethora of guns she wears tucked within the belts on her torso. She seems unable to decide upon a gun to shoot with, a phallic signifier to deploy; there appear to be too many options from which to choose. Next a multidirectional focus (articulated with her head/eyes and finger guns) suggests a demented paranoia. It appears that she not only fears for her life, but also fails to ascertain which toy weapon will best defeat the cavalry of imagined opponents surrounding her. I read this image as a poetically lucid depiction of the cowboy’s
place in the U.S. Cold War imaginary. As America’s public stood fearfully in the shadow of the potential of nuclear annihilation and the government furtively searched for ways out of no-win, second strike scenarios, the popularity of the cowboy’s masculinity petitioned stoically in support of a post-World War II version of Manifest Destiny. Rather than a realistic depiction of such relationships between icon and context, Schmitt and Kim conflate the paranoia with the image of reassurance onto a single, conflicted, quivering, and immobilized body.

With a change in the music, Grier’s eyeballs roll up and out of sight and her eyelids begin to flutter—suggesting a liminal consciousness. Her shoulders roll lugubriously in their sockets, recalling an ensemble motif introduced earlier in the performance. With this, a toy gun slips out from the belt around her waist. She sees the plastic weapon and contemplates picking it up, but instead prepares herself for another adversary. She reaches now for two guns and points toward unseen, offstage targets while scenes from The Shootist play on the screen behind her. Specifically, the choreographers rip this scene from the final gunfight of the film, where John Wayne's character uses the mirrors placed in the saloon to ascertain the location of his adversaries. When Grier as "JOHN" looks out of the performance frame toward the enemies that seem to surround her, so also does Wayne as John Bernard look beyond the frame of the camera to determine the trajectories of the shots he will soon fire. Upon the firing of these shots, any fan of the film knows, John Bernard will die—John Wayne's last screen death. The ensemble stares at Grier, transfixed by her solo as they slowly, deliberately tear their paper hospital gowns from their bodies to reveal the same cut of tank tops and white men's briefs that she wears. In this, they empathically morph from the feminine gown to the masculine underwear, performing another destabilization of gender.
Grier's multidirectional shooting accelerates until yet another toy gun still holstered to her torso falls. She pauses. She shoots again in a multidirectional, accelerating manner. Another gun falls. She again pauses, then shoots and accelerates her multiple firings further until a position of resignation throws her head back. With this her black cowboy hat falls to the ground. Defeated, she slowly retrieves the fallen toy pistols and the cowboy hat from the ground. Over the speakers the audience hears a countdown, which anticipates the explosion of a bomb. Grier walks slowly, as if in retreat, to the chairs upstage.

Simultaneously with Grier's retreat, the ensemble starts walking forward. Whereas Grier's embodiment of Wayne/Bernard was signaled most clearly with the nametag on her chest, the ensemble uses a different approach. As they walk forward slowly, drawing attention to subtle shifts of weight that move them forward with one step before sinking their weight deep into the opposite hip socket, they gradually cover their own faces with photocopied images of Wayne’s face. These masks are oversized and decidedly flat. Cut cleanly in a square, each mask is two-dimensional; black and white images hover atop the slowly shifting, three-dimensional bodies that approach the audience. Then they reveal small, red, plush pillows, which they have also hidden behind their backs. Upon revealing the red pillows, they transform so as to luxuriate in a persona associated with the feminine luxury of the pillow plush fabric, fanning themselves with their John Wayne masks. Then they hold the facsimile of Wayne above their bodies, evoking a field of tombstones.

The small, red pillow directly cites Wayne’s performance in The Shootist. In the film this pillow signifies Bernard's cancer—an illness that Schmitt and Kim point out in the program note, mirrors Wayne's. Throughout the film, Bernard places the red pillow to protect the hurt that is "way down deep in [his] back" from the pain that he experiences horse riding. When, in
the beginning of the film, Dr. Hostetler (played by James Stewart) prepares to examine Bernard, he instructs him to bend over the examination table and disrobe "from the trap door down"—signifying the pain and vulnerability of John Wayne's anus discreetly and in accord with Hollywood codes for acceptability. In the hands of Kim, Schmitt, and the ensemble of performers in Making a Disaster, the small red velvet pillow is played with as a sign of masculine crisis—at different times the performers hold the small red pillow behind their trembling backs to shield their own anuses from the audience. At times they rest the pillow behind their heads as they lie down on the floor with a corpse-like turgidity. At times they clutch the pillow against their abdomens, transforming the pillow’s plush comfort into blood red gunshot wounds. Taken together with the inconstant images evoked by the use of the mask, the ensemble deftly reflects, expands upon, and goads the emasculation that Bernard suffers via his illness. They waver between states of empathic suffering and taunting revelry, thus complicating any single reading of their response to his crisis.

Making a Disaster derives its power to model a feminist subject position precisely from the inconstant shifting between contrary states described here. The inconsistent movement from theatrical homage to choreographic critique of Wayne's iconic, cowboy masculinity precisely demonstrates the gliding relationship to ideology that Case articulates and which I experienced on the dance floor at Oil Can Harry’s. While reenacting the death of John Bernard in The Shootist could be seen as a performance of wistful nostalgia for a bygone canon of cowboyness, the multiple deaths of John Wayne that the ensemble enacts conjoin to expose the irony within the homage. Similarly, Grier's multiple guns and multiple imagined adversaries expose the threat of the Other in Western films as revealing more about the panicked response of the Western film hero (and the U.S. audience that has historically identified with this hero in the
Cold War era) than the reality of that threat. The inconstancy displayed throughout the performance does not show a split subject, impaled by the ideological imperative of masculine dominance; rather such representational strategies articulate calibrated responses to a particular strain of rugged cowboy masculinity that the collaborators deftly undermine. The inconstant movement of signification and the artificiality of the signs themselves—perhaps most potently in the form of toy guns, photocopied masks, and a nametag—broadcast the importance of the source material while toying recklessly with the cowboy image.

Further, the ensemble nature of the performance develops Case's powerful thesis and vivifies a collective model of empowerment. If the two-stepping lesbian pair creates a movement of phallic power between them, then the collaborative team of *Making a Disaster* maneuvers the sign of the masculine throughout its ranks. Whereas Case asks of the lesbian two-stepping pair, "Penis, penis, who has the penis?", *The Many Deaths of John Wayne* leaves the audience wondering, who is the real John Wayne, the real John Bernard? Who is the hero? Who is the villain? Is the authoritative image of masculinity projected upon a collapsible screen behind the live action? Or is the real cowboy negotiating inconstant signs of butch and femme signifiers while wearing a nametag that says "JOHN"? In such a formulation, phallic power has no power at all. The ensemble nature of the performance allows for abrupt and at times bewildering shifts from good to bad, butch to femme, earnest to flippant. The multiracial cast shows us African-American, Latina-American, and Anglo-American women owning and disavowing the cowboy claim to power. Clad, by the end of the performance, in ribbed white tank-style shirts and white male briefs (replete with a slit front pouch to access their penis for urination), and equipped, at varying points, with an excess of phallic accoutrements (in the form
of toy guns), the ensemble seems to be attacking the cowboy image in one moment while laying it respectfully to rest in the next.

**Cowboy Phallus Glides Past**

I like to remember the two-step at Oil Can Harry's at its best. In this scenario, a really great country song starts to play (let's say it's "Earl's Gotta Die" by the Dixie Chicks) and I happen to be standing next to my favorite dance partner Jerry. Neither of us asks the other for a dance, instead we just look at each other and nod in agreement. No need to ask who will lead or who will follow, he always takes me around the floor. I face him and extend my right hand. He clasps my hand with his left and holds the small of my back with his right. On a cue given by a subtle shift in his weight forward, we begin to dance.

In the final section of *Making a Disaster: The Many Deaths of John Wayne (Part II)*, Liz Winfield puts on the black cowboy hat that Grier wore in a previous scene and steps forward to separate herself slightly from the rest of the ensemble. She begins to dance jerkily, kicking up her heels and sharply jabbing her elbows into the space around her. Small stumbles and shifts of weight punctuate her movement, and her feet strike loudly against the floor at times, accentuating the effort this expression of masculine bravado entails. It looks like a real cowboy dance.

He leads me firmly so that we may glide. Jerry is older, with a graying mustache and feathered hairstyle combed over to hide a receding hairline. He tells me that he used to compete in rodeos when he was younger, and though I know he's told me what events he used to compete in, I can never remember. (I never found a good way to take notes in the middle of the dance floor.) The crowd is not too densely packed tonight, and Jerry finds plenty of room to maneuver
between faster and slower moving couples. A familiar rhythm of quarter, half, and full turns emerges that functions as the equivalent of a thumb print of his lead—I can read it easily by now and I find great kinetic pleasure in its familiarity. Our boots rarely if ever break contact with the floor. Is this what it feels like to dance with a real cowboy?

Winfield continues her jerky, muscular effort. Gradually her head starts to shake, nod, and jerk erratically; she now tries furiously to discard the cowboy hat she put on a minute ago. She successfully frees herself from the hat’s cover, tossing it off her head behind her. She looks intently into the space above. Her arms awkwardly dangle as another ensemble member, Jessica Hannah, rushes to pick up the cowboy hat. Hannah places it back on Winfield's head and steps to the side while facing Winfield expectantly.

Jerry and I don't talk much. The numerous standing fans directed at the dance floor (Oil Can Harry's has no air conditioning and becomes oppressively warm in the summer) dilutes Jerry’s strong, sweet cologne. The cologne and the movement of air, caused by both the fans and our promenade, provides a welcome counterpoint to the musky smells of sweat and beer that linger in the room. He turns me under his arm and stops my rotation halfway through. We walk together—slow, slow, quick, quick—side-by-side and facing forward for a few measures with his right arm wrapped around my shoulders in a position called "the cozy." As the chorus of the song arrives, I look down to make sure that I'm still in step with Jerry after the turn. I am.

Winfield begins her muscle-bound, jerkily stomping dance again. This time, the energy of her cowboy dance barely registers before her head starts thrashing wildly, again attempting to rid herself of the cowboy hat she wears. Again she tosses it off with the force of her bucking head and this leaves her in an upward focused gaze as before. Hannah runs to retrieve the hat
and places it on Winfield's head before returning to her same stance of anticipation. Hannah, it seems, demands a repeat performance. Winfield begins her cowboy dance again.

Jerry guides me back to a closed partner stance. I think to myself, “damn he’s smooth.” For a moment, I remember how I felt when I first started coming here, when I didn't notice how people bumped each other on the floor, when every dance seemed beautiful from the outside and clumsy from the inside. I remember how it felt when I believed that we were all only coming here because it was really fun and really friendly and sexy as hell. He takes me through an inside turn that no other leader does with me—I’ve tried it out on a few following partners with mixed success. I love the centrifugal force.

Winfield bucks the hat off quickly and forcefully this time. As she waits for Hannah to re-place the hat on her head, which will restart her dancing, she breathes heavily and maintains her attentive gaze to the space above her. As Grier indicated a menacing presence outside of the performance frame in her earlier solo, so also does Winfield's focus indicate a potent force above her. Dutifully, Hannah places the hat upon Winfield again, cueing her increasingly quick and multidirectional dance.

I remember interviewing one of my informants and asking him about the sexual and gender politics embedded in dancing like a cowboy. His exasperated response stuck: I think they just come here to dance. Jerry turns me again and we both smile at each other. This feels great. I wonder, what does that mean, to just dance?

Each time, the pace and ferocity of Winfield and Hannah's action increases, indicating an increasingly urgent directive. Each time, Hannah renews her commitment to replacing the hat on Winfield’s head. Each time Winfield kinetically rages to dance the hat off her head. In between
these compositional spasms, Winfield looks intently toward the space above. What is up there? A flag? The mushroom cloud from a nuclear blast? God?

What would “just dancing” be? The song ends and Jerry turns me before we thank each other and exchange a damp embrace. He walks off to side of the floor as I make my way to buy a beer. I run into Darlene who greets me with a big smile. She says, "Wow, you two really look smooth together." I thank her, gush about how much I love dancing with Jerry (am I blushing?), and am about to ask her how long she's been here when she asks me if I'd like to dance.

Darlene’s enthusiastic assessment of my dance with Jerry confirms the kind generosity she displays throughout her interactions at the bar. I walk with her back to the dance floor. She asks me, “Can you handle being led again?” Actually, I’m grateful for this. At the time of this encounter, the prospect of navigating yet another set of shifting trajectories seemed too much. I smile, thank her, and pivot so that she can take the lead. I surrender, willfully.

Winfield and Hannah's action loop continues, becoming increasingly hurried to the point where Hannah constantly runs to catch her partner's hat—her attentive obligation to replace the hat on Winfield’s head cannot keep up with Winfield’s contradictory imperative. As the lights begin to fade, Winfield's stare upward gains resonance, if not clarity. Her arms grow increasingly taut in their position. She has developed a slight sheen and beneath the white pancake makeup a pair of tattoos have become visible on her shoulder and bicep. Her straight brown hair has become damp and stringy in her ponytail. This evidence of labor and upward gaze do not read as submissive. She stands rather expectantly—as if asking, "What next?" The duet continues to repeat its action in the darkness of the theater. As they noisily dance in the dark, their action seems not supplicant to the force Winfield has indicated above, but ready—outlasting the image with their movement.
Both *The Many Deaths of John Wayne* and the women dancing the two-step at Oil Can Harry’s call for cowboyness—or at least cowboy affiliations with patriarchy—to surrender to a queer politics of gender equity. In the case of Oil Can Harry’s, this troubles the desires of some gay men to isolate themselves within a homosocial matrix of same-sex desire, and results in unacknowledged collisions on the dance floor. By and large, the women neither accept nor react to these affronts. Rather, they quietly continue their dance practice and sharpen their navigational skill as some of the men continue to exercise the privilege and entitlement that they enjoy in many other aspects of their lives. Other men, in a best-case scenario, take the time and energy required to notice some of the superbly subdued and expertly navigated dances some lesbian pairs improvise in response to the available space on the floor.

Whereas the women at Oil Can Harry’s disrupt patriarchal associations with cowboyness through a resistant approach to presence and improvisational skill, Schmitt and Kim compose a queer world that rattles the image and icon of John Wayne at its masculine foundation. Watching Liz, for example, shake the hat off so vehemently, I consider the symbolic power that the cowboy hat connotes. She shakes off not just masculinity, but also patriarchy. She resists again and again Jessica’s attempts to place the hat on her, but their combined, bifurcated ambivalence, I believe, testifies strongly to a desire and contempt for the cowboy icon. I believe that this ambivalence, rather than acquiescing to heteronormative paradigms of gender performance, marks the enduring powers and calcifying limits of cowboy masculinity in the U.S. imaginary.
Recently, on a summer night in Chicago, I ran into a friend who had just come from Charlie’s, the city’s gay country-western bar. I knew he had been going to the Friday two-step and line dance lessons for a couple of months, he was a fan of some of the country music, and he was enjoying learning to two-step. I asked him how the dancing was that night, and he responded with a lightly scrunched up face. He said that the DJ played “a lot of other kinds of music” during the line dances. From my friend’s tone, this “other kind” of music did not match his expectations.

This made me think of the first time I went to Oil Can Harry’s in Los Angeles, twelve years earlier. After stumbling through my inaugural two-step lesson, the first line dance I learned accompanied a Janet Jackson song titled “All For You.” The dance was called “The J-Rag” (I think the “J” is for Janet), choreographed by DJ Rick who spins on Thursday nights. The dance blends vocabulary from line dancing with stylistic references to commercial hip hop and studio jazz; line dance standards such as three step turns, coaster steps, and pivots are syncopated and repackaged to imitate popularized hip hop steps like the Roger Rabbit or interpreted by dancers to accent rhythmic subdivisions in the music. I remember dusting off some early training from studio jazz classes in order to learn the dance; the sharp clarity of the movement was markedly different from the gliding cadence of the two-step I had just struggled with.

“The J-Rag” and the majority of the other line dances in repertoire at Oil Can Harry’s consist of twenty-four to seventy-six counts of movement (sometimes more) that are repeated...
throughout the course of the song. Most dances are “four-wall dances,” meaning that each repetition of the step sequence rotates the dancers ninety degrees. Line dancing values an organized, equidistant arrangement of bodies on the dance floor wherein each dancer stands directly behind the dancer behind him and in line with the dancer to each side. At the beginning of each song, dancers line up in a grid pattern to begin the dance.

Popular music often accompanies country line dances at Oil Can Harry’s and other gay country-western bars. This musical crossover appeals to many patrons who may or may not be all that into the country thing. In some cases, such as “The J-Rag,” the dances are choreographed specifically for a pop song. Other times a dance originally choreographed to a country song is repurposed with a new pop accompaniment. In either scenario, steps can be performed in a style that values the bound smoothness found in other country-western dances (most prominently the two-step) or in a style that recognizes the song’s musical influences through stylistic citations of the non-country club dancing that predominates queer nightlife.

Dancers roll their hips to Janet Jackson, shimmy their shoulders to Ricky Martin, and jack their torsos to the Backstreet Boys. They add head rolls to three step turns and pop their rib cages with ball changes. Dancers off the floor bounce to the beat as an afterthought while talking with friends. Newcomers who haven’t yet learned a particular dance look longingly from the side of the dance floor, trying to pick up the steps in time to jump in for the last part of their favorite song. These newcomers sometimes look astonished as they scratch their head under the cheap straw hat they bought especially to come to the cowboy bar for the first time; they can’t believe the DJ is playing this song. This isn’t a real cowboy dance, is it?
Here I want to think briefly about the cultural codes embedded within these music and movement choices. The appropriation of Africanist impulses—most prominently via rhythmic complexity, the aesthetic of the cool, and polycentric isolations in the body—is hardly unique to Oil Can Harry’s.\(^1\) Rather it is the profound lack of those landmarks in other dances at the bar (e.g. the two-step) that vivify their relatively infrequent iterations. How do these impulses, which have been integrated so completely into the composition of American life (and distinctively within queer cultural enclaves), so much so that they have been rendered invisible as cultural currency, relate to notions of cowboyness?\(^2\)

I discern asymmetrical values regarding the relationship between cowboy authenticity and popular music at Oil Can Harry’s. Some patrons see pop-cowboy amalgams (such as “The J-Rag”) as very sexy. One dancer whom I interviewed, David, had divided all the line dances into two categories, one category consisted of sexy dances and the other consisted of fun dances. The sexy dances were largely those set to pop songs. For this dancer, expressivity with the hips was key to sexiness, and I read this perspective as a shared value with many other patrons who flock to the floor to dance to songs they could hear just as easily over the hill in West Hollywood. For David these pop music interruptions into the country music norm are refreshing and rejuvenating, placing predominant gay cultural tastes back within a country-western setting. The rest of the dances, those that valued smooth shifts of weight or quick pivots and turns—mostly set to country songs, he categorized as “just fun.”

Another patron had a contradictory view. Jim thought the turning, shifting dances that valued a bound, holistic integration of the body into a single unit were sexy and he gave me a somewhat backhanded compliment by saying that I danced all of “those hoppy dances with a lot of fun bounce.” To this dancer and several others that I talked to, smoothly shifting “traditional”
country line dances felt like “real cowboy dances” and the smoothly shifting cadence provided an affirmation of masculine values of strength and control. Jim viewed the inclusion of pop music and pop-inspired line dances as a necessary pandering to hook in new dancers.

Another patron, Vance, claimed that he was lacking a “gay gene” and that this deficiency keeps him from being able to participate fully in those “booty-shaking dances.” Here the historical appropriation of African American culture by queers becomes naturalized as a genetic phenomenon, and the technical acumen required to move through syncopated isolations is reduced to “booty-shaking.” For this dancer, pop-cowboy amalgams register as a sort of non-compliant aberration from values established within the two-step’s glide, which is the predominant form practiced at the bar.

The majority of patrons read the pop-cowboy amalgams as recent additions to cowboyness. While many patrons would argue that these innovations were vital to the continuation of the form and others would argue that these dances were less than “real” cowboy dances, no one mistook Jackson’s “All For You” for a rising country single and the dances to such songs were consistently referred to in terms of contemporaneity, urbanity, and soulful expression. These qualities stand in striking opposition to the mythic cowboy’s rugged, stoic isolation.

The U.S. popular imagination has stubbornly resisted the consideration of African American identities in conceptions of the West, despite the fact that as a result of Spanish exploration and conquest, African slaves inhabited the American West beginning as early as the sixteenth century. According to numerous scholars this exclusion can be partially attributed to the devaluing of those deemed “other” by white explorers interested in civilizing the frontier.
The whites who ultimately “won” the West controlled the production of history, and until the advent of new western history and new western literary studies in the 1960s, historical records have been organized in relationship to binaries that pit civilizing whites against savage others. The threats of Native American and Mexican others outweighed those posed by the relatively small number of freed slaves inhabiting the western states in the mid-nineteenth century.\(^3\)

William Loren Katz’s *The Black West* (1987) offers that by 1890, when Frederick Jackson Turner famously (and problematically) declared the frontier as closed, over half a million African Americans lived in the states of Texas and Oklahoma.\(^4\) He also indicates that after the Civil War, anywhere from twenty to twenty-five percent of cowboys driving cattle up the Chisholm Trail from Texas to Abilene, Kansas were black.\(^5\) Katz cites a study by historian Kenneth W. Porter indicating that the cowboy occupation likely provided blacks with the least discrimination of any occupation in any region in the U.S. at the time.\(^6\) He notes black slave presence in every aspect of frontier settlement including: early explorer expeditions from Spanish colonies, fur trading camps, colonial life (including long standing frontier settlements of black slaves), cowboys, homesteaders, and participation in the infantry and cavalry of the Civil War.

American West literature scholar Blake Allmendinger in *Imagining the African American West* (2005) notes numerous reasons, including illiteracy and the heavy labor that livelihood in the West required, for the fact that African American inhabitants of the West were less likely than their white counterparts to leave written records. He also notes that western history and literature scholars have historically disregarded records by some African Americans who briefly lived in the West, favoring narratives of subjects who settled in the West for a longer time. (He looks at a 1935 short story by Langston Hughes in this light.) Allmendinger also writes about
the attempt of at least one author to pass as white in his autobiography. James P. Beckworth’s 1856 monograph never identifies the author as African American and omits the fact that his mother was a slave. This leads Allmendinger to ask, “To what extent can a work offer insights into the African American western experience when its author denies having had a ‘racial’ experience?”

In an earlier essay, Allmendinger analyzes the 1907 autobiography of freed slave and black cowboy Nat Love to consider the numerous contradictions that accompanied African Americans in the West in the late nineteenth century. In “The White Open Spaces” (1998) Allmendinger discusses The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle Country as “Deadwood Dick.” Significantly, this is the only autobiography published by any of the thousands of black cowboys who worked during this time. His essay centers on the tension between Love’s written representations of himself as a cowboy versus a freed black slave. Allmendinger notes numerous ways in which the autobiography “claims a white genealogy in nineteenth-century literature,” including his identification with dominant culture, his frequently racist rhetoric toward Indians and Mexicans, and general opposition toward people of color. Allmendinger attributes this tension between his identity as a cowboy and his identity as a freed slave as one possible reason why the book never acquired a substantial readership. He follows African American literature scholar Houston A. Baker to point toward inherent tensions between the western frontier and the possibility of agency for people of color: “By definition, the western United States—a site of conquest and plunder, removal and genocide—couldn’t guarantee freedom, success, or advancement for blacks.”

Allmendinger’s chapter on the cowboy in Imagining the African American West uses Nat Love’s autobiography and the Deadwood Dick dime store novels they inspired as a point of
departure for a study of African American cowboys in fiction, film, and rap. Within these forms, he attends to the ways in which the cowboy’s toughness and isolation offer avenues for identification for African American viewers and readers. He discusses “black” Westerns that used white musical western film conventions as a template, looking at films by Herb Jeffries from the late 1930s and 40s. In these, Allmendinger notes, “Racial minorities could identify with the cowboy-as-outcast while taking pride in a hero who was self-reliant, aggressive, and strong.” Yet Jeffries departed from Western conventions—pairing urban, eastern locations with rugged western landscapes, for example—to make the films relatable to urban African American audiences. Allmendinger finds a similar urban/rural pairing in the lyrics of contemporary rap artists who, “Like most people…prefer to imagine cowboys as romantic outcasts, bandits, and rebels.”

As a response to the historiographical challenges posed by the lack of representation surrounding western narratives from people of color, Allmendinger recalibrates the western imaginary to include African American narratives. He looks at a complex palette of sources that includes: the “passing” narrative offered by Beckworth’s autobiography, Westerns by African American film pioneer Oscar Micheaux in the early twentieth century, the Deadwood Dick novels written by Edward L. Wheeler from 1877 to 1885, rap songs by Ice Cube and Mo Thugs Family, and the play Twilight: Los Angeles (1992) by Anna Deavere Smith. The interdisciplinary assemblage of these sources speaks potently to the varied and complex subject formation of African Americans in the context of the frontier. Further, Allmendinger finds historical resonance within these source texts, identifying potent tensions between historical and imagined realities.
Here I attempt to contribute to the emerging archive being developed by Allmendinger and other authors similarly interested in troubling the naturalized whiteness of western narratives. A close reading of the dance *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* (1984) by Fred Holland and Ishmael Houston-Jones will attempt to interpret the historical resonance of the dance within the context of the beginning of the Reagan-Bush era while also attending to the ways that the dance gives voice to the historical reality of African American cowboys.

**Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders**

Fred Holland and Ishmael Houston-Jones—both in their collaboratively created performances and in their independent efforts through the 1980s—consistently address queer politics, attending simultaneously to presence, memory, intimacy, and the civic in improvised compositions. In *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* Holland and Houston-Jones interrogate the assumed whiteness of the cowboy as it has been represented in popular culture. They accomplish this through a consortium of strategies, which include: compositional improvisation; reflexive comment on film and modern dance; practiced artifice; exposition of alternate historical narratives; and a visceral, risk-taking vocabulary. By these means, *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* works to expose the naturalized whiteness of the cowboy imaginary in the U.S. while positing the queer African American identities of the creators as central to the performance. Via a close reading of the dance and attention to surrounding context, I posit that *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* uniquely attends to multiple identitarian concerns including race, sexuality, and gender through an improvisation that recognizes the traumatic history of queer peoples in the U.S. and positively recovers such trauma for queer subjects. The dance occupies a sweet spot between historical documentation and ephemeral improvisation, advocating for a radical and inclusive vision of queerness in the context of an icily conservative political climate.
Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders is an improvised work that changed significantly from one performance to the next. The structure and details that I describe here are based on a single performance from 1984, the video documentation of which is available at the New York Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center. The structure of the performance I describe is as follows: An opening tableau of a man hanging from a noose in silhouette opens the dance. Holland then enters the space. In a pedestrian solo, he plays with toy cowboy and Indian replicas, changes records on a portable record player, and practices shooting a toy gun. Then Holland drags Houston-Jones, who is bound and gagged, out from a cardboard box, and this begins the duet that will comprise the majority of the work. The duet between them contains a range of choreographic modes that include: visceral partnering forms, ironic imitations of Hollywood-style gunfights, and a monologue detailing Houston-Jones’ childhood vacation to the West. Then a young, African American girl, Breinin Bryant, rides a toy horse as visual support to an audio recording of an interview with cowboy and community activist Hal Foster. Houston-Jones then performs a dancing monologue that discusses the research process that informed the movement vocabulary, citing precursors Agnes de Mille and Martha Graham. A black and white film of Foster riding a horse follows this. Then Yvonne Meier performs a solo that marks a kinetic high point of the work, after which, she speaks a monologue where she reflects upon her own discomfort with cowboyness. Meier, Houston-Jones, and Holland finish with a highly kinetic trio that reconstructs and then demolishes images associated with mythic cowboyness. Now, returning to the beginning…

At the beginning of the dance, a lifeless body hangs from a rope behind a scrim. Lit in silhouette, the body sways next to a ladder. A loud buzzing sound, something like cicadas,
accompanies this image. After a pregnant stillness, Holland emerges out of a cardboard box on the other side of the stage. Cardboard cutouts of saguaro cactus, toy trains, wind-up toy horses, and other western paraphernalia litter the stage. A yellow blinking light perched on a construction placard near the hanging man signals caution. Holland swaggers around the stage. He wears a large cowboy hat, chaps, and boots—even spurs that clang loudly with every step. He holds a rifle and adjusts his hat with a deliberate, measured cadence. He then walks behind the scrim, adjusts the ropes that suspend the hanging figure, and lowers the lifeless body to the ground. Throughout all of this, two figures play cards silently in a far corner of the stage, barely visible in the shadowy light. Holland then drags another cowboy out from behind the large cardboard box. This cowboy, Houston-Jones, keeps his body taut as he lays hog-tied—bound by his hands and feet and with a gag in his mouth on the floor; he begins to writhe spastically as Holland walks away to play with two wind-up action figures: a cowboy and an Indian.

Though the image of the hanged man could be read as a generic image of Western-style justice, I cannot separate the potency of the scene from the history of lynching in the United States. Rather, I read this image as a foundational trauma from which the rest of the performance stems. This reading accounts for the discrimination and racialized violence that led African Americans to leave the South in the nineteenth century. While the majority of the Great Migration’s traffic traveled from south to north, Allmendinger notes that beginning in the twentieth century, African Americans increasingly moved west to escape oppression in the South. Even in the nineteenth century, authors in his study see the frontier as a site of increased mobility and safety when compared with norms in “civilized” southern states. 

If the innocuous hanging man signifies the traumatic history of lynching, the bound, gagged body of Houston-Jones stands as a recalibration of such traumas for sexual pleasure. I
read the bondage not as simple domination, but as sadomasochistic sexual play—a reading that the two artists confirm moments later when they nonchalantly negotiate the terms of Holland’s dominance over Houston-Jones. In a reflexive framing convention that asserts itself throughout the work, Holland looks directly to the audience and announces, “This is the part where I’m supposed to let Ishmael loose.” Next Holland turns to the bound Houston-Jones to ask, “You alright?” Houston-Jones responds affirmatively with a grunt. After Holland unties his legs, he asks, “You want your hands loose too?” To this Houston-Jones mumbles, still gagged. When Holland removes the gag in response, the audience hears, “You can let me loose if you want to.”

I read this negotiation between improvisers as resembling the communication required in bondage or sadomasochistic sexual play. The exchange between two improvisers regarding one partner’s satisfaction with a moment in the dance resembles the way a dominant sexual partner might communicate with the submissive/bound partner to successfully navigate territories of pain, pleasure, domination, and submission. This boundary testing occurs throughout Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders in various forms, testifying to a sexual reality vastly different in structure and tone than the heightened romances featured on such hit television shows as Dallas in the mid-1980s.

While the lynching image emerges enigmatically, never being discussed or recalled later in the performance, Houston-Jones speaks directly to racially targeted oppression in contemporary western landscapes in a dancing monologue. In one of several fragmented monologues he performs, Houston-Jones speaks while walking with a toy gun in his hands. The choreography punctuates the text through abrupt pivots and shifts of weight that disrupt his steady gait. These pivots and shifts all involve a tiny click as Houston-Jones pulls the trigger of the toy gun. This text accompanies a make-believe gunfight:
First trip west. One.
LA. 1965.
Family trip.
Bus.
Stopped motels along the way.
See the Beatle movie, *Hair*, Salt Lake City, first slot machine in Nevada.
Watts Riot, Watts, Los Angeles, whole vacation spent… Eight p.m. curfew.

Holland supports this monologue with a play gunfight of his own. He repeatedly shoots his toy
gun toward the audience from a kneeling position and then falls sideways into the ground as if to
avoid the shot from an offstage adversary.

The content of the monologue and the stage action rub dissonantly against each other,
requiring the audience to hold turbulent race relations and the mythic West side by side. The
monologue haltingly recalls a family vacation to Los Angeles, but rather than describing a
western landscape, Houston-Jones lists artifacts of the trip: motels, buses, movies, cities, and
slot machines.¹⁶ He delivers the text coolly, and the action consists of a repetitive, pedestrian
imitation of a gunfight. The tinny, hollow click that accompanies the movement aptly undercuts
any potency the movement composition might acquire. As this fragmented syntax undercuts the
symbolism of the movement vocabulary, the stoic recitation of the language accumulates power
in the last lines of the monologue. The family trip on a bus ends in Watts in the middle of the
1965 race riot. In the performed ellipsis between two fragments—“Watts Riot, Watts, Los
Angeles” and “whole vacation spent… eight pm curfew”—Houston-Jones communicates the
debilitating effect of this historical context. The Watts Riot, which began with a police stop for
reckless driving in a predominantly African American area of Los Angeles and ended several
days later in thirty-four deaths, thousands of arrests, and millions of dollars of property damage,
takes over the fragmented vacation narrative Houston-Jones begins.¹⁷ In this, an alternative
account to the Watts riots emerges as the endpoint to his Western travels.¹⁸
In this danced monologue and throughout *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders*, Holland and Houston-Jones treat text as a compositional element of the dance event that can support, complicate, or contradict the movement. This value surfaces throughout the majority of Houston-Jones’ solo and collaboratively improvised compositions. He consistently articulates a public exposition of the private that commingles sensation, risk, memory, and reflexive narration. Susan Foster writes extensively about his 1982 work, *Part 2: Relatives*, in which his mother, Pauline Jones, performs. In *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (2002), Foster describes Houston-Jones’ improvised performances as occasions “where many kinds of associations, reminiscences, or discoveries can follow, one upon the other.”19 Foster reads the textual ruptures as providing “partial, fragmented perspectives on the performer’s past and present” and notes the nuanced manner through which autobiographical details inform the meaning of the improvisation.20 Rather than using text to express the emotional backstory for the dance or to predetermine a linearly constructed exposition, Houston-Jones coolly articulates a hybridized movement and textual discourse that opens narrative possibilities. In *Part 2: Relatives*, Foster asserts that the resultant talking dance constructs history “from the improvised performance of fragments, spoken and moved, that are shared by mother and son.”21 In *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders*, Houston-Jones and Holland similarly assemble the fragmented narrative of an intimate relationship between two men. These men dance intimately and playfully together while speaking about cowboys and the West, while shooting toy guns and swaggering with clanking spurs. I read these linkages from sexual intimacy to cowboyness to lynching to the Watts riots as disrupting common assumptions—perpetuated by Hollywood Westerns during World War II and throughout the Cold War—regarding the cowboy’s straightness and whiteness.
Finding Black Cowboys

Holland and Houston-Jones also historicize the racial identity of the cowboy through documentary footage of Carlos Abraham Foster. Foster, who was raised on a cattle ranch in Oriente Province, Cuba before touring the Mexico rodeo circuit, appears in the work through film and audio documentation.22 A program note dedicates the performance to Foster. Though the projected film was shot in preparation for Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders (Holland is credited for the film in the program), the treatment of the film causes the images to appear grainy, suggesting an archival document. The film starts with an extreme close-up of Foster adjusting the bridle on a white, spotted horse. The contrast between the horse’s white coat and Foster’s black skin fills the frame, and the closeness of the lens to the subject renders the horse and rider a high-contrast, abstract visual study. As Foster adjusts the bridle, a wedding ring moves through the frame. A white/gray sideburn peeks out beneath the cowboy hat Foster wears. The film cuts to a new perspective, and the audience sees Foster mounting a horse and showing off a series of horse tricks—high prances and sideways trots. As the camera angle gets wider, it becomes clear that this is not an imagined West of rugged terrain that paints the cowboy as an epic figure who commands the visual frame. Instead, we see tall, industrial buildings in the background—interrupting the horizon line so central to classic Western films.23 The camera also reveals a massive piece of irrigation equipment—reflecting a postmodern agricultural turn toward corporate farming.

Earlier in the performance, Foster’s voice provides the audio context to an image of an African American girl, Brienin Bryant, prancing across the stage while pretending to ride a
plastic, toy pony. The pony is illuminated by a bulb inside its plastic shell, and the light from the pony takes the foreground to her stately, even stoic movement. The voice says:

…and they are not, uh, knowledgeable about Black men, and what they have done and his blood and his sweat…is what made this country… what it is. And I know, born and raised where I am, we haven’t seen….In fact, I didn’t know anything about white cowboys… We were all black, we were all Hispanic… were all Indians and all of that over there—we were all cowboys. My father was very, very black and… [I saw him]….taking care of the ranch, taking care of cattle, milking cows, ok?… so when I, uh, uh saw white faces on the screen [as the] cowboy, I always wondered, where in the United States are the black cowboys?

The man’s voice sounds old and weathered—he might have smoked. His voice cracks as he describes the frequently unacknowledged contributions that black cowboys have made in the United States. As with the film document described above, the recording of the voice suggests an archive (background noise in the audio track indicates it was not slickly recorded in a sound studio but rather retains a sense of place) and, similarly to Houston-Jones’s danced monologue, the voice-over opens more possibilities than it closes. From a formal perspective, the film image and the voiceover function singularly—there is no other recourse to a film documentary in the dance, and audio documentary recurs only briefly at the end of the dance. Thematically, however, both documents stand as fragmented utterances that, taken together with other aspects of the performance, seek to vivify the reality of cowboys of color and negate the iconic cowboy’s privileged whiteness. Reading through the speculative gaps in the performance (no outright exposition or biographical information is given in regard to Foster or Bryant), the audience must construct a history, reasoning between the fragments of recorded audio, filmic image, improvised choreography, stage image, and spoken word.

Born in Cuba, Foster was best known in the New York region for founding the Urban Western Riding Program, which used horse-riding education as a tool in working with at-risk youth. His New York Times obituary (he died in 1998 at the age of seventy-six) states that after
becoming an expert rider on a ranch in Cuba, he toured a rodeo circuit in Mexico and then moved to the United States in 1960. His obituary notes that he was employed at a number of community and drug-rehabilitation centers, provided community service by speaking to school-aged children about black cowboys during National Black History month, and founded the Federation of Black Cowboys through which a small system of regional rodeos began. Foster’s obituary noted his frustration with the lack of awareness about the historical importance of the black cowboy.

Dancing With Agnes

As the audio recording of Foster ends, Houston-Jones enters the space and stretches his arms wide. He continually energizes and re-engages with this expansive stance as if trying to stretch across the entire stage. His presence in the space pairs potently with Foster’s voice. As Foster’s recorded voice says, “I always wondered, where in the U.S. are the black cowboys?,” Houston-Jones’ domination of the space seems to respond, “I am here.” Then the steps facilitating this expansiveness begin to condense into an even, rhythmic stepping of the feet—an uncharacteristic bourrée reminiscent of ballet. He says,

Research:
First research on this piece took us to the Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center looking for some…. authentic…. cowboy choreography….
Uh, what they had on file was basically… dances by… Martha Graham and Agnes DeMille.

Identifying Graham and DeMille as choreographic precursors, his light stepping continues—accentuated by the sound of his cowboy boots tapping against the floor. His arms, which earlier were reaching wide and flat, begin to curve gently in imitation of a balletic port de bra.

He continues to dance in silence. Houston-Jones’ performance of the ballet-inspired vocabulary
imitates the steps of ballet without capturing ballet’s illusion of light weight—partially, this is
due to the cowboy boots tapping on the floor (a sound he seems to accentuate rather than try to
diminish). Yet he also disrupts ballet’s weightlessness through his studied examination of the
movement he performs. He steps, for example, in a quick series of bourrées, but also explores
minute accelerations and decelerations, as well as small changes in the force of the steps—
drawing attention to his feet striking the ground. He also begins to play with the direction of the
movement, swiftly interrupting the bourrées with pivots and turns. However the quick stepping
remains as the imperative of the improvisation, and his disruptions of this elongated, even
swiftness stop short of disrupting the performance of ballet vocabulary. Throughout this section,
his head cocks slightly, changing orientation—mimicking the head position of ballet, but also
contributing to the impression of the performer’s distance from the choreography he performs.

Over the previous text, Holland enters the space and begins walking downstage toward
the audience before turning his back to them and walking away. This cross repeats several
times; he holds a lasso, and his spurs clank loudly. His steps are long and lumbering, and his
shoulders hunched—a studied contrast to the dance Houston-Jones performs next to him.
Occasionally he circles the lasso low to the ground as he walks. He then stands in the
background, continuing to slowly work the lasso as Houston-Jones speaks again:

So we watched Oklahoma…. and Rodeo…. 
And what I found… was that …basically to make… 
balletic movement…
cowboy-esque…. 
everything had to be performed in second position plié… to simulate the riding of 
horses….

He begins to embody the movement he describes, maintaining the bourrée while widening his
stance. In this he takes on a signature movement from two of Agnes DeMille’s most enduring
works: Oklahoma and Rodeo. The spread, bent position of the legs pronounces the shift of
weight, and he indulges in this awkward challenge. He breaks momentarily from the quick stepping of the feet to shift into a pose with his leg lifted to the side, struggling to maintain the bend in the knees. Reminiscent of ballet’s side arabesque, his performance of the position continues to accentuate weight and an active negotiation for balance—rather than the ballet ideal of balance as a naturally occurring phenomenon. He continues to describe the vocabulary of his choreographic precursors:

Also there’s this little… thumb and hand action here…
and I’m not sure what this is supposed to symbolize….
but a lot of movement gets made like this……

He puts his thumbs in his belt loops, maintaining angularity in the elbows. He then sets and resets this position several times, and commences with complicating his imitation of ballet.

He gradually departs from his improvised study of DeMille’s choreographic vocabulary. His movement increasingly accentuates a cool polycentrism, weighted pelvis, and angled approach to line. He lunges in profile before beginning the quick stepping action again, this time in forced arch. Here he allows the insistent speed of the bourrée to slow, shifting attention to multiple centers of movement within his torso. While he maintains his thumbs in his belt loops, he actively engages and re-engages the position of the thumbs through small isolations of his elbows and shoulder blades. Whereas de Mille displays such gestures and postures as a fait accompli, Houston-Jones awkwardly revels in the process of construction. Simultaneously he cocks his head back and forth—smoothly echoing the rhythm of the bourrée that his feet just quit. The low position of the pelvis and angularity of the forced-arch lunge contribute to the bourrée’s disintegration.

Holland stands behind Houston-Jones as he speaks, slowly circling the lasso toward the floor. As Houston-Jones begins his skewed citation of cowboy ballet, Holland’s lasso work gets
faster. Then Houston-Jones says, “Then there’s a lot of this as well,” while making a motion with his hand above his head—imitating the twirling of a lasso. Over this, Holland’s real lasso—still circling—moves up over his head. Houston-Jones dances in the foreground—imitating the lasso move, while Holland accomplishes the same movement with a real lasso behind him. Holland gradually lets out rope on the lasso so that the speed of the lasso’s end point moves faster—the sound of the rope moving against the surrounding air provides a whirring audio accompaniment. The sound from the lasso, the proximity of the quickly moving rope to Houston-Jones, and the tall, silhouetted stature of Holland takes on a menacing tone. Meanwhile Houston-Jones proceeds to thoroughly wreck the ballet and modern dance inspired vocabulary he began with. He references the bourrée, the port de bras, the thumb-in-belt position, and the lasso move, but forcefully manipulates the movement’s ordering. Multiple turns, swift juxtapositions in stance, spastic bursts in the torso, and a prevalent value upon viscerally generated movement (as opposed to ballet’s value on axial alignment) re-authors and critiques De Mille’s vocabulary.

Houston-Jones’ angular, weighted, and polycentric incursion on the ballet vocabulary can be read through the lens of dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s writing on the Africanist Aesthetic in dance. Houston-Jones’ tight juxtaposition of highly contrasting elements, his use of polyrhythm/polycentrism, his value on the pelvis’s weight and active spine, and his value on movement over line all find support through the lens of Gottschild’s writing on the Africanist Aesthetic in dance. Houston-Jones’ cool, polyrhythmic disruption of de Mille’s vocabulary locates the cowboy at the intersection of European and Africanist influences, supporting assertions previously made through Foster’s text and contesting prevailing visions of cowboyness that exclude racial difference.
Holland’s presence in the background develops this critique. The circling lasso resonates at a level of spectacle and draws out an understated animosity in Houston-Jones’ delivery. Holland accompanies the spoken narrative, which nods toward the racialized representations of cowboyness on the concert stage, with an exact reproduction of the coordinated dexterity required of a working cowboy. Through both Houston-Jones’ dancing and Holland’s visual design, the creators articulate their relationship to the cowboy’s iconicity and critique historically Eurocentric representation. This section seems to confirm and vivify the argument that Foster delivers in the previous voiceover—black cowboys are nothing new.

**Kick Me, If You Want**

Throughout the open-ended duet that makes up the first two-thirds of the performance, Holland and Houston-Jones depict a non-normative sexuality marked as deeply ambivalent toward the subject of mythic cowboy masculinity. Evidence of this queerness manifests repeatedly throughout the work through a variety of compositional strategies that include: successful performances of masculine power, reflexive framing to undercut these successful performances, themes of domination, and negotiations of risk.

At times, they fully embody the masculine physicality of the mythic cowboy. This most often happens in verbal interactions reminiscent of Hollywood westerns and in sustained kinetic images. Images include: The lassoing movement by Fred Holland (described above), prolonged passages wherein both performers swagger loudly through the space, sustained tableaux during which both performers face the audience with their hands up above their heads as if to say, “Don’t shoot!,” extremely slow-motion falls through the space, and the unexplained pair of
cowboys playing cards in silhouette in the beginning of the dance. These images most potently embody iconic cowboyness.

Several fragmented scenes that similarly quote the Hollywood film genre populate the dance, yet reflexive framing conventions thoroughly corrupt any pretense to authenticity. One emblematic scene occurs in the midst of an improvised meta-commentary wherein the performers decide upon the sequence and qualitative variation of the designated movement. The sequence starts as Houston-Jones and Holland crouch, ready to run at upstage center. Houston-Jones shouts, “Go!” as a cue, and they both run for a toy rifle placed downstage. Holland arrives at the toy first, diving to outrun his opponent. From a lying position on the ground he points the rifle up toward Houston-Jones, who retreats backwards quickly with hands raised in surrender. Houston-Jones’ boots tap percussively against the floor as he skitters. Once Houston-Jones arrives upstage, the two freeze in this tableau before casually walking out of the positions they just held so tensely. They then reset to the original crouched, ready-to-run position.

Here, as they do frequently throughout the performance, they collaboratively improvise variations on the previous movement sequence. One will ask the other a question (“One more fast?”) and wait for either an affirmation (“One fast”) or qualifier (“One fast. Three consecutive shots.”) to determine the substance, syntax, and quality of the subsequent movement. This occurs through several distinct variations, one of which Houston-Jones sets up by saying, “Window. Card game. Got cards?” Holland nods affirmatively to the question and confirms, “Window.” Houston-Jones then reconfirms the entire sequence and cues them to begin with the word “go.” They replay a slow motion variation of the earlier rifle trick. Holland shoots Houston-Jones three times and the sequence continues into a chokehold whereby Holland holds Houston-Jones by the neck with the rifle, supporting the majority of Houston-Jones’ weight.
Here Houston-Jones reminds Holland, “Slow. Slow. Slow down.” Then, as Holland lowers Houston-Jones down to the ground to continue the fight, Houston-Jones suggests, “You can kick me if you want.”

After the slow-motion kick, the dance returns to pedestrian time. Staying taught in their bodies, they check in about the next sequence of events. Houston-Jones announces, “Non-sequitur window,” then asks, “Ready?” Holland confirms this and when he cues the action, Houston-Jones breaks subtly into scene. He calls for Holland to show his cards. Holland, also shifting into scene announces his cards (three spades) and asks, “What you got?” Houston-Jones announces, “Three aces.” When they put the cards down, Holland says, “You’re a liar, John,” and the two begin to throw slow-motion punches at each other. Then they struggle/wrestle in real time until Holland throws Houston-Jones through an imaginary window; they both quietly say “crasssssssh” with this action. When they begin moving in slow motion again, the scene ends with Houston-Jones falling out the imaginary window, finding his own idiosyncratic virtuosity in the slowly shifting weight as he rolls into the floor.

On one hand, the competition, violence, and willful repetition of these images demonstrate a desire for the masculine subject of the cowboy. In repeatedly rehearsing these scenes of violence and domination, these sequences can be read as fetishistic tributes to cowboy masculinity. But I argue that such successful performances lack the consistent maintenance required to fully ascend to and hold masculine power. While Holland and Houston-Jones may indulgently acquiesce to cowboy masculinity in one moment, the reflexive meta-commentary disrupts any ascension that might momentarily occur. It is as if Houston-Jones and Holland successfully achieve mythic cowboyness only to disavow and distance themselves from the performance in the next moment. These oscillations between performing in scene and
commenting on the scene requires the audience to actively participate in the creation of meaning and discern for themselves which of these performance modes (if either) is the “real” scene.

In moments where Houston-Jones is bound—either with ropes or constrained at the neck with a rifle—he instructionally directs Holland, the dominator, in the ways he is willing to submit to Holland as a dominant power. At times, Houston-Jones gives Holland the option to dominate him more completely—“You can kick me if you want.” At times, he gives him the option to release him from bondage—“You can untie me if you want to.” At times he commands Holland to change the quality of domination—“Slow. Slow. Slow down.” For Holland’s part, he performs his dominance over Houston-Jones coolly but thoroughly. After dragging him out to the center stage from a refrigerator box and leaving Houston-Jones writhing on the ground, Holland’s perfunctory, task-oriented manipulation of his fellow performer, attention to his well-being (“You want your hands loose, too?”), and his direct address to the audience (“This is where I’m supposed to let Ishmael loose) complement a contingent domination—a willful play by both parties.

I argue that the continual negotiation of the power dynamics within the duet recuperates the trauma of historical domination associated with the cowboy. Feminist and queer studies scholar Elizabeth Freeman discusses sadomasochism, and performances that call on conventions of sadomasochism, as “sexual metacommentary…on the entangled histories of race, nationhood and imperialism.” She describes sadomasochism as “an erotic dialectic between two or more people, that ostensibly focuses on the ritualized exchange of power.” In such exchanges of power and in accoutrements recalling historical trauma—the slave-owner’s whip, the Nazi’s boot, the revolutionary’s sword or, in this case, the cowboy’s rifle—sadomasochism becomes a site where trauma becomes negotiated and redeployed. She writes, “sadomasochism can…aim
for a certain visceral fusion, a point of somatic contact between a single erotic body in the present tense and an experience coded as both public and past.\textsuperscript{31} Her work in sadomasochism recaptures historicity in the study of sexualized power exchanges, which she notes had been looked at in increasingly ahistorical, psychoanalytic terms by gay male theorists in the recent past.\textsuperscript{32} This historicizing of trauma through ritualized exchanges of power is precisely the kind of sexual discourse I read in \textit{Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders}.

Physical risk manifests itself in duet forms that accentuate an active visceral presence contained by a coolly expressionless surface. The representations of violence described above find further resonance in dancing that draws upon Contact Improvisation as well as weighted partnering that values collisions as much as controlled exchanges of weight. Throughout these exchanges, the relationship between the two dancers emerges as highly negotiated, contested, unstable, and subject to sudden fluctuations in tempo, force, and energy. When they dance together, it looks dangerous. Torsos collide with faces, forearms slap loudly against scapula, embraces struggle against the partner’s desire to flail—this dance celebrates the accident, the fall, and the occasional scrape. I read this dancing as an extension of the theatrical and meta-theatrical allusions to sadomasochism elsewhere in the performance.

\textit{f/i/s/s/i/o/n/n/i/n/g}

The combination of indulgent ascension to masculine power, reflexive framing to undercut such acquiescence, themes of domination, and physical risk-taking recur throughout the collaborative work of Houston-Jones and Holland, and in work by each artist in his independent solo work.\textsuperscript{33} Another work by Houston-Jones that premiered in the same year, \textit{f/i/s/s/i/o/n/n/i/n/g}, reveals the acute political comment he intends in his work—and locates the
focus of his critique squarely on U.S. colonialist impulses. I look at *f/i/s/i/o/n/i/n/g* to further contextualize this project within larger themes of Americanness and trajectories of American domination. In choosing to look at *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* and *f/i/s/i/o/n/i/n/g* as related works, I develop this essay’s connection not only to cowboyness but also Americanness. Whereas *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* positions the black, queer identities of Holland and Houston-Jones in order to advocate for the inclusion of cowboys of color in the nation’s history, *f/i/s/i/o/n/i/n/g* critiques the concept of nation itself.

Throughout the entire twenty-minute solo, Houston-Jones dances wearing only combat boots (a signature costume element throughout many of his dances) and a bandana that he wears over his face as a blindfold. In a triangle shape, the blindfold wraps and obscures his face from the audience, while simultaneously obscuring his vision. He evokes a range of personas including the target of a firing line, blind justice, and the blind seer Teiresias. Vulnerable nakedness permeates the work, and his movements are small and sensuous. The improvisational score seems to change only in accordance with his impulses and the sensory feedback he receives within tight repetitions and variations of movement—the way vibrations from the floor reverberate in response to a stomp, the way light or shadow moves across his face to indicate his position in space, and the sensation of air moving across his body, guide his progress through the dance.34

The physical image of his blindfolded, naked body stands in potent contrast to the politically conservative song-selection that accompanies the dance. The program notes credit the songs as written and performed by Dave Dudley, a singer who was best known for “trucker country” hits like “Six Days on the Road” (1963) and “Truck Drivin’ Son of a Gun” (1965). However, Houston-Jones selects songs with extremely patriotic lyrics. One song for example,
implies the singer’s “Mama” to “tell them what we’re fighting for” and asks her if protesters of Vietnam had forgotten “Pearl Harbor and Korea too.”

“You're a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere” refers to the American flag greeting the singer in the afterlife. Houston-Jones’ response to these indiscriminately patriotic selections begins with quiet—even obscure—resistance, the potency of which accumulates with time.

As the work develops, the charge between the lyrics and the dance intensifies. At one moment, Houston-Jones collapses abruptly onto the ground and then silkily brings himself up to his hands and knees; his blindfolded and naked state evokes sexual submission as the lyrics say, “Goodbye my sweetheart, hello Vietnam.” While such submission might, at first glance, indicate that Houston-Jones submits to conservative ideology, he exceeds the parameters for such blind allegiance in the next moment by deliberately pushing his ass into the air and suspending in this sexually submissive position before he shifts his weight to his legs and unfurls to a standing position. In the next moment he places his hands above his head in yet another willing posture of sexualized submission while the music blithely mourns the loss of a young draftee’s freedom. Dudley sings:

We must stop communism in that land,  
Or freedom will start slipping through our hands.  
I hope and pray someday the world will learn  
That fires we don’t put out will bigger burn.  
We must serve freedom now at any cost.  
Or someday our own freedom will be lost.

Houston-Jones’ apparent submission to the text exceeds the bounds of conservative patriotism through the queer, dissident placement of his naked, black body in a position of ecstatic bondage to dominant ideologies of U.S. nationalism. The ironic juxtaposition of patriarchal patriotism and queer subversion symbolically pummels any fidelity to political conservatism that the text accrues.
Watching *fil/si/o/n/i/n/g* feels like being trapped in an insane asylum for the political right. The dissident and compositionally dissonant choreography conjoin with Houston-Jones’ nakedness to turn these melodies, pitched to the heartland of America, into an ironic, seething exegesis. Nonetheless, Houston-Jones speaks in between two songs to further clarify the meaning of the work:

So, um…
As of yesterday I started talking in this piece…,
because I realized…
my point of view might not be quite clear…..

Today someone asked me…
if…
I am being ironic….
using this music…
with this image….
And my answer is, I don’t quite know.

I mean one can no more…
choose one’s country….
than choose one’s parents….

And there….
are many things about this country….,
that I have political differences with…..
But still I am…..
American….
and I do….
want to continue dancing….

Because that’s the only thing that I can do that could possibly….
make a change in anything, I think.

So is that irony? I don’t know.

With the text “But still I am/American/and I do/want to continue dancing,” Houston-Jones positions a complex and even contradictory relationship between his own body and Americanness. Continuing on with “Because that’s the only thing that I can do that could possibly/make a change in anything, I think,” he posits dance as a change agent in the history of
U.S. empire building. As he ends the above text the song, “I love my little Filipino baby” comes on over the sound system, evoking U.S. occupation of the Philippines. To this music, his hips start to shift suddenly from side to side, throwing his released torso and arms around in such a way so as to facilitate a repetitious self-flagellation of the torso by the hands and forearms as the pelvis’ force whips his cupped hands around like tethered balls.

Is this a whip of self-flagellation? Or is this a whip of the cowboy on the hide of cattle? Or is this the whip of master on slave? I believe Houston-Jones invites the audience to consider all of these possibilities. In positioning self-inflicted violence next to a song about a sailor who fantasizes about returning to his “Filipino baby” whose “teeth are bright and pearly white” and whose “hair is black as jet,” Houston-Jones composes a caustic yet enigmatic protest. He positions U.S. occupation of the Philippine Islands in a larger context of U.S. domination, and vivifies the racialized, patriarchal nature of such violent governance.

I read Houston-Jones’ *f/i/s/s/i/o/n/n/i/n/g* and *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* as companion works to locate his critique on cowboyness as positioned within an embodied critique of American politics through a history of racialized, heteronormative domination. While *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* critiques a specifically racist construction of white cowboy iconicity, *f/i/s/s/i/o/n/n/i/n/g* critiques the empire building that cowboyness has come to connote. The keystone of both dances is the vulnerable, viscerally engaged, black, and queer speaking body of Houston-Jones, whose presence productively complicates notions of cowboy masculinity and relationships between patriotism, Americanness, and domination.

*But I’m Not Going to Look Like a Cowgirl Either*
I utilize this encapsulated reading of *f/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/g* as further evidence of the dissident politics Houston-Jones attributed to dancing during the early and mid 1980s. Focusing such queer agency back to the work of *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders*, I assert that the collaboration between Houston-Jones and Holland attends to multiple identitarian concerns including race, sexuality, and gender through a mode of performance that recognizes—and attempts to be a change agent in—the traumatic history of queer peoples in the U.S. Throughout the first two-thirds of the dance, black queerness achieves primacy. Yvonne Meier, however, intervenes in this prevalent concern of black, queer masculinity. Her presence, which comes late in the dance, singularly marks white femininity in the work—yet takes time and space adequate to unveil the critique that Holland and Houston-Jones’ construct.

Entering after the documentary film of Carlos Foster ends, Meier’s presence, and the white femaleness her body symbolizes, mars troubles the established themes of the performance. Wearing a lavender skirt, tan shirt, and brown work boots—more prairie than cowboy—she dances along a diagonal pathway from upstage to downstage, described by a singular light source. She travels along this diagonal, initiating the movement from different body parts from moment to moment. At times she seems to be moving through a viscous substance, at times it appears that the space pulls her from one endpoint to the next. The pulling increases in voracity and eventually takes her to the ground. With this, the athleticism and complexity of the movement grows more extreme. She straddles across movement states of recklessness and control. At times her limbs’ musculature thrusts or tosses before surrendering to the impulse of such an attack through a fall, turn, slide, or undulation. At other times she holds on, binding beyond this initial burst of force. Throughout this, her emotional state appears cool; her face registers little to no awareness of these shifts. At one point her movement isolates in her hands
in a series of furiously executed gestures—too flung to be tied to pedestrian coherence. In the next moment, she hops on one leg and circles her arms, luxuriating in the increased buoyancy her arm movements give to her momentary suspensions in the air. In all of this, extremes in the movement ricochet between clearly delineated formal elements: control/abandon, bound/flung, core/distal, quick/slow, attack/decay. She performs the most formally complex, full-bodied, and voraciously kinetic compositional improvisation of the dance, rendering her unexplained and unexpected presence in the work as a major event, an interruption, an intervention. The visceral intelligence articulated in this solo cannot be relegated to a supporting role despite its late placement in the dance.

As Meier’s solo resolves, Holland and Houston-Jones enter to form a trio. Holland rolls like a tumbleweed being blown in slow motion as Houston-Jones rehearses his cowboy swagger one last time. The song,“(The Man Who Shot) Liberty Valance” begins over the sound system. The lyrics depict predictable narratives of masculine dominance and homosociality with lines such as, “When Liberty Valance rode to town the womenfolk would hide,” and, “From the moment a girl gets to be full-grown the very first thing she learns/When two men go out to face each other only one returns.” Over this the three of them oscillate between high-impact partnering, game-based improvisation, and sustained images that evoke Hollywood films. In one moment, the three dancers take turns hurtling themselves into each other, each demanding that the receiving partner in the movement accommodate his or her velocity. This shifts quickly into an exchange of cowboy hats wherein, for example, Houston-Jones tries to keep his hat on Meier while she shakes her head to try to fling it off. The dance shifts again as Houston-Jones and Meier perform deadpan parodies of the cowboy villain embracing the resistant damsel in distress against her will. This motif resolves with Meier taking Houston-Jones to the floor with an
aggressive pulling on his head from the back. Throughout the trio, conventional narratives of
gender in the mythic West are introduced in the song lyrics and promptly demolished in the
dance.

Throughout this section, Holland, Houston-Jones, and Meier engage with a series of
compositional forms in rapid succession, developing and then dissolving the integrity of each
composition’s logic. The trio form starts to fracture as Meier shoots a toy rifle in the air
(complementing a jerk of the rifle with a diminutive “phitew” rather than the authoritative
“bang” spoken by the men earlier in the dance) and Houston-Jones and Holland perform an
awkwardly forced partner dance with a closed-arm embrace that recalls dancehall comportment
gone awry. Just as these citations of western-themed combat and leisure establish, they dissolve
into a series of runs and jumps. Their arms reach up over their heads hybridizing a parody of
balletic grande allegro movements and generalized, jubilant frolicking. Again, just as the form
emerges, Holland and Houston-Jones go into more sustained, weighted holds and embraces.
They intimately hold each other as if evoking the unspoken affection of homosocial bonding
before a death in gun battle and then assisting each other with a fall to the ground. Over this,
Meier wields the length of the rifle to accent a geometric partitioning of the stage space into
upstage and downstage areas, separating herself from the men behind her. Intimacy, jubilance,
decorum, death, and isolation: They exert and discard these potent images with the frustrated
pace of a bored child tearing up a well-worn picture book.

Meier’s presence simultaneously complicates and develops the coherence of the work.
Her white femaleness surely disrupts the dance’s tenuous coherence, but so also does her
movement. In her solo, dichotomies between formal poles shift and refract (from a concern with
bound vs. free energetic attitudes in the movement to a concern with core vs. distal initiation to
an oscillation between acceleration and deceleration) to evoke a kind of euphoric, kinesthetic complexity that borders on the incoherent. Yet I also read Meier’s presence as developing the thematic and formal premises of the work. From this perspective, Meier’s white femininity opens the scope of Holland and Houston-Jones’ calibrated reconsideration of cowboyness and the mythic West. Her movement—both in her solo and in the trio—provides a viscerally composed antonym to the damsel in distress stereotype propagated by Western films. She replaces helplessness with choreographic acumen, performing a kinetic articulation that surpasses the bar set by her male peers and offering a substantial, complex, and coolly performed subjectivity in place of the two-dimensional histrionics, stoicism, or pleasantness so often found in Hollywood Westerns such as The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962).

Meier continues her feminist critique of cowboyness in spoken form. Throughout her text, she speaks in a halting cadence, leaving the impression that the text is being remembered through a fog:

Where are… my spurs?
My… hat?
And… how come… I don’t….have…a gun.
I don’t think I can dance with you.
But I’m not going… to look like a cowgirl either…maybe a farm girl. They look dumpy?
I look dumpy?

What does she remember, why is her speech so halting, and what, specifically does this text critique? The opening of the text recalls cowboyness, referring to hats and spurs and guns, but the halting text coupled with the fact that she had a hat previously (which she defiantly shook off her head) and only moments before set down her gun, suggests two things: her seeking of cowboy artifacts is not to be taken too seriously, and if she did possess such artifacts, the genuine items are not to be found on a set strewn with more plastic replicas of western paraphernalia than
authentic articles. This logic develops with, “I don’t think I can dance with you,” which similarly critiques the dance work within which it is spoken. Her meta-commentary, presumably translating a juncture in the process with Holland and Houston-Jones, articulates an ambivalent stance toward the mythic cowboy’s privileged position of white, male power.

So, rather than placing herself as a cowgirl in the work—an available and frequently visible ingénue construction in 1980s popular culture reinvigorated by the success of the film *Urban Cowboy* and consistently reinforced by *Dallas* actress Charlene Titon’s pinup status—Meier dresses in a different kind of western wear (brown leather, flat boots, and a loose cotton shirt/skirt combination) that is rather plain, even dumpy. In her costume and especially the extreme dynamic range of her movement, Meier replicates a model of hard, physical labor that speaks to the history of women on the frontier. Whereas the modern dance precursors that Houston-Jones describes in the work earlier—namely Graham and De Mille—most frequently constructed their pioneer women within romantically driven patriarchal narratives, Houston-Jones, Holland, and Meier choreographically collude to question the primacy of any singular identitarian stance. In this, Holland and Houston-Jones scheme with Meier to historicize the placement of each performer’s identity within the work. Black man, white woman, queer subject, straight subject—all configure relationships to cowboyness while simultaneously offering a scathing assessment of the cowboy’s traditional representation.

The improvised composition forces cognizance of the multiple presences configuring the dance’s identity and the importance of an inclusive, multiple-pronged approach to rewriting the mythic cowboy’s presumed whiteness, straightness, and conservatism. In a performance that insists upon the audience’s active engagement in meaning making, Holland and Houston-Jones compose an event wherein the audience balances complex and even contradictory philosophies
regarding the cowboy’s value. Foster and Meier, for example, posit conflicting accounts, and throughout the work the stoic stasis of the cowboy stance becomes unhinged, unwound, spiraled through, and flung about in an improvisation that embraces expertise and recklessness equally. Simultaneously, the dance destabilizes the West with regard to place and ideology. Is the West best represented by the song “(The Man Who Shot) Liberty Valance”? Or is the West most aptly captured in a ritualized remembering of the Watts race riots? We even learn that the West can be located on the East Coast—or so Holland’s film documentation of Foster posits. Utilizing reflexive framing devices throughout, the performance requires the audience to construct a West, and cowboyness, for themselves.

**Queer Futurity in the Yuppie Here and Now**

In its accounting for multiple identitarian perspectives, in its distinctively anti-heteronormative ideology, in its coalitional politics, in its historical cognizance, and perhaps especially in its radical, participatory approach to meaning making, *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* is as close to a queer utopia as I have witnessed in the cowboy choreographies studied for this project. I take my usage of the phrase queer utopia from performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) he posits queerness as a potentiality that has not yet been achieved. His argument bears extended quotation:

> Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.  

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Muñoz embeds queerness within the desire of what we cannot grasp in the present. In this, queerness amounts to a methodology of hope for the future rather than a static identity for consumption and distribution in the here and now. He locates this desire, the potentiality of queerness, in performance practices and events that range from literature to photography to dance—mostly surrounding the 1969 Stonewall rebellion. He describes his monograph as polemical—a ranting targeted against “the neoliberal ideology and the degradation of politics brought about by representations of queerness in contemporary popular culture.”\footnote{41} If 	extit{Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders} falls outside of Muñoz’s historical scope, it is certainly aligned ideologically with many of Muñoz’s case studies. In the dance I see a reconfiguration of the past in the interest of imagining a queer future.

I find 	extit{Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders} all the more remarkable for its ascension to queerness in the midst of one of the most chillingly conservative eras of U.S. political history. The year 1984 would be described by 	extit{Newsweek} as “The Year of the Yuppie,” a generation known at the time for self interest, aspirations to wealth regardless of social impact, and narcissistic attention to the promotion of self image. As political historian Michael Schaller describes in 	extit{Right Turn: American Life in the Reagan-Bush Era 1980-1992} (2007), “Unlike socially concerned protesters or hippies of the 1960s, these young adults had little interest in overthrowing what their predecessors had called the ‘rotten system.’ They came of age eager to consume.”\footnote{42} This negation of 1960s political progression replaced phrases such as “Hell no, we won’t go”—as a rally to occupy public space in protest of U.S. empire-building overseas and injustice at home—with the Yuppie mantra, “Go for it,” which promoted self gratification, consumption, and self-interested achievement. At the same time, Jane Fonda, the film actress who had come to infamy with the political right for supporting Vietnam War protests in the
1960s, was reclaimed by the mainstream as she sold millions of dollars in workout videos that perpetuated a pliable, smoothly veneered body, toned by aerobic exercise to sculpt the corporeal as a visually consumable product. Such concern for and financial commitment to weight loss and physical perfection occurred at a time when poverty rates in the U.S. reached an 18-year high. In contrast, Holland, Houston-Jones, and Meier all utilized a lifetime of physical training to relish in the imperfect stutter, the awkward rebound, and calculated misstep, validating multiple kinds of bodily movement in a politically progressive, experimental discourse concerning the body in relationship to empire.

The shallowness of the Yuppie generation could be seen as modeled from the top of the U.S. political hierarchy, as President Ronald Reagan calmly rationalized the newly publicized failing of public schools, not as a result of funding cuts or white flight from the inner-city, but rather as a cost incurred due to court mandates to correct racial segregation and sex discrimination. Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders premiered at a time when civic accountability was at all time low (as evidenced by Edwin Meese’s argument that Ebenezer Scrooge was a victim of bad press), Imperialist impulses at a relative high (as evidenced by the U.S. driven overthrow of Grenada’s Marxist government), and historical accuracy largely disregarded by the administration. I cannot view Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders outside of such a negating historical context. Rather, I read Holland and Houston-Jones’ ironic critique of Manifest Destiny as enacting a critique of the past to relate to the here and now. Muñoz discusses such methodologies in relationship to looking at the activism of the Stonewall riot to critique the bourgeois state of Greenwich Village at the beginning of the twenty-first century. He writes,

The move from then to here is a move to think about the coterminous nature of the temporal and spatial in the queer utopian methodology that I am suggesting. The time of the past helps mount a critique of the space of the present. This is not
revisionary history or metahistory; it is a critical deployment of the past for the purpose of engaging the present and imagining the future.  

I argue that *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* similarly deploys the past with the effect of engaging the present. In composing a work that views a consortium of historical strains through a queer lens—the Watts riots of the 1960s, the high modernist universalizing impulses of expressive dance matrons at mid-twentieth century, and the white-washing of the cowboy by Hollywood film—Holland and Houston-Jones critique exclusionary and monolithic Western narratives of the past. But I also argue that they deploy this past toward a critique of 1980s conservatism.

I see *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* deploying a queer methodology of hope in the way that it looks at the potential for queer politics generationally. With the presence of Houston-Jones and Holland, Carlos Foster’s presence via film and audio documentary, and enigmatic cameos by the young Briënin Bryant, there are three generations of performers represented in the dance. I describe Bryant’s parts as enigmatic in that they are the most fully task-oriented, pedestrian passages in the dance. She walks slowly across the stage with a lighted, plastic horse over the voice of Foster in one section. She plays with toys from a wooden chest over Meier’s monologue in another. I read these supporting moments as ritualized through their slow deliberateness, and through their placement in the larger work, Bryant provides a vital component of queer potentiality to the dance. She is not claimed by any member of the cast as belonging to a family unit, and her relative isolation and ritualized mode of performance rescues her from such heteronormative trappings. Rather, her presence quietly, slowly, and deliberately asserts a queer potentiality within the work. What can she learn from the documentation of Foster’s narrative? How does Meier’s resistance to cowboy masculinity inform her future? How do Houston-Jones and Holland configure her presence within a queerly imagined, western landscape? Certainly her presence raises more questions than answers, which adheres to the
logic set by the entrances of Foster and Meier as well. Her presence provides a generational inclusion consistent with the overall coalitional politics in *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* and resonant with Muñoz’s queer methodology.

In the stuttering steps, high-impact collisions, open-ended images, and softly-spoken improvised monologues throughout the work, *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* resists the allure of upward mobility and consumerism that predominated mainstream discourses in the 1980s. While the armed forces were promoting the opportunity to “be all that you can be” to young men through televised Army promotional jingles, the work of these artists valued hesitant stutters and incomplete utterances as fully as the virtuosic leap. In this, the dance succeeds in creating utopian possibilities precisely through its failures. Muñoz discusses failure in relationship to Judson-era choreographer Fred Hercko. In relationship to Hercko’s failed performance in the arena of postmodern choreographers, including his own suicide that Muñoz describes as a jeté out the window, Muñoz writes that such performances remind queer subjects of alternatives to the pragmatic concessions gay and lesbian politics have made to the tyranny of straightness. Muñoz discusses such tyranny in terms of straight time. He writes:

> Heteronormativity speaks not just to a bias related to sexual object choice but to that dominant and overarching temporal and spatial organization of the world that I have been calling straight time…. Queerness and the politics of failure are linked insofar as they are about doing “something else.” And in both cases they may be doing something else in relation to a something that is missing in straight time’s always already flawed temporality.⁴⁸

*Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* does “something else” with the racist, chauvinistic, and heteronormative discourse that has laid claim to cowboyness. The dance configures a curious amalgam constructed from multiple perspectives of The West (including cowboy labor from the early twentieth century, the Watts riots, and “[The Man Who Shot] Liberty Valence” and
demands that identitarian difference be recognized. In this, I argue, *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* offers an incursion to the master narrative of Manifest Destiny that Hollywood films and cowboy politicians upheld. Holland and Houston-Jones do “something else” with the aesthetics of performance, creating a deeply experimental aesthetic within which to investigate these ideas. And the creators do “something else” by positioning their queer black bodies, and the queer desires these bodies perform, in a stage situation that includes multiple other identities: white, female, young, old, and straight.

*Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* fails to offer a cogent, seamless account of Western history, and in this the dance questions how such a singular account of Manifest Destiny could ever perpetuate itself in historical narratives. The dance fails to portray mythic cowbowness with any sustained realism, and in this the dance recognizes the limits of such bound stoicism. The dance fails to vivify a dancing body impervious to gravity, uncontrollable velocity, stutters, and missteps, and in this the dance interrogates notions of kinetic mastery while broadening the scope for what good dancing can be. The dance fails to adhere to a single mode of performance; instead *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* restlessly shifts from meta-narrative to experimental documentary to improvisational play to virtuosic, risk-taking dance. All the while, the choreography forces the audience to maintain a critical distance from the seduction to escape into the Western landscape. Critical distance is also maintained with regard to the dancing itself through reflexive framing devices wherein the fourth wall of the proscenium stage crumbles in response to a toy gun that amuses more than menaces. In this, the dance invites the audience to participate in the dance as a maker of meaning amidst these contradictory signs. In a time when a calmly assuring leader looked at the American public through the lens of a camera and offered
reassuring, yet factually incorrect, accounts of America’s greatness, rightness, and destiny in the
world, such exercises seem particularly germane.

A caveat embeds Holland and Houston-Jones’ invitation to participate in meaning
making—the audience must acknowledge the identitarian diversity present within the
performance frame, and by extension, in the West. Young, old, queer, straight, male, female,
black, white—this is the West, too, and it always was.
Chapter Three: The Shadow’s Imperfect Choreography

He asks me to Shadow and I say yes. He asks me, “lead or follow.” I say, “I’d prefer to follow.” Our exchange frames the dance to come. His question (a proposition?) and my answer (a disclosure?) establish our roles in the forthcoming choreography. Would he smile the same way if I had said I wanted to lead? He takes my hand and leads me to the floor. I wait to feel the contact of his body behind me. The contact of his body arrives. We stand in a moment of anticipation, our left hands out and clasped, our right hands joined with gentle pressure on my stomach. We are standing facing the same direction—his lead behind my follow. I wait for a cue from him to start. His pelvis pushes against mine and I move my left foot out slowly, our cowboy boots sliding against the buffed wooden floor to the familiar rhythm of slow, slow, quick, quick. With a gentle pull of his left hand I take the cue to move back—and here the dance becomes fluid as my observation becomes messy. The Shadow leaves me nothing to look at except for other dancers and others who watch me watching. “They” are the third partner in this dance, the viewers for whom this choreography is performed. He turns me, ducks under my arm and we have reversed. I now stand behind and for a moment I am in the lead, on top. I feel uncomfortable in this new role. Not sure what to do, how to steer, what cues to give, wanting to be clear, to step up, to glide forward and then back. Slow, slow, quick, quick. He turns me, extends our arms, and I am in front again, being led, his shadow. Must remember for field notes: so easy to dance from one who is moved to one who moves another, from subject to object—must remember how it feels to be looked at. His hands place mine behind his hips and his hands
move to the nape of my neck. His fingers rest effortlessly while the positioning of our bodies broadcasts the choreography of gay sexuality to the room. This dance continues.

“Yes,” my partner says softly but impatiently, “The dance certainly does continue. Is that all you’ve got?” (Perhaps he has grown tired of my ethnographic fussing interfering with such a sexy dance? When did he gain access to my omniscient narration anyway?) He chuckles at this and firmly pushes against my backside, guiding my pelvis smoothly through a turn. He then maneuvers us through the many couples with whom we share the floor. “Let me know when you’ve figured it out.”

The description above, written as a representative composite of field experiences from October 2001 to June 2003, intends to introduce the sexually charged choreography of The Shadow at Oil Can Harry’s and relate it to the participant side of participant-observation methodological paradigms. The researcher’s desire to simultaneously participate and observe the dance event slips and stumbles awkwardly in the midst of the elusiveness of a split perspective. This evocation of The Shadow risks becoming an examination of the ethnographer’s encounter with difference and obscures the sociality of the dance form that this writing attempts to study. I will attempt, then, for the better part of this essay to view the dance from the outside, taking accountability for the inequitab...
originality and pretensions of naturalness. This metonymic reading will begin with the cowboy boot the dancers wear and extend to the choreography of the dance itself—utilizing Michael Taussig’s concept that the poorly executed copy has the power to assume the power and likeness of that which is copied through a sensuous knowing of the represented. I read The Shadow as a reflection of deeply embedded cultural beliefs that can be distinguished from the idiosyncratic nature of performance in alignment with Susan Foster’s critique of current debates regarding the performativity of gender. Following a synopsis of “gay vague” marketing strategies that The Shadow resists with its overt reference to anal sex, the 2003 reality television series Boy Meets Boy serves as a potent development of the negating effects of the emergence of gay men and lesbians as a viable marketing niche during this era. What I intend to illustrate through this investigation is that The Shadow can be read simultaneously as a choreography of sexuality and a performance of a desire to act politically, and in either reading, the dance embraces conflicting aspects of identity with regard to sexuality and its erasure within the market driven conceptualizations of queerness that became increasingly noted in journalistic and scholarly circles in the mid-1990s. Finally, I assert that The Shadow affirms and vivifies gay male sex practices in the historical context of the growing shadow of AIDS.

**The Follow Turns Around**

The Shadow begins….

For many of the participants at Oil Can Harry’s The Shadow has a contested history. Some claim that historic cowboys on the open range danced a version of The Shadow as respites from the hard labor of cattle drives, though social norms of the time—upended as they may have been on the open range—render such accounts fantastical rather than historical.³
Some claim that The Shadow has its origins in the gold rush era of the 1840s and 50s. Though historical accounts of the gold rush support destabilizing social relationships between men in contexts from dance halls to domestic spheres, to labor divisions within the mines, choreographic innovations to the European-derived ballroom embrace, as I describe in The Shadow, are not supported. Some believe that The Shadow was invented by gay and lesbian dancers in the boom of country-western dancing caused by the film *Urban Cowboy*, yet my research does not indicate widespread acceptance or practice of The Shadow throughout gay/lesbian country-western bars nationally. When I have talked with gay country-western dancers visiting Los Angeles from out of town they support the assertion that, “nowhere else will you see men dance The Shadow like they do in Los Angeles.”

A lengthy anecdote may serve as evidence in favor of a Los Angeles-specific affection for, if not origin of, The Shadow. Visiting the Rainbow Cattle Company in Austin, Texas during the summer of 2002, I was struck by the physical size of the club (at least twice the square footage on the dance floor), and the number of dancers deftly performing the two-step, shuffle, waltz, East Coast and West Coast Swings, and a few line dances. After a while I began talking with Greg, a man who had moved to Austin from Los Angeles a few years before. He was very familiar with Oil Can Harry's. We talked for a few minutes about the similarities and differences between the Rainbow Cattle Company and Oil Can Harry's—the different selection of line dances, the greater number of cowboy hats here, the song selection by the DJ, etc. After a few minutes, a slow-tempo song came on, and Greg asked me if I would like to dance. We walked up the steps to the large dance floor and began to two-step. Then he asked if I knew how to shadow and when I said yes, he immediately turned me around to The Shadow position. We were the only ones on the floor doing The Shadow, which made me feel a bit uncomfortable, as
if the ethnographer had suddenly become the center of attention. When the dance ended another man approached me and commented with a chuckle that Greg had convinced me to try his L.A. shadow dance.

When I talk with Carrie, who teaches the twice-weekly lessons at Oil Can Harry’s, how, when, or where The Shadow started, she replies, “I have no idea.” Standing next to us is Christy, our bartender and a barrel-riding competitor on the gay/lesbian rodeo circuit. Upon overhearing my question Christy laughs and interjects, “a couple of guys doing this.” As she speaks, she pumps her hips toward her fists, which she clenches phallically in front of her. Carrie offers that she began teaching The Shadow at Oil Can Harry’s in the mid-1990s. Rather than anxiously searching for the origins of the dance, I will focus on its inauguration as a teachable choreography at the bar. I use the historical moment of the mid-90s as the contextual frame of this essay, analyzing The Shadow as a response to social, political, and economic realities for queers at the end of the twentieth century.

The Shadow begins….

Perhaps it begins with the boot. The cowboy boot connotes dancing knowledge in the field of Oil Can Harry’s. Before asking a stranger to dance, the experienced dancer looks to the stranger’s shoes—cowboy boots indicate experience, whereas any other shoe exposes the novice. And while the slightly elevated heel and leather sole of the cowboy boot allow for a softly gliding step, there is something else at work here. The boots do more than reinforce Tim McGraw’s or Toby Keith’s lyrical references to the imagined west of cowboys and wranglers. Rather, I read the boot as part of a metonymic chain of additive associations. That is, I suggest that the cowboy boot is contiguous with a specific kind of cowboy masculinity and, as worn by
the gay country-western dancer, the dancer can be read as contiguous with but not the same as the cowboy masculinity that the cowboy boot connotes.

The cowboy masculinity that the cowboy boot metonymically signifies (a particular signification that is not merely associative but also additive in its connotative linkage) in turn points toward iconoclastic and mythic notions of cowboyness that does not only associate the image of the cowboy with the historical conditions of hard labor on the ranch, or the range, or any other (real or imagined) place. Rather, the boot additionally connotes a cowboy masculinity imagistically linked to Manifest Destiny and the imperialistic occupation of the West. Cowboyness also has come to be associated with a history of a contemporary breed of expansionism in and by the United States. Thus a metonymic chain of signification can be read as running from the boot to iconic cowboyness, to the history of U.S. expansion that continues to the present day. My interest lies in the ways gay and lesbian subjects link and unlink this connection for their own purposes, and, in so doing, use this linkage not for the purposes of maintaining the status quo, but to connect homosexuality to cowboyness in order to conquer and redefine their own frontiers. As Presidents George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan before him have both co-opted cowboy iconography for political gain while simultaneously enacting direct assaults against the legal rights and public health of the LGBT population, what gains might the gay and/or lesbian subject hope to achieve through performing the choreography of a particular cowboy kinesis? What politics can be observed in the choreographic evocation of sexual pleasure?

The Shadow dance begins….

Maybe I could just pick the dance up from the middle and describe it from the outside sans the ethnographic anxiety of the opening paragraphs? Very simply, this is a slow version of
the country-western two-step—the very same dance that John Travolta and Debra Winger popularized in *Urban Cowboy*. Whereas the follow in the two-step must face her or his partner and walk backward, The Shadow requires the following dancer to turn to the front. This denies the pair visual contact with each other, while prioritizing extensive contact between the front of the leading dancer and the backside of the follow. The right arm of the lead wraps snuggly around the follow, and the right hands of both dancers rest, clasped together, on the following dancer’s torso or belt. They both face forward throughout the dance to maintain visual contact with their forward trajectory while maintaining more body contact than the two-step allows. Their slightly bent knees compensate for any differences in height, connecting the dancers at the level of the pelvis and contributing to the smoothness of their travels. The connection of their torsos and the gentle tension that they maintain in their left arms, which are held out to the side like a conventional ballroom embrace, allows the leading dancer to guide the following dancer through simple turns and other variations of their scalloping trajectory. Whereas the two-step encourages a pair to display competence and sophistication of the form through the execution of highly codified turns, The Shadow encourages variations in the placement of the hands upon the body, the use of musical breaks to momentarily depart from the repeating step sequence, and the precise location and amount of body contact shared between partners.

**Comparing Shadows**

The leading dancer of the first couple seems completely overcome by the passion of this dance—his eyes are almost shut, face squinting against the excess of desire that washes over him with each new phrase of the music. Ahead of him, the follow seems overcome also—lost within this excessive pleasure, the front of his torso splays open to the space the leader pushes him
through. The lead’s hands move to caress his partner’s stomach, chest, and the nape of his neck. They lean into each other, relinquishing the pressure of bodies only to continue the rocking trajectory of their steps that have become increasingly lyrical, uneven, swept up in the passion of this choreography. They struggle amidst the desire that their pairing conjures, to execute the choreography that is, perhaps, the only occasion for their partnership.⁶

Sharing the floor with them is a second pair who perform this passion, but in the quotation marks of camp as evidenced by their wide smiles and upturned heads that quote the shape of ecstasy but enact its energy with a bit too much verve to be taken seriously. They stop their scalloping steps to accent beats in the music and, in a move planned well in advance of this particular song, the leading dancer positions the following dancer face to face with one of the architectural posts that circumscribes the dance floor. On a break-beat in the music, the following dancer takes hold of the post and, during the ensuing vocal or instrumental embellishment, the two dancers writhe in serpentine patterns down to the ground before reversing this move to stand again (their pelvises, of course, remain connected). Throughout all of this their faces perform stock masks of ecstasy to the delight, or at least modest amusement, of the viewers off of the floor.

And lest this composite be incomplete, there is also couple number three. Provided that there is room on the floor, they take up a bit more space with their dancing—the stride in a long gliding cadence. Rather than performing campy humor or exuberant passion, their faces remain composed. They concentrate instead on maintaining the connection between them as a mode of communication. Their dancing resists embellishing the base choreography save for a couple of turns throughout the course of the song and subtle pivots and shifts of weight that challenge each other to maintain the gliding motion of their scalloping trajectory. Rather than appearing bored
or matter of fact, these dancers appear in the midst of an accomplishment that is, at its best, about nothing more than the physical accomplishment of achieving the competence that they now perform, a successful navigation between a dancer’s individual skills, the skills of his partner, and the choreography that begot the competence they currently display.

**An Imperfect Copy**

In *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (1993), Michael Taussig writes about mimesis simultaneously as a faculty and a history. While the ability to mimic may be natural, Taussig describes mimesis as a socially deployed mechanism through which to know the Other. He writes of mimesis, in a phrase he repeats frequently throughout the book, as "the nature that culture uses to create second nature." His project tacks dialectically between natural/essential and social/constructed difference. It is a self-consciously mischievous move that relishes in the "place between the real and the really made-up." He critiques the academy's complacent reliance upon constructivism for the passivity with which it allows for discrepancies between the theoretical and the practical, or what Taussig describes as "the true real." He writes, "With good reason postmodernism has relentlessly instructed us that reality is artifice yet, so it seems to me, not enough surprise has been expressed as to how we nevertheless get on with living, pretending—thanks to the mimetic faculty—that we live facts, not fictions." For Taussig, the lives that we actually lead belie theoretical constructions if these constructions are not brought to bear upon historical and social knowledge.

Taussig theorizes mimesis as a two-fold process of sentience and copying, drawing upon the once influential theory of sympathetic magic by James George Frazer (the theory that an imitation of the original will have power over that original and that two objects, once in contact with each other, will continue to influence each other), as a process whereby the copy can
assume the power and likeness of the original. Key to his conception of the power of the copy over that which is copied is the notion (via Walter Benjamin) of a multi-sensory experience of perception wherein the image of a thing is not perceived visually but through an activation of the senses into action that incorporates tactility and, in relationship to desire, a leaving of the self. To represent something through mimesis is to have perceived the thing that is represented. And to know something is not to know it through the light waves that stimulate the retina and produce the image of the represented in the brain via neuron transfer, but rather to perceive the thing in the place where it is. To perceive the Other, in other words, is to sensuously leave the self. This leaving of the self in relationship to the object of desire, this sentience, creates a "visceral bond connecting perceiver to perceived in the operation of mimesis."  

For Taussig, mimesis functions in opposition to incorporation, wherein the self creates a bank of appropriated images, senses, and perceptions. Sentience is, then, a splitting of the self, a simultaneous coexistence of selfness and otherness and in relationship to this splitting; the copy remains as an unfixed and slippery perceptual flash to that which is copied. He writes about this ambiguous function as mundane and magical at the same time, dancing between the sameness of the perceiver and the difference of the perceived.

Pulling you this way and that, mimesis plays this trick of dancing between the very same and the very different. An impossible but necessary, indeed an everyday affair, mimesis registers both sameness and difference, of being like, and of being Other. Creating stability from this instability is no small task, yet all identity formation is engaged in this habitually bracing activity in which the issue is not so much staying the same, but maintaining sameness through alterity.

Taussig thus posits the process of mimesis, this nature that culture uses to create second nature, as a way of constituting the self through exposure with difference. Further he continuously reminds the reader that mimesis is not only a natural function but also a deployment of aesthetic and political values, that mimesis is used specifically to enact culturally held beliefs.
But what about the *imperfect* copy? What about the strategic failure of the mimetic faculty? In the case of The Shadow, when the following dancer turns around to connect his/her posterior to the leading partner and faces forward toward the direction of travel, the dancers articulate a point of contact with the cowboy (albeit a contact in the form of Western films or other gay/lesbian dancing cowboys at Oil Can Harry's or elsewhere). Simultaneously, they fail to precisely reproduce the cowboy's two-step. Here Taussig reminds us, "Mimesis represents and falsifies simultaneously. This is its ambiguous power—its mischief." An imprecise production mischievously reproduces the power of the original that it represents. Here Taussig recognizes the power of the ideogram—a representation without precise likeness—to evoke the copied without recourse to imagistic similarity. The copy of the two-step represented in The Shadow thus has the potential to remake the two-step in effigy. A poorly modeled representation of the cowboy two-step original complicates metonymic chains of meaning that run predominately through conservative political agendas and adds a different kind of political referent, rendering The Shadow as a calibrated choreography with progressive political effect.

Taussig’s theory of the changeability of the mimetic faculty reminds me of the relationship between a cowboy and his shadow. (Any reader wishing a more standard theoretical application of Taussig can skip the elliptical rumination on light and shadows in this paragraph.) Walking to Oil Can Harry’s behind a tall man wearing a large cowboy hat from a parking spot a block away on Ventura Boulevard, I count hundreds of streetlights casting faint shadows of his image. The cross-section of each of these shadows shows the cowboy’s likeness on the ground. These shadow cowboys accompany the cowboy on every step of his walk to the bar. The Shadow cowboys change in shape and size, vary in intensity as the cowboy moves toward and away the various light sources, and capriciously shift in response to panning car headlights.
pulling out of a driveway. Myriad imperfect, shadow copies dance with the cowboy, circling him and creating distorted copies of his image on the pavement as he walks. Watching my own shadows, now cast by the same sources of light as illuminate the cowboy ahead of me, I wonder, do I really look that tall, that small, how does my image shift in relationship to a moving headlight, even as my own cadence remains steady? And how is it that I see the shadow as a thing separate from me over there, when in fact it is my body that blocks that surface from the light? In imagining my self projected over there on the pavement, I leave myself to know an image of my self that shifts, dances, moves, and changes from what I know myself to be.

As I have written in chapter one, in the gay copying of the country-western two-step, the same gendered pairing of the dancers exposes hegemonic assumptions, not only of male to female partnering, but also of a division of labor wherein men lead the dance and women invariably follow. While the imperfection of the copy in the country-western two-step at Oil Can Harry’s exposes the assumptions of the country-western dance tradition with regard to gender, The Shadow interrogates this same tradition with regard to sexuality. The Shadow keeps the same step sequence as the two-step, maintains its reliance on quarter turns and a forward, circular promenade, the “following” dancer remains in front of the leading dancer, but rather than being pushed by the shoulder girdle and moving backwards through space, the follow turns around. The follow is pushed by the lead, not by the shoulder but by the hips. Turning the following partner to the front and quoting a sexualized position of anal sex (that is commonly construed as exclusively gay and male), The Shadow’s choreography explicitly interrogates the sexuality of the authoritative, heterosexual two-step and exposes the sexuality that was already present, if invisible, in the two-step’s congenial embrace. Further, the leader and follow of The Shadow roughly produce the dancer they dance with, using the sense of touch, rather than sight.
to replicate the actions of the other. Here, The Shadow cannot exceed the bounds of two-step or fully depart from its image any more than the cowboy’s image in the parking lot could appear to be a horse. The Shadow can only imprecisely copy the two-step from which it comes, it cannot leave the form from which it was created.

**Passionate Attachments**

Susan Foster’s essay “Choreographing Gender” (1998) resituates Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity as an act of choreography. She examines the use of the term performance to develop Teresa de Lauretis’s concept of a historically and politically constituted essentialism that maintains an essential gendered difference constructed by historical, as opposed to biological, realities. Foster tells us that feminist scholarship’s failure to develop de Lauretis’s theory stems from an unexamined use of the term “performance” in Butler’s theory and that this, in turn, is responsible for performativity’s inability to theorize gender in a synergistic relationship to race and sexuality. Foster intervenes in the increasingly textocentric application of Butler’s theory (as evident in Butler’s reliance upon performative utterance) while situating the still-emerging discipline of dance studies in relation to performance studies, feminist theory, and critical theory more generally.

Foster theorizes choreography as a “structuring of deep and enduring cultural values that replicates similar sets of values elaborated in other cultural practices, whereas performance emphasizes the idiosyncratic interpretation of those values.” She further claims that choreography can be used to understand both bodily and verbal modes of articulation through dance scholarship’s examination of dance as a kinesthetic sign system. While equating bodily action to signs may seem textocentric, Foster declares such a move as necessary to oppose a
history of scholarship that has used the dancing body only in the most broad and ultimately reductive metaphors. In focusing the conversation about the historical construction of gender in a synergistic relationship to race and sexuality and onto the slowly evolving, historically and culturally contingent construction of choreography (as opposed to the idiosyncratic nature of performance that often values the exception to hegemonic constraints rather than the constrictive discursive rules) Foster foregrounds the historical constitution of bodily difference. Foster tells us,

Neither in performance nor in choreography is the body free to change its shape and location, although, as I have argued here, the performing body, especially as that extension of the textual body that simply moves the text into action, might well appear as unlimited. In fact, performance places important and obvious strictures on the body's whereabouts since a body can perform only in a given time and place. Yet it is the choreography this body performs that articulates its connectedness to a specific surround.16

Foster's conception of choreography as articulate of the body's negotiation with socially constituted space resonates with the discussion of The Shadow I offer here. Further, consideration of The Shadow as a corporeal marking of the intersection between gayness and cowboyness offers continued development upon Taussig's theory of the imperfect copy. The Shadow is not a mere repetition of an existing act, a faithful copy harboring idiosyncratic differences. Rather I argue it is a politically savvy choreographic innovation upon the two-step original.

I read The Shadow as a choreography of sexuality that articulates the location of its performers within the metonymic chain of associations linked to cowboyness and adding new resonance to this linkage simultaneously. In the choreographic repositioning of the following dancer, The Shadow vivifies its difference from the two-step original and thus additively connotes gayness to cowboyness. Rather than displaying fidelity to the original two-step from
which The Shadow is derived, the choreography of The Shadow exercises power over the heterosexual two-step by exposing the assumption of face to face contact—exposing the enclosed embrace as derived from a missionary position as clearly as The Shadow can be read as derived from a position of anal sex. To be clear, I am not saying that the two-step, or any other partner dance was historically created out of some conscious celebration of the missionary sexual position, rather, I am proposing that the choreography of The Shadow dance rewrites the history of the closed partner dance embrace as if it were so. Thus The Shadow’s imperfect copy takes power over the original just as The Shadow’s choreography (the representation) takes on aspects of the represented in the process.

I do not believe that the men and women at Oil Can Harry’s come to the bar to fastidiously learn country-western dances only out of a desire to mock the heterosexual construction that choreographs so many elements of the form. Rather, the masculine heterosexuality of cowboyness that the dancers value through the wearing of the boots is the very same imagistic discourse that The Shadow dance interrogates. It is not that the desire that produces the wearing of the boots and the desire that produces the choreography of The Shadow dance are oppositional. Rather, I believe these desires dance in a passionate duet, each inescapably connected to its partner. They are aligned in a desire to queer the cowboy, to expose the chain of signification that not only forms the dancers of Oil Can Harry’s into cowboys within their identities of leisure but also provides an identity which they can, in turn, perform and re-choreograph—queerly. Whereas the two-step queers heteronormative assumptions within the choreography through the same-gendered pairing of the dancers, The Shadow queerly re-composes foundational elements of the dance.
Connecting the metonymic chains of signification from the cowboy boot to the mimetic interrogative power of The Shadow’s choreography explicates the gay country-western dancer’s body as historically constructed by the punitive regulation surrounding his/her sexuality. The Shadow’s choreography then, can simultaneously be read as enacting a male homosexual pleasure while interrogating the presumptively straight choreography of the two-step. Rather than an idiosyncratic performance of desire that exists in a space and time apart from political and economic forces, this choreography can be linked to a historical moment in which a predominately white and male urban gay enclave produces and reproduces a choreography that testifies to deeply held elements of their cultural reality.

The Frontier of the Gay Niche Market

I offer that The Shadow shows the potential of re-inscribing sexual identity onto a community of dancing bodies that, in the postmodern condition of late capitalism, has become increasingly invisible in favor of a “gay vague” consumerist ideology. With the growth of gays as a niche market in the mid 90s—roughly the same period of time during which The Shadow dance emerged as a teachable choreography at Oil Can Harry’s—a simultaneous loss of queer identification had occurred according to many gay activists on the left, queer studies scholars, and journalists alike. Here I will discuss the systematic targeting of queer subjects as a resource for capitalist gains, followed by a close reading of the 2003 television series, Boy Meets Boy. Finally, I will offer a reconsideration of The Shadow as a choreographic response to such negating discursive trends.

Queer subjects found themselves recognized, albeit obliquely, by market forces in the mid to late nineties. Journalist C.J. Prince, writing for the glossy gay and lesbian newsmagazine
*The Advocate*, outlines the ways in which “gay vague” advertising had become an increasingly popular strategy by marketers “to strike a chord with gay men and lesbians but sail straight over the heads of oblivious heterosexual consumers—or in the best case, appeal to them as well.” The article provides evidence of one utopian ad campaign wherein a furniture company “can snag two of its main targets—straight women and gay men—with the same handsome face featured in its furniture ads.” The article squarely places such cross-niche mass marketing as emerging in the era after the cancellation of the “too gay” television show *Ellen* and the premier of the hit television show *Will and Grace* (commonly derided by the gay left for its antiseptic treatment of its lead gay character) the following season. Again, when Prince writes this article in 2002, he quotes a variety of niche marketing experts who have noted that this expansion of advertising began “over the last five years in particular,” placing its emergence alongside that of The Shadow.18

Market capitalism’s sustained influence on lesbian and gay community formation extends well beyond the nineties. British Queer and Cultural Studies Scholar Alan Sinfield in *Gay and After: Gender, Culture and Consumption* (1998) traces the historical constitution of gay and lesbian identity in relationship to capitalist impulses from the postwar era at midcentury. Noting the simultaneous emergence of capitalist dominance and gay community formation after World War II, he asks, "If capitalism…facilitated gayness as we know it, why has it been having so much difficulty accommodating us?"19 He finds the answer in LGBT studies scholar John D'Emilio's theory that as the predominance of market capitalism made independent life away from the family unit possible for queers; simultaneously, queers were blamed for the social instability of the disintegrating family unit. Sinfield continues on to trace the increasingly unstable relationship between subcultural queer identifications with mainstream ideological
parameters. In response to the contiguous prohibition of gay and lesbian civil rights and the celebration of the queer image in marketing campaigns, Sinfield writes,

The asymmetry is striking: in a period of new stigmatization consequent upon HIV and AIDS, with minimal civil rights precariously balanced in the popular vote, the market has leapfrogged the earnest work of activists and conferred upon us the legitimation of glossy representation in national media.20

Surveying literature from the early to mid-1990s, Sinfield notes recent global monetary forces in relationship to this dubious legitimization, the ways in which attempts to obvert capitalism had failed in the instances of the Soviet Bloc and a social-democratic New Zealand despite an overall world economic downturn. He quotes Bill Short in his comment, "according to one marketing magazine at least, we gays are the last untapped market of capitalism. And when most markets are failing, this is news indeed."21 He also notes that gays (and to a lesser extent lesbians, due to the "economic disadvantages of all women in paid employment") are likely to have a disposable income conjoined with a subcultural value that does not worry about hedonism as a moral shortcoming.22

Yet the power of gay vague marketing (or the power of the "pink pound" in Sinfield's writing) frequently operates in a manner that stimulates straight consumerism. Sinfield notes that advertising placed by large companies within the queer press, for example, are not only selling to a gay market but also raising a kind of cool metropolitan sophistication to their products and corporate image—a cachet that generates revenue from non-gay sources as well. He notes how certain successful gay-targeted media campaigns have produced sales spikes far greater than could be produced by gay a niche market alone. Further, Sinfield cites Danae Clark's assertion that images of queers in mainstream media often have an effect of "ining" the queer subject via the construct of "window advertising" whereby we as viewers are invited from the outside of the frame into the window of the gay subject and product, "into the ad to identify

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with elements of style...in as consumers...to be part of the fashionable 'in crowd', but [negating] an identity politics based on the act of 'coming out.' Gay and lesbian subjects are thus, Sinfield reminds us, constituted around the product rather than by a community of queer peers, in a queer environment, or in a non-heteronormative frame. This in turn sends the signal to straight consumers that heterosexuality is legitimated by the queer consumption of the product, that homoeroticism (if indeed eroticism is at all addressed in favor of the sanitized images predominant in gay-targeted marketing) is an accessory to acquiring the status of metropolitan sophistication.

In addition to "window advertising," Sinfield categorizes a number of other strategies for reaching the desirable gay niche market. Each has a positive and negating effect for gay and lesbian subjects. "Exploitive imaging" offers queer visibility yet commodifies the Otherness of queer life. In the most infamous of exploitive imaging advertisements, the picture of the man dying of AIDS in the 1990s Bennetton ad, Sinfield tells us, "Even our deaths may be marketed." "Positive imaging," less frequently published outside of gay and lesbian press, goes so far as to depict queer intimacy, providing context to the queer subject beyond the consumption of the product, yet frequently sanitizes the queer subject in the service of mainstream palatability. "Assimilative marketing" runs ostensibly mainstream advertisements in the queer and straight presses. Assimilative marketing may feature the image of advertised product sans consumer, eliminating sexual and gender difference and thus allowing the context of the press and the identification of the viewer, to fill in the void of the absent consumer. The assimilative strategy invites the viewer to fit him or herself into the image of the product and omits the target niche altogether, it is rather intended that an inferred identification on the part of the potential consumer will occur. While this provides a dialectical relationship between the subcultural
ghettoization of the gay press and mainstream capitalist marketing, Sinfield points out that the promise of the dialectical two-way street appears to be moving traffic in only one direction; the gay rags are increasingly assimilating while the political tone of straight media stagnates.\textsuperscript{25}

Sinfield finds more hope in what he defines as "subcultural marketing." Subcultural ads, most frequently found in the gay press, may sell products exclusively consumed by the lesbian/gay consumer, but for Sinfield are most effective when they pitch commodities that gays and straight both desire but in a manner that appeals to insider knowledge. The fact that they "appeal to us in our own terms" is a defining component of the strategy, one that provides a decidedly more healthful dialectic between the ghetto and the mainstream.

Despite the progressive tendencies of subcultural marketing, Sinfield cautions the reader regarding the limits of gay subcultural consumerism. He references studies from the mid-1990s which suggest gay men, the presumed benchmark for disposable income, earn less than their heterosexual counterparts and that this discrepancy is magnified when educational procurement is taken into account. Further, he notes that for the many gay men living in poverty (or in the "chronic insecurity" of paycheck to paycheck subsistence), they are "doubly excluded: both from heteronormalcy and from prestigious subcultural motifs."\textsuperscript{26} Additionally, Sinfield notes the demeaning triviality socially associated with consumerism. He points out that no one cares so much as to how gay disposable income is produced, only that it is available for the purchase of upscale products and services. Sinfield points out that because consumption "is the main ground that has been conceded to us, we are particularly vulnerable to the pressures of fashion and the media. Commodification is not just one of the pressures upon gay men; it aspires to create our world."\textsuperscript{27} Sinfield references the movement from the roots of gay subcultural activism (specifically in the form of the New York Gay Liberation Front) and how it sought the abolition
of social oppression in the interest of sexual freedom, to the current subcultural consumerism that risks absorption by the market.

At its worst, gay subcultural consumerism seems to say, 'Cut hair, teach children, arrange flowers, work as a machinist, tend bar, hell, prostitute yourself if you must. It doesn't matter. Just know that your identity is constituted by and predicated upon your consumption. The promise of your liberation is for hire.' Whereas early gay rights activists attempted to create social change for gays and lesbians through the labor of activism and citizenship (a common strain found in both radical and assimilative gay rights movements), gay subcultural consumerism offers the underwhelming and fickle promise of market legitimization as a stylish accessory for purchase.

The emergence of queers as the last American minority-marketing niche and the emergence of The Shadow as a teachable choreography at Oil Can Harry’s do not coincidentally converge. Instead, I read The Shadow as a calibrated response to an increasingly invisible marker of sexual identity within the market-driven cultural visibility of queer culture. As cultures are continually co-opted in order to provide an ever expanding market of consumers—necessary in the age of late capitalism to sustain the illusory possibility of equal opportunity to upward mobility—The Shadow’s choreography resists the systematic and market driven erasure of sexual identity from the culture of queerness and the negating effects of postmodernity even as the very population that performs this choreography (decidedly middle and upper-middle class) overwhelmingly benefits from market driven capitalism. From this context, I read the choreography of The Shadow as a response to U.S. expansionism, not of overseas territories or in regard to the history of Manifest Destiny (which is not to say that such readings could not be
articulated), but in response to a U.S. expansion of market share with negating effects for queer subjects.

**Watching Boys Connect**

As perhaps the next logical development of the bizarre asymmetry that Sinfield describes, The Shadow debuted on cable television in the reality series *Boy Meets Boy*, which was broadcast by the Bravo network in the summer of 2003. In this six episode television series modeled after major network reality dating shows such as *The Bachelor*, James, a 32-year old, well-educated, professionally successful, athletic gay bachelor, spends eight days with fifteen men (referred to as "mates") who are all hoping to be chosen as the object of his affection. As the "leading man" James is allowed to bring his "best straight girlfriend" Andra who is frequently present on the set to help him in his decision-making process. The leading man and his chosen mate are promised, in addition to the possibility of a romantic connection that James continually expresses a desire for, an expense paid trip to New Zealand, the perfect prize for a new couple to cement their new relationship.

Set in Palm Springs, James gets to know his suitors through a tightly scheduled series of group and one-on-one activities that include a luau replete with hula dancers, a rock climbing expedition, a shopping excursion, a karaoke night hosted by a drag queen, a visit to the zoo, a spontaneous lap dance competition, spa dates, a hot air balloon adventure, a ride in a horse-drawn carriage, several candlelit dinners, a poolside barbeque, a conversation on horseback, and possibly more cocktail hours than there were contestants. In keeping with *The Bachelor* formula (and with the formula of most competitive reality television shows) a number of contestants are eliminated at the end of each episode thereby pressuring each contestant to attempt to
demonstrate during the social activities that he is the most suitable mate for James. Further, the group social events (such as the luau) were often auditions of sorts for the mates to gain access to a one-on-one activity in the form of a private nightcap, the opportunity to make James breakfast in bed, or a romantic limousine ride at the end of the evening.

During episode two of the series, James and the remaining mates (three of the hopefuls were eliminated at the end of the first episode) are driven out to a miniature western town dressed in jeans and cowboy hats. In keeping with a common device of the show, no one knows what will happen next, and this mixture of anticipation and anxiety—as supported by heightened music, nervous dialogue, and strategically rapid editing—becomes a trope throughout the series. Waiting for James and the mates is Jorge, an attractive and fit Latino dressed in a cowboy hat and boots, western shirt and new looking, chemically-worn (decidedly more fashion conscious than rugged) jeans. I recognize Jorge from Oil Can Harry's, he was a regular throughout my research there, and so I have a bit of an idea as to what the gay bachelors may be in for. Indeed, the group activity for the day is country-western dance lessons. Jorge begins by teaching a simple line dance called "The Freeze." Simultaneously dubbed in with visuals of Jorge teaching the contestants and the live band that accompanies them, one of the mates describes Jorge as "very expressive with his hips." In another cut-away interview, a shirtless James (apparently being interviewed while halfway out of the Jacuzzi) tells us, "It wasn't just line dancing. It was like this sexual-country-infusion kind of dance." Indeed the flirtation with the presumed heterosexuality of the cowboy image is overt. Earlier when Jorge greets the cast he asks where the women are. When one of the mates replies that there are no women, he replies, "That will make it very interesting."
They proceed to learn the two-step, which the majority of contestants (and James) execute quite clumsily before Jorge suggests that if they want to get a bit more intimate, they could try The Shadow. He says that he needs someone shorter for the demonstration, at which point the muscular, attractive, and blonde contestant Dan volunteers. At this point Jorge places Dan in front of him to demonstrate the placement of the hips and the mobility of the hand position, rubbing his hands up and down the front of Dan's body and partially lifting up his shirt in the process. From the previous episode, we know that Dan has told James that he has "an attachment" to a partner living in another city. The sexual intimacy of The Shadow is not lost on James and from the same cut-away hot tub interview we hear James saying, "At this point I was beginning to dislike Dan." He goes on to describe how Dan's infidelity to his long-distance partner is offensive to James, thus placing Dan at risk of elimination. (In fact James and Andra struggle to pin down the exact nature of Dan's romantic availability for some time, providing a dramatic sub-plot to the series for parts of two episodes.) The convention of the cut-away interview allows the viewer to be privy to James' opinion, while Dan remains unaware. He playfully does his best to accommodate Jorge's fondlings and instructions at the same time—all the while the other contestants catcall and smile at the overt sexuality of the demonstration.

We then see the whole group trying to make it through another two-step. Their execution remains awkward. We see them putting a lot of energy in the hips, their gaze frequently lands down at their boots, and their feet stumble through the sequence. They have not achieved the glide discussed in chapter one. Throughout this montage the camera periodically cuts away to James' hot tub interview where he evaluates a number of the mates and their ability to invest in the activity. This is part of how James evaluates the possibility of establishing a connection with a given contestant.
The desire to connect coheres these activities. James and many of the contestants identify connection as a primary objective for participating in the show. During several of the episodes, the cast speaks of "connection" over twenty times in the confessional-style interviews that pepper the show. Alternately, they categorize connection as finding chemistry, finding the spark, seeing if something is there, and following from, speaking from, touching on, or pulling at—the heart. James searches for a kinetic articulation of emotional connection in the two-step he shares with some of the mates on the show.

Next, James is asked to "lasso" a mate for one more dance and a private "cowboy style" nightcap. We immediately see a number of cutaway interviews with various mates proclaiming how much they all want/wanted a chance to have that connection, that chance to express their feelings, to get to know him, to know where they stand with James. (In the style of most reality show editors splice the footage of the events with confessional-style interviews where participants discuss the events in follow-up interviews, making for a bewildering shift of verb tense between past and present, often in relationship to the anticipation of events that may happen in the future.) James, after much deliberation and saying to all of them what a tough decision this is, picks Franklin. Their last dance together, surrounded by eleven watching mates, is The Shadow.

Approaching the intimate embrace, they both laugh. They negotiate that James will lead despite his disclaimer that he's really not any good at this. This division of labor comes as no surprise. In keeping with the role of "leading man," James has led all of his partners. A close-up shows James' hand over Franklin's which are located on his ribs. Then the camera cuts to their faces as they are ready to begin their first forward step. Perhaps in response to a miscue or an inaudible catcall from out of frame, they both begin to laugh embarrassedly. Then we see a close
up on their boots shifting timidly, slow, slow, quick, quick. The camera pans to reveal their serious faces, concentrating to accomplish their newly learned choreography. Then one of them laughs again as the short but elusive step sequence is lost. Periodically, short close-ups on the other mates' faces show looks of pensiveness, tension, or amusement. We see shots of Jorge coaching them through a writhing break from the forward momentum as they swivel their hips from side to side while bending their knees to the ground in sync. In another hot tub interview shot of James, he describes how nervous Franklin was but that he was impressed at how focused he was on executing the movement correctly. After the song ends, they go to talk. Franklin declares (again in a cut-away) that he thinks they had great chemistry. But did they find a connection?

Hold the Twist

The contestants desire to connect must yield to the show’s contradictory imperative for contestant elimination. The logic of the series requires James to implement a round of cuts at the end of each episode. In the interest of creating dramatic tension, producers, writers, and directors collude to challenge James with certain obstacles at each round of cuts. In the first episode, for example, James must eliminate three mates after only engaging with them for a few hours. In the second episode, the mates are placed into three groups of four and he must eliminate one contestant from each group. Another episode gives his friend Andra the power of veto over his choices. These twists continue to add up resulting in anxiety-fraught deliberations for James and Andra. One twist in particular is a key selling point to the entire series.

As I mentioned earlier, in addition to the television debut of The Shadow, Boy Meets Boy is significant to this essay as an example of the next logical development in asymmetrical
legitimation of gays in the mainstream media. For in addition to James and some of the contestant's looking for the elusive connection that is relentlessly talked about in the series, there are some of the mates who are looking for something much more material—$25,000. For as the host Dani Behr tells us in the opening seconds of the first episode (and as she points out at every possible opportunity), there is one BIG twist to the show. Some of the mates are not what they seem. Some of them, seven of the original fifteen to be exact, are straight men pretending to be gay and competing to win a cash prize. James, Andra, and the gay mates are not told about this twist before hand, only the viewers, producers, and the competing straight men know. Whereas the straight men are there for the chance to win $25,000, James and the gay mates are there for the considerably more modest prize of an expense paid trip to New Zealand and the promise of a romantic connection. All of this is sold to the audience as a progressive social experiment. Behr describes the subversive nature of this project in the series opening. She asks us, “In a world where gay is the norm and straight men must stay in the closet, will boundaries be crossed? Will stereotypes be shattered? Will romance prevail? Find out when two worlds collide as we bridge the gap between gay and straight. Welcome to Boy Meets Boy.”

Exit interviews by the straight men as they are eliminated from consideration reinforce claims to boundary-crossing and stereotype-shattering values held by the producers of the series as well as the contestants. (Each episode ends with the elimination of several contestants and the viewers learning whether each eliminated mate is gay or straight.) In virtually every exit interview, the straight men reveal how their incentive for doing the show was to show people that the sexual categorizations of gay and straight are irrelevant to making a connection with a person, that they are gay allies with the intent of dismantling stereotypes. Sean proclaims, "I'm so happy to have been a part of a show that bridges the gay and straight world." Dan declares,
"At the end of the day we're just people." Brian insists that his motivation for participating "wasn't about the money. I was excited to show the world that it doesn't matter if you're straight or gay." And Jim informs the viewer that, "Your sexuality does not define you." Yet within seconds of these disavowals of difference, in these same one-on-one moments with the camera, the straight mates invariably discuss how difficult the experience was for them and how they learned just how hard it must be to experience the repression of the closet. They had to do it for a few days and it was really frustrating! Can you imagine years of that kind of dishonesty?

Where the straight contestants do differ in their exit interviews is when they discuss the degree of difficulty that some of them had when forced to act gay. Brian A. declares, "It was fun. It was at times frustrating. I knew I had a few slip-ups and I know that…cost me. You don't realize how, how difficult it can be." He notes how ironic it was to be on a reality show while acting like a gay man. He confesses, "Little idiosyncrasies that I can only hide for so long eventually came out." Curiously, gay and straight people are really no different, yet at the same time it was really difficult for some of the straight men to pretend to be gay. For most of the imposters, the emotional toll of lying and dishonesty became a burden even if "acting gay" was not. The show’s contestants consistently contradict themselves through articulating a double message that can be reduced to this: Sexuality does and does not inform their sense of self.

The straight cast members assure the audience with each exit interview that they support the ethos of the show. They are all here to support gay equality. Each of them has a gay relative, friend, and/or roommate. Yet the bonus features disc of the boxed set DVD edition renders this exposure as just another leg up in the competition to win the cash prize. Both Dan and Franklin (featured performers in The Shadow dance from episode two) prepared for the show by hanging out with gay friends, going to gay gyms, creating a false history of coming out of the closet, etc.
This process, reminiscent of method acting (indeed Dan works as an actor full time according to his biography provided by Bravo), reads as a calculated strategy in the interest of winning the cash as opposed to truly engaging in a groundbreaking social experiment.

Also on the bonus features disc, the audience is allowed to view Andra's thirty-nine minute emotional breakdown in response to learning about the twist (an excerpted version of this scene aired in episode 5). Whereas James' on-camera reaction to the twist was contained, Andra breaks into tears in front of the camera. James, who was told first by the host and must break the news to Andra, tells Andra that he already shed tears over the news. We hear about his anger only in the past tense of cut-away interviews. Upon hearing the news that there is one straight man in the final three contestants, she sits back and shakes her head in disbelief. Then, when she hears that the straight "winner" could potentially take home a large cash prize, she stands up, covers her face with her hands and says, "That's bullshit, James." She walks into her bedroom where the cameras and James follow to find her sitting on the bed sobbing. James attempts to console her, but she is both sad and angry for her friend and bitingly indicts the show's premise, asking bitterly, "So now it's about money? That's fucking great." When James tells her that there are two rules associated with the twist, that they cannot directly ask any contestant to reveal his sexual identity and that they can't reveal the twist to any of the contestants (in a frightening parallel to the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy), she says,

    So now I'm an actress. Is someone going to pay me to be an actress now? Is that the point? God, they've played us so well…. Can we have our own fucking twist? Ok, you know what, we're a straight couple, how about that, we don't fucking care. … What great television, what great fucking television. Do you think they can film silence for half an hour because I'm very upset."

James tells her that he already did his crying and screaming, a scene we are not privy to in the edited network episodes or on the bonus reels. He alludes to an extended conversation with the
show's producers during which they assured him that extended background checks were conducted on the straight contestants to make sure they were with the cause of the show. Regardless, the scene shows both of them in tears, they agree in whispered tones (perhaps trying to escape from the sonic reach of the camera's microphone) that they never would have done the show if they had known it was going to be like this.

Andra’s on-camera breakdown resonates with me more deeply that any other aspect of the show. From my assessment of watching the show numerous times, she solely possesses the capacity to develop the affective connection the contestants describe so fervently. Andra's disbelief at the cruelty of this twist that makes "great fucking television" mirrors my own incredulity at the shows premise. It is in her scene, which is only partially excerpted into a few minutes on the aired broadcast, that I finally find a resonance to my own experience of watching the entire series. The show opens old wounds, teases me about my high school crushes from the closet all over again, and reinvigorates traumatic experiences of growing up gay in a heteronormative world. Witnessing the earnestness with which James speaks of the desire to find love in a society that too frequently prohibits his civic rights while being constantly reminded of the show's big twist reminds me of all the horrible passing anxiety that the closet entails, reminds me of the fear I have felt around toxically hegemonic, patrolling masculinities, reminds me again of how difficult it can be just to show affection between same-sex partners. Watching the show reminds me that "gaydar" (the ability to spot another queer) exists not only as a technique in the interest of cruising and queer socializing, it functions also as a survival strategy against hegemonic enforcement and even violence. Queers use gaydar to discern potential allies from potential assailants. Boy Meets Boy depicts a worst-case adolescent nightmare, replaying the trauma of the closet—with a twist.
The potential catharsis a similarly minded viewer might garner from Andra's reaction pairs asymmetrically with James’ on-camera comportment. He looks like he is in shock. We are not privy to the breakdown he alludes to in his conversation with Andra, even though the camera captures the host, Behr, informing James of the twist. Seated on a couch in the house he shares with Andra, James remains almost completely still upon hearing the news. A slight tensing in his jaw suggests a clenching of teeth and his eyes slightly harden in their focus as he looks at Behr who gazes at him sympathetically. She seems to be prepped for an emotional meltdown, a meltdown he refuses to provide. Instead he smiles for a moment and then laughs in a tone that seems to say, "I should have seen it coming." In a way, this reaction is, though less dramatically gratifying, more true to the experience of gays and lesbians who have been cruelly tricked in the past. I read it as an outcome of the closet's conditioning, a conditioning that perpetually reminds us, "Don't show passion for the thing that is most important. Your best defense is to show indifference for the object of desire." James reveals at the beginning of episode six, "If I were to pick the straight guy, I think my world would just come crashing down." Indeed, if Andra reacts with an emotional outburst, James simply implodes.

Of course, James' world does not come crashing down. James picks Wes, a very nice, very gay young man and amid tears and hugs they are waltzed off to their New Zealand vacation together. Further, James gets the $25,000 prize that the straight finalist, Franklin, would have gotten. There is a gesture toward redemption when James correctly identifies Franklin as the straight finalist and confronts him about his deception—he tells Franklin that his infiltration hurt. This redemption remains undeveloped, however, as Franklin reveals earnestly that his entire agenda for doing this show was to break down the stereotypes about homosexuality and that it became really difficult for him once he realized how personal everything was getting. Franklin
assures James, "I came here on your side. I'm not here to infiltrate. I'm not here to expose. I'm here to help." A close-up on James' face shows that familiar pairing of clenched jaw and hardened gaze from the scene where the twist is revealed, then the two shake hands, and Franklin exits.

In Andra's exit interview (on the bonus features disc) she somewhat more calmly discusses her anger with the premise of the series.

The bottom line is that it wasn't enough for it to be about gay men. And it's about America not being ready for that…. It's almost like, "let's see if the gay guy can tell the difference or let's see if the straight girl can tell the difference," when we don't even know that we're playing…. If one person is hooked into watching because they want to laugh at us and in the end they realize how similar we all are then that's the only thing that can come from this. And I hope my tears and James' tears, all of it, has some effect on somebody somewhere because otherwise [it was] worth nothing.

Her words bring up two important points that I would like to discuss briefly here: Who was it for, and what was it worth?

I return to my assertion that Boy Meets Boy expands and develops the logic of gay-targeted marketing that Sinfield describes in relationship to television and print advertisements in the nineties as part of his assessment of varying strategies to capture gay men's disposable income. The six-episode series can be interpreted as one large marketing tool used to promote both the products of advertisers and also to generate gay interest in the network (which also premiered the far more successful and long-running Queer Eye for the Straight Guy in the same season). As such, it pays to analyze the show in terms of the five strategies he identifies: subcultural marketing (appealing to queer viewers on their own terms), assimilative marketing (bringing gay culture into the mainstream market), window marketing (inviting straight
spectators into queer cultural production), positive imaging (showing queers in an undeniably
positive light), and exploitive imaging (selling products through depicting queer trauma).

Given its context as a major cable network series, *Boy Meets Boy* assimilates gay culture
into the mainstream market. Advertising revenue by sponsors such as Gateway Television, the
New York Times, Hertz Car Rental, and City of Las Vegas Tourism reflect assimilative
marketing in the majority of accompanying advertisements. Additionally, the choice of Dani
Behr, best known to U.S. audiences as a host for the news entertainment show *Extra*, reinforces
the show’s palatability to straight viewers. Positive imaging is rampant throughout the show,
most palpably in casting James as the leading man. James fulfills the role of leading man with
ease. He is handsome, smart, successful and sincere; he is immanently likable. Further, his
earnest desire for a monogamous relationship and the anxiety-fraught process through which he
deliberates upon eliminations show a depth and sincerity often lacking in mainstream depictions
of gays. His moral conservatism and good looks increases his appeal to a large cross-section of
viewers. And yes, just as Sinfield claims that the drawback of positive imaging strategies is the
way in which they sanitize gays, James is a squeaky-clean assimilationist who is fond of telling
the viewer, "we all want the same thing"—a monogamous relationship (anchored in an upper-
middle class income to be able to spice things up with numerous vacations to exotic locations, no
doubt). In this way, the assimilative and positive imaging strategies go hand in hand.

Andra best summarizes the exploitive aspects of the show when she recognizes that a gay
reality dating show was not enough without the big twist. To reach a wider audience, there had
to be a decidedly exploitive twist for the gay leading man and the gay contestants alike. Thus,
while one discursive strain of the series tells us that gays are gaining acceptance in the
mainstream, the flip side of the coin brings into relief the ways in which gays are exploited by
this arrangement. Further, these strategies conjoin to enact an insidious kind of ining resonant with the window advertising strategy discussed earlier. For just as the gay subject is represented solely in regard to the product in window advertising, the gay subjects here are represented solely within the context of the big twist, the show's most marketable commodity. If Sinfield's critique of this strategy is largely based on the fact that any sense of gayness (with regard to community or environment) is stripped from the representation of the gay subject, then the constant reminders of the big twist renders the appearance of community as a shrewd illusion. The audience knows and the gay men eventually find out that the appearance of community is—to reinterpret the tantalizing text spoken by Behr—not what it seems.

The subcultural appeal of Boy Meets Boy is evenly embedded within each episode. Certainly there are moments when the mates commingle at poolside or during karaoke in a manner so as to appeal to gay viewers in their own terms, but predominately this appeal comes in the form of the "gaydar" calibration the show asks the viewer to engage in. Every moment of every episode, the show invites scrutiny of each contestant’s physical and vocal comportment. Is the pliant wrist of the cute, blond competitor sufficiently effeminate to read as reliably gay, or is his fey gesture an overtly calculated attempt to blend? Is Sean's giggling striptease and subsequent lap dance erotically energized, or verging on a panicked hysteria? Who is gay? And how do you know? How accurate is your gaydar?

The reason I include Boy Meets Boy within this chapter stems from a conjoined function of exposing the asymmetrical legitimization of gay-targeted marketing in mainstream media and the inaugural broadcast of The Shadow; the ways in which The Shadow works within the series bears consideration here. Copies upon copies upon copies—nowhere else is the complexity of mimesis layered as thoroughly as when the contestants attempt to execute the dance. The
straight men mimic the gay contestants in order to pass as being gay. Since the gay contestants don’t know the straight men lie about their sexuality and all contestants are new to the dance, the gay men take cues from the straight men in their execution of The Shadow. Beyond this peer exchange, the choreography of The Shadow requires mimicry of one partner by the other in a constantly reinforcing feedback mechanism facilitated through the extensive bodily contact between the partners. All the contestants—gay and straight—mimic Jorge, who holds authority to instruct the mates in cowboy dancing in a constructed backdrop of an old western ghost town provided by the show’s producers, location scouts and art department. Jorge’s authority is predicated upon his dancing competence, which draws upon his own imperfect copying of his dance partners at Oil Can Harry’s. As I have discussed before, I read The Shadow at Oil Can Harry’s as an imperfect copy passionately attached to the two-step original it mimics. Copies upon copies upon copies—all mimicking imperfectly, yet all passionately tied to the heterosexual original. These copies are no more able to depart from the codes of the two-step than a cowboy’s shadow can change into the shape of a cactus or a horse or a grain of sand. A shadow cannot escape from the object that blocks its access to light. Here the choreography of The Shadow mimics in a precise imperfection—queering the sexual identity of the two-step’s choreography while retaining the overall values on glide, rhythmic cadence, and cowboyness. In all of this, the performance of The Shadow’s choreography quotes the position of anal sex and recasts the choreography of the two-step as a choreography of the missionary sexual position. Copies upon copies upon copies—The Shadow in episode two of Boy Meets Boy exposes, perhaps more clearly than any other social activity on the series, the bizarre faculty of mimesis and its strategic deployment.
Casting Shadows

Though my investment in reading The Shadow as a choreography that quotes anal sex resides largely in the context of the callous marketing of queer culture, I’m also invested in the dance as it depicts anal sex as a sex practice with specific cultural value to gay men. During the early days of the AIDS crisis, linkages emerged between AIDS, gay men and anal sex, rendering the three signs as synonymous with each other. These linkages, despite the emergence of vast reservoirs of evidence that disputed such reductive theories, stuck firmly and persistently. Resistances to such homophobic linkages, and against AIDS stigma generally, are well documented and warrant a short rehearsal here. In the volume AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism (1987), edited by Douglas Crimp, several related and relevant themes emerge—the social construction of AIDS, the ineffective response of the Reagan Administration to the crisis, and the internalized phobia around anal sex that emerged in gay male communities in the early years of the epidemic.

Biomedical communications scholar Paula A. Treichler in “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification” (1987) discusses AIDS as a linguistic construction. She writes, “The name AIDS in part constructs the disease and helps make it intelligible. We cannot therefore look ‘through’ language to determine what AIDS ‘really’ is.” She argues for recognition of the social significance of AIDS in tandem with, and with equal importance to, biological considerations. Thus the linkages of anal sex, gay men and AIDS are not tangential to what constitutes AIDS. Rather, via linguistic construction and metonymic chains of additive association, the social significance of AIDS is as follows: AIDS = anal sex = gay men. Sexual contact between men, and anal sex in particular became seen not only as a moral sin to the puritanical right, but also a public health issue that demanded government
interventions—proposed by the Reagan administration—such as mandatory testing and the criminalization of AIDS transmission.

Such moves were not lost on LGBT activists and scholars. Greg Bordowitz, writing about the activist protests of ACT UP in the essay, “Picture a Coalition” writes in regard to the Reagan administration’s emphasis of testing over immediate research for the cause of AIDS, “We are being tested. The Reagan Administration spends funds for costly, inefficient testing programs instead of for medical research, preventive education and health care. This misuse of our tax dollars and neglect of our real needs tests the limits of our tolerance. It tests the limits of our will to fight back.”

Similarly, cultural theorist Leo Bersani writes, “having the information necessary to lock up homosexuals in quarantine camps may be a higher priority in the family-oriented Reagan Administration than saving the heterosexual members of American families from AIDS.”

The “us versus them” rhetoric articulated by Bordowitz and Bersani echo sentiments from a growing number of queers at the time. The conservative silence and reluctance of the Reagan administration to intervene in the emerging AIDS crisis has been well documented, and stands as one of the most negative legacies of Reagan’s presidency.

Yet perhaps more detrimental than the negative tropes of gay male sexuality coming from administrative offices, health care service providers, and organized religion were the ways in which such negative messages became fearfully internalized in queer social spheres. In 1985, Michael Callen notes that the AIDS epidemic had led to more frequent descriptions of anal intercourse as the sole cause of the AIDS not only in the mainstream media but also by non-profit AIDS advocacy groups such as the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), founded by activist playwright Larry Kramer. He writes,

I am appalled by the sentiment that all one has to do to wipe out AIDS is eliminate anal intercourse….
But I fear that many in the gay community share the simplistic notion that anal sex per se is a death-defying act. What is going on here? Consider GMHC’s “trick card”…. Check out Point 3: “Try to avoid anal sex.”…. Aside from the sex negativity, the worst thing about this anti-anal-sex message is that it discourages the use of condoms: if condoms are protective, why “avoid anal sex”?....

The rectum is a sexual organ, and it deserves the respect that a penis gets and a vagina gets. Anal intercourse is a central sexual activity, and it should be supported, it should be celebrated.

…Simply put, those who enjoy getting fucked should not be made to feel stupid or irresponsible. Instead they should be provided with the information necessary to make what they enjoy safe(r)!

Callen’s assertion that anal sex stands as a basic human right worthy of defense in the same way that consensual heterosexual sex is constitutionally protected stands defiantly against predominant discourse in gay male culture at the time.

Both the reductively metonymic linkages between AIDS, gay men and anal sex and fearful avoidance of anal sex lingered residually through the nineties. The fear of anal sex persisted despite active marketing campaigns promoting condom use as a viable alternative to safe sex. And these linkages perpetuated themselves despite the growing number of women being affected. I argue that the specter of AIDS renders the sex-positive choreography of The Shadow as a choreographic response to these reductive and fearful linkages surrounding anal sex.

The choreography of The Shadow, as idiosyncratically performed by the dancers, enacts a desire beyond sexuality to the political and economic connotations with which they increasingly find their sexuality to be entwined. It is important to distinguish the sexuality-infused discourse that is produced during The Shadow from similar choreographies produced in other nocturnal queer spaces. Whereas the solo disco-dancing body can be viewed as offering itself to spectatorship as an inviting, sexualized object, The Shadow’s closed embrace resists such invitation. Already enclosed into the dynamic of a pair, the fixed unit of an embracing
couple does not offer itself to the circulation of sexual availability in the same way. I believe it is this sexuality without the promise of an attainable object/commodity that has, in part, excluded representations of The Shadow from marketing strategies in popular as well as subcultural advertisements. I also see this exclusion as being tied to the reality that, for all the metropolitan coolness that gay men might provide mainstream consumers, straight America remains much more interested in what queers do with their hair products as opposed to their personal lubricant. Quite simply, gay men don’t sell as much if the consumer knows they fuck.

At Oil Can Harry’s, this choreography of sexuality remains democratically available to those with a few dollars cover charge, the ability to clear a few hours of their night aside for lessons and the desire to pretend to be a cowboy and dance with another man who is also pretending to be a cowboy. No, the dance is not free, but in the high priced nightlife economy of Los Angeles, it remains a relatively equitable exchange for the men and women who attend. And this, I argue, posits the movement of The Shadow between effigy and fetish, between sentience and fantasy. It is a choreography that sensuously knows an Other through the movement of the self and articulates that knowing—not by getting it right, but by getting it a little wrong. Very simply, the following partner turns around, and in this they value a cultural practice for which they have been stigmatized—anal sex. And for the social realities of the patrons who have dedicated their leisure time to working very hard in a sweaty dance hall at The Shadow, that singular choreographic intervention, that flaw in the copy, communicates something about their contact with cowboy and conservative politics their boots connote.

To adapt the deeply entrenched social values that Foster provides to the men and women performing at Oil Can Harry’s—the desire to act politically functions as nothing less than positioning The Shadow’s representation of the homosexual act, the intimate kinesis by which
men and women are persecuted, as the subject of the dance while denying the absorption of the choreography into the market economy. These dancers perform the choreography in resistance to postmodernity’s negating, sanitized aesthetic and an era in U.S. politics wherein the LGBT movement for civil rights remains engaged in a volatile series of triumphs and backlash-inspired defeats. The Shadow’s choreographic representation of the sexual act brings the heteronormative authority’s anxiety into the open and, via the boot, demands a passionate attachment between the cowboy and The Shadow. The Shadow dancers find a connection—a connection between the icon of U.S. expansionism and the representation of gay male sexual pleasure. And it does so on terms set by the gay men performing the dance. Thus The Shadow positions the very act by which male homosexuality is overwhelmingly defined—anal sex—and conjoins it with the unquestionable legitimacy of cowboyness, making the acceptance of homosexuality (in identity and deed) a subject of Manifest Destiny, whose desire to conquer new frontiers is sanctioned by the historical authority of the United States.

I wait for a cue from him to start. His pelvis pushes against mine and I move my left foot out slowly, our cowboy boots sliding against the buffed wooden floor to the familiar rhythm of slow, slow, quick, quick. With a gentle pull of his left hand I take the cue to move back—and here the dance becomes fluid as my observation becomes messy. The Shadow leaves me nothing to look at except for other men who are also dancing this choreography of sexuality. And yes, other patrons in the margins watch me dance as well (or at least I hope so). I notice the exclusion of this choreography and notice for the first time, the “she” that I have not included in this essay and also the way that this essay has assumed, in its silence, a whiteness and an Americanness at the exclusion of African, Asian, and Latino/a Americanness. “They” are the multiple and shifting partners in this dance, the excluded for whom this choreography is
denied. He turns me, ducks under my arm and we have reversed. I now stand behind and for a moment I am in the lead. I feel uncomfortable in this new role. Not sure what to do, how to steer, what cues to give, wanting to be clear, to step up, to include in this essay what the choreography itself denies. This dance continues.

“Yes,” my partner whispers in my ear, “It certainly does.” He then leads me through a turn and maneuvers us through the many couples with whom we share the floor. I notice their bodies, many white male bodies, yes—but also bodies of color, some women in pairs that, in their very presence on the floor assert a visibility and a demand to be considered in conceptions of cowboyness and a market driven agency. “Let me know when you’ve figured it out.”
Chapter Four: Mapping Cowboyness

Mapping Narrative #1:

Performing the choreography of a line dance like “Walk the Line” or “Dizzy” or any of the other dances that value a tight sequence of turns, it can be hard to know where, exactly, you should dance. At Oil Can Harry’s the DJ will announce the next line dance over the loudspeaker, cueing dancers to clear from the previous dance—a two-step, The Shadow, or another line dance. Then, a second or two later, the music starts. Patrons abandon conversations in mid-sentence, hurriedly set down beer bottles and water, and rush out to the floor to claim a spot. The men and women assemble in a series of rows. I learned that in an ideal scenario, I should be looking at the back of the head of the person in front of me and in line with the dancers that flank me on either side. Separated by an arms length (less on busy nights), the goal is to adhere to grid pattern; line dances value a geometric distribution of bodies across the floor, recalling a militarized patterning.

But these marches balance a disciplined attention to movement patterning with some serious sass. Coaster steps, three step turns, and multiple pivots complicate a simple forward march into a dizzying exercise in spatial intelligence. Consider that the base pattern of steps (somewhere between thirty-two to sixty-four counts in length) rotates ninety degrees at each repetition. Consider that in a dance like “Walk the Line,” there are no fewer than five direction changes (turns, pivots, etc.) within a single repetition. Consider that each of the forty-plus line dances in repertory at Oil Can Harry’s all draw upon the same basic vocabulary of steps—each
dance reorganizes the syntax of this base palette to create a new work—complicating a simple compartmentalization of one line dance from another. Consider that in the seconds between when the dance is called to when the DJ counts them in with “five, six, seven, eight,” each dancer must recall the step pattern for her or himself and simultaneously find a space on the floor among other bodies that are also assembling. Finally, consider that once the dance starts, the dancer must negotiate a space within the grid even as other dancers interpret the holding of this grid differently, even as other dancers fall out of line or forget the steps, even as dancers run in late to the sequence, even as a newcomer fails to hold the line.

When I first started at Oil Can Harry’s, I was amazed by the way dancers held their lines. From my training in concert dance I was accustomed to a very different methodology for maintaining lines or grids in patterned movement. In training for the concert stage, holding a formation was a process of maintaining rows and adjusting steps so that one was never too far in or out of line. But at Oil Can Harry’s, there are too many complicating variables for such a simplistic methodology to work. Instead, dancers at Oil Can Harry’s must constantly negotiate a place on the floor even as other dancers trespass on another’s space. As I continued dancing and began to adapt to this more complex method for maintaining a shifting spatial pattern, questions arose for me about the way these men and women understood space.

*Mapping Narrative #2:*

They dance together while arranged equidistantly in a grid pattern. About twenty-five men and four women face the same direction and move in unison. I lean against the back bar sipping a beer. I have not learned this dance yet, so I take a moment to contemplate the relationship between the unison movement of stomps, kicks, pivots, turns, and the cowboy boots
the dancers all wear. I also consider the overall aesthetic value that results from a combination of the country-western music; the boots, hats, and jeans; and the grounded, bound, and weighted values of the dance. I react a bit negatively to the way these facets of movement produce masculinity and a particular cowboy ruggedness. This dance, called “Whiskey River,” is particularly robust. In the middle of the repeating sequence, the choreography requires the dancers to stand and stomp their right heel for four beats before shifting the same heel behind them and repeating the sequence—that particular movement is not physically difficult to execute, but it can be a bit hard to pull off without looking ridiculous. Heel tap, heel tap, heel tap heel tap, shift, heel tap, heel tap, heel tap, heel tap? Where is the fun in that? Other movements in the line dance are somewhat more fluid, but not much. A big, hopping chug forward on the left foot accents a few pivots, rocks, and shifts. To my taste, this choreography has about as much character as Toby Keith’s lyrics do finesse.

At this point a regular, we’ll call him George, approaches me. I steel myself for the question, “Why aren’t you out there?” (This is common small talk at the bar.) But instead he declares loudly, “This dance is just too damn butch for me,” and looks to me for a response. Part of me wants to agree with him, but instead I bait his response by remaining neutral, smiling only slightly as if to say, “Go on.” He proceeds to scrunch up his face and pound his heel into the floor exaggeratedly, mocking the dancers behind him (or at least the choreography they perform). Over this he grunts in time with his heel stomp, “Unh, unh, unh, unh.” He shifts his foot and then again grunts, “Unh, unh, unh, unh.” Then he says, “There’s nothing fun about that one at all. Sorry, that one is just too butch for me,” in a biting and resentful tone. He then walks over to the bar to buy a bottle of water. The butch cowboy dance continues in front of me and George’s indignant protest continues as he orders a drink at the bartender’s station to my right.
side. As he repeats a slightly condensed version of his performance for the bartender (who smiles as if he’s heard it all before) I consider George’s performance in relationship to the cowboys dancing “Whiskey River.” Only ten feet separate these two performances, but at this moment the space between them seems charged and difficult to reconcile.

I understand both of the instances I describe above in terms of mapping. In the first example, dancers negotiate physical space. As the pivots and turns of “Dizzy” or “Walk the Line” disorient the novice, more seasoned dancers learn not only to maintain their own position in the line, but also to accommodate for those who may have drifted into his or her position. These shifts, accommodations, and infractions happen continually throughout a single song, building the capacity of each dancer—through numerous repetitions—to know her or his placement in the larger, shifting grid. I believe a parallel exists between these accomplishments in physical space and the capacity of the country-western dancer to know herself or himself in ideological and affective spatial constructs. As George points to the ideological rift between his approach to gender performance and the men and women butching it up to “Whiskey River,” I contend that these kinds of discursive tensions happen just as frequently in close proximity, and that physical and ideological mapping processes often happen simultaneously. I see the dancers negotiating spatial scales that reverberate at a level of politics with similar dexterity as the expert line dancers negotiate their placement within the shifting rows of bodies on a busy Thursday night.

In the previous essay, I argued that The Shadow at Oil Can Harry’s provided a pointed choreographic critique of the gay-vague, apolitical, consumerist philosophy of postmodernism. In this chapter, I want to deepen a conversation regarding postmodernist spatial logic to include
the body. Through a close reading of a line dance at Oil Can Harry’s, “Walk the Line,” and a 1996 dance by San Francisco choreographer Joe Goode, I hope to demonstrate two related claims. First, I will offer the men and women dancing at Oil Can Harry’s as a model of collectivity that resists the political polarization that came to exemplify civic life at the end of the Reagan-Bush era. Next I posit that in embedding cowboyness within an AIDS choreography, Goode vivifies an affective map that locates cowboy masculinity at the nexus of longing and contempt. In both of these related endeavors, I hope to connect corporeality to contemporary conceptions of space. I attempt to show that both Goode and the dancers at Oil Can Harry’s have located, or mapped, the cowboy within spheres of social and political discourse, and that they have done so through corporeal articulations.

A Spacing Rehearsal

Considering the phenomenon of space through a postmodernist lens warrants rehearsal here, followed by the implications of a postmodernist spatial logic for queer dance spaces. Frederic Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) examines the aesthetic parameters of postmodernism so as to understand its social, cultural, economic, and spatial meanings. From his analysis of the Los Angeles Bonaventure Hotel, he derives the theory of a bewildering hyperspace. Postmodern hyperspace transcends "the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world." This points toward "the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects." This leads Jameson to recognize space rather than time as the preferred logic through which to understand
the postmodern condition. He offers cognitive mapping as a process that “enables[s] a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structure as a whole.”\(^5\) Thus if the paramount challenge of modernism was to historicize the temporal moment of the subject, the equivalent in postmodernism is for the subject to recognize his or her location in socially constituted space.

Specifically in regard to the architecture of the Bonaventure, designed by John Portman, Jameson describes the bewilderment incurred upon entering the building “as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions.”\(^6\) This bewildering hyperspace is caused, posits Jameson, by the exterior surface of the building, which reflects only a distortion of the building’s surroundings; transportation devices in the form of elevators, escalators, and rotating cocktail lounges that complicate “high modernist” navigation techniques; the rigorous symmetry of the various towers, which leads to a spatial disorientation; and the preferential treatment that the vertically expansive lobby is given proportionately to the actual hotel rooms, retail spaces, and other useable areas.\(^7\) In these aspects, Jameson tells us, postmodern hyperspace transcends our human capacity to navigate it. More importantly, the phenomenon of postmodern hyperspace engulfs the self so that no critical distance from which to evaluate postmodernism can be found. He writes, “We are submerged in its henceforth filled and suffused volumes to the point where our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distantiation.”\(^8\) For Jameson, the spatial logic of postmodernism subsumes all identities to a place wherein “political interventions…are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system” of which they are a part, “since they
can achieve no distance from it.”9 This failure of the postmodern body to attain a vantage point upon the object of postmodernism figures prominently in Jameson’s spatial theory, and one for which he offers the corrective of cognitive mapping.

Jameson’s theory of cognitive mapping offers a way by which subjects can see themselves within the larger global economic matrix of which they are a part. His work develops upon urban planning scholar Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City* (1960) wherein mental maps are explained as consistent demarcations based on the pathways, neighborhoods, and landmarks that subjects cognize to navigate a city.10 Jameson critiques Lynch’s work as being too limited to the model of the city but states that his rubric “becomes extraordinarily suggestive when projected outward onto some of the larger national and global spaces.”11 Jameson structures his reuse of Lynch’s mental mapping in alliance with the subject’s real versus imaginary existence as the subject navigates her/his trajectory through the city and, in Jameson’s revision of this concept, through a globalized network of social relations.

Social geographer and cultural theorist Steve Pile locates cognitive mapping at the nexus point of discussions concerning space, subjectivity, and social forces. In *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity* (1996), Pile juxtaposes "a geographical and a psychoanalytic imagination" in order to show the emotional responses that spatial relations provoke. For Pile, the "intertwining of territories and feelings" and the ways that "self and space" are mutually constituted create a map of subjectivity in the social world.12 Pile models his use of psychoanalytic theory after contemporary interventions on Sigmund Freud's pretense of a universal psychic function. These contemporary developments "account for the personal meanings that people produce for themselves as they struggle to cope with, and make sense of, the painful realities of everyday life.”13 Pile develops a relationship between space and the self
through object relations theory as articulated by cultural geographer David Sibley. Sibley writes, “object relations theory provides us with a map of the self in place, an integration of the spaces of the body, the space of the self and other, and the mediating environments of the home, the locality and the world beyond.” That is, our sense of self is always mediated in relationship to objects, which include people and material things while also encompassing identifications, desires, corporeal experiences, and memories. In this, the process of cognitive mapping that Pile theorizes does not leave the subject struggling to achieve distantiatio from the object of inquiry as Jameson finds the subject in the postmodernist crisis of hyperspace. Rather, Pile critically reads Jameson to say, "The cognitive map is not a replica of the external world, it is a means of taking control of the world and making the world anew." Whereas Jameson defines cognitive mapping as the imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to his or her real condition of existence, Pile sees cognitive mapping as an opportunity for the subject to recalibrate these conditions to his or her own needs. For Pile the practical and theoretical conceptions of space hold equal ground; the subject needs to understand the relationship between his or her empirical placement in space as well as his or her social placement within a larger social and spatial construct. This construct can occur locally, regionally, and globally simultaneously. Pile critiques Jameson’s conception of space as “profoundly undialectical, passive and fixed. [Jameson’s] argument that power and abstract social relations are evaporating into ever-larger spatial scales increasingly renders an understanding of place and of experience useless. As place is dissolved, political action can only occur on the global stage, at the level of aesthetics.” Rather than a theory that calls for the subject to calibrate the imaginary only to more fully cognate the real, Pile advocates for a theory of space wherein the imagined cognitive
maps of individual subjects are given more equal footing with the real spaces and relations such
cognitions represent.

Dance scholar Jonathan Bollen engages with a specifically queer spatial logic that I
believe opens the above theorizations to include bodily and identitarian articulations. In “Queer
Kinesthesia: Performativity on the Dance Floor” (2001), Bollen looks at both citywide and
interpersonal scales of interaction in the context of large dance parties in Sydney, Australia in the
1990s. Bollen found that many party goers discussed the parties as ecstatic escapes from the
hegemony of the “real” world—a movement from painful reality to pleasure-filled utopia—and
his essay works to complicate this simplistic binary. He does so by focusing on the interaction
between dancers at the balls and attending to the macroscopic political concerns—and the
reproduction of hegemonic values—as they play out granularly between bodies on the dance
floor.

Bollen identifies kinesthetic resources that dancers deploy on the dance floor. These
resources include: synchronicity, imitation, and the attainment of choreographic cohesion. He
describes synchronicity as the temporal unity of the ensemble which, in the case of the dance
parties he describes, is dictated partially by the beat of the music being played and partially by
interpreting an improvised choreography to those beats in relationship to other dancers. Bollen
defines imitation as the kinesthetic exchange of discrete movements in regard to rhythmic
interpretation or spatial pathways. Often, this imitation becomes a deliberate incorporation
wherein, “Dancing like others on the dance floor may be part of a conscious project, a kind of
‘becoming-other’ through dancing the other’s moves.” Bollen discusses this incorporation in
the context of a dance floor that is as much a site of rehearsal and practice as it is for the
performance of dancing—a model that has been a guiding, if latent, principle throughout this project.

Bollen’s discussion of how dancers maintain choreographic cohesion on the dance floor holds important information pertaining to the way dancers negotiate space. He notes that the value of choreographic cohesion exposes itself most clearly when it fails to manifest, specifically when dancing bodies bump into each other on the dance floor. Similarly to the way I describe the phenomenon of bumps between partners in the country-western two-step in the first chapter, Bollen attributes these bumps to one dancer miscalculating or simply ignoring the kinesphere of another dancer.\textsuperscript{20} He writes, “Usually, the concern is framed in terms of spatial accommodation, such that accidental bumping occurs when party goers take up a lot of space on the dance floor without adjusting their kinesphere and accommodating their actions to the available space.”\textsuperscript{21} For a densely packed population of dancing bodies to succeed in creating choreographic cohesion, a multi-faceted negotiation must occur. This negotiation entails “redressive measures” wherein dancers continually adjust to the shifting matrix of available space negotiated within intersecting kinespheres.\textsuperscript{22} In this adjustment, Bollen argues, a kind of “kinesthetic consistency” emerges “within the interstices between dancing selves and dancing others.”\textsuperscript{23} For Bollen these entanglements between dancing selves and dancing others locate themselves around binaries of hegemony versus queerness. He describes a kind of gender play “that offset[s] the demand for consistently gendered performance and expand[s] a body’s capacity for movement beyond the constraints of the morphological imperative.”\textsuperscript{24} More simply, some men at the parties would dance in a “girly” style that accentuate “up and over-the-top arm gestures,” hands that “flap around,” lightly articulated support shifts, and, most distinctively, a swishing lateral pelvic action with fluid torso inclusion that is sometimes known as “sashay.”\textsuperscript{25}
This girly style contrasts a more masculine aesthetic performed by both men and women. He describes this masculine style through the display of muscular flexion in the upper body, stomping in the feet, punching actions in the arms, and a more weighted relationship to pelvic buoyancy. In this, Bollen notes that societal expectations for the performance of gender can be suspended on the dance floor, reinforcing the dichotomy between real-life-hegemony and dance-floor-utopia that he set out to complicate.

But Bollen also notes that such performative departures from hegemonic expectations in relation to a body’s materiality do not go unpatrolled by other partygoers. He writes, “There is no simple escape from the regulation of gender, just different ways of moving it around.” Bollen discusses the policing of gender as occurring both internally and externally: externally in the way that unstable gender identities would be “un-cruisable” to the majority of party-goers, and internally in that, to feel desirable and to fit-in, at least one of Bollen’s informants noted that he internalized the hegemonic imperative to dance in a masculine way.

Similarly to Bollen’s interpretation of his fieldwork, I see the men and women at Oil Can Harry’s engaged in a simultaneous choreographic suspension of hegemonic imperatives, and a systematic patrolling of identities to keep such practices within the parameters of social legibility on the dance floor. Specifically in line dances, I see men and women finding different ways of performing the same choreography. Similarly to Bollen’s observations, I see complicated relationships to the hands and arms that either reinforce cowboy masculinity (though a flexion of muscle and minimal movement of the arms in the upper body) or subvert such associations with cowboyness (through more movement of the arms up and away from the body and embellishments in the wrists). Similarly to Bollen, I do not see such gender indeterminacies via effeminacy as diffusing hegemonic imperatives found off of the dance floor, and I have been
hailed for performing “Walk the Line” or other line dances incorrectly. Though as much as I have been corrected for being what Bollen’s field would call as “too girly,” I have also been corrected for trying to assert masculinity beyond the believability of my personal morphological identity. As a skinny, tall, effeminate gay man who moves quite lightly on the floor, other dancers have cautioned me not to “dance all butch.” More important than these critiques, I see stylistic variations at work in the hands, arms, and pelvic weight from dancer to dancer, and these interpretations of the vocabulary show different ideological stances toward the articulation of cowboyness.

In response to the relationship between the hegemonic and queer, Bollen calls for a move away from a morphology-based or materialized conception of identity and more a choreographic model that feels rather than sees gender performativity.

For kinesthesia cannot be read off the surface of the body in terms of matter, shape, or form. It must be read as movement, in the ongoingness of movement, and in how that movement feels. This is where the resources of movement analysis, a different kind of bodily intelligibility, have a contribution to make a performative analysis of identities conceptualized and experienced as “a stylized repetition of acts.”

The recognizable quotation embedded within the quote above is taken from Judith Butler’s performative theory of gender, and I believe that Bollen’s intervention to Butler’s theory is significant in that it draws attention to a critical analysis of the performance text/choreography from within the experience of moving. Rather than distancing the researcher from the field and negating the conjoinment of the participant-observer relationship, a choreographic approach to identity—analyzed kinesthetically—draws attention to the feeling of the movement in addition to its scripted, static form.

Further, I want to follow the model of Bollen’s queer kinesthesia because such a model advocates more strongly for the subject engaged in a multi-faceted cognitive mapping project.
Bringing together concepts of mapping that include global, local and interpersonal scales resonates with the dance performances that I observe and participate in at Oil Can Harry’s. In the deft negotiating of spatial resources through holding a line, in finding moments of dissident protest (as in George’s response to “Whiskey River” that I describe above), and in each dancer’s calibration of his or her relationship to cowboyness (which I will discuss in more detail in the following pages), I see the patrons at Oil Can Harry’s locating themselves in multiple spatial dimensions simultaneously.

Key questions emerge from this theoretical conception of space: How do diverse subjectivities get along on the dance floor, and how are these differences negotiated spatially? Can the same skill sets that allow the subject to know their place in relationships to the objects in the city (via Lynch’s pathways, surfaces, nodes, and landmarks) be utilized to navigate a position in a queerly complex maze of other dancers with elbows (to be avoided), thighs (to be grazed perhaps?), gazes (to be met or disavowed), and crotches and buttocks (to be gazed upon, brushed across, ground against?). Or is the postmodern body subsumed in a bewildering, identitarian hyperspace à la Jameson? Are all body parts, carrying the social significances they are endowed with in queer subcultural spheres, taking over the subject’s position in social/psychic/material space? And what do these questions imply for a bunch of gay men and women who dress up like cowboys and try to achieve a sense of choreographic coherence?

**Holding the Line at Oil Can Harry’s**

The amplified voice of the DJ says, “Come on out for ‘Walk the Line.’” A low and insistent bass beat begins to play on the sound system. It is Thursday night at Oil Can Harry’s, and about 50 men and women find their places in rows upon the dance floor. Artifacts of the
cowboy inundate the room—saddles hang on walls and a cowboy hat no less than twelve-feet in diameter (and decorated with chaser lights) looms over the main bar as a distinctive feature of the architecture. The boot-clad men and women shift restlessly over the first strains of the music, then as the DJ calls “five, six, seven, eight,” they settle. The recognizable voice of country-western diva Shania Twain sings, “From this moment life has begun.” On the downbeat of the new measure, they shuffle in unison toward the first wall and the spectators who stand off of the floor. Their weight shifts lightly, expectantly forward before dropping with strength onto their right foot with a stomp. From this momentary heaviness, they push off into a quick, three-step turn toward their right shoulders—stepping lightly to face a new set of spectators and finishing the turn by dropping their weight with another stomp. They kick forward and then to the right, change weight, shuffle left, and then right, pivoting in between. At different times their focus moves from their feet to the dancers beside them and then perhaps to check out the small crowd of surrounding spectators. Some hold their arms at their sides, in their belt loops, or behind their backs; their arms rest at times, at times hold tightly. Others dance with their arms in constant motion—enacting complicated relationships to space and to other dancers while articulating a stylistic flourish that rides on top of the choreography. They dance all in a row. They dance together in a cohesive, unison choreography while finding minute stylistic variations—simultaneously a collective picture of grace and a series of laboring portraits. They are working hard, sweating, breathing quickly, spinning, walking, stomping, shifting to one wall, and in the next moment the sequence continues to the next facing ninety-degrees away. Through all of this, they concentrate to maintain the precision of their rows, to intersect their kinespheres without colliding. They look, perhaps, as if they are marching.
Beyond the three-step-turns and coaster-step sequences that the men and women master through attendance at line dancing lessons held twice a week, they also develop a particular spatial awareness—the ability to hold a line. As I stated earlier, holding a line means maintaining a row, or more specifically, an individually negotiated process wherein each person continually marks his or her place within a matrix of bodies on the dance floor. “Holding” a line is not a process of holding space at all; it pertains instead to an individual navigating her or his relationship to every other body in the vicinity as the choreography turns, shifts and propels his or her body through space. This process has numerous functions that pertain to the sharing of kinesthetic resources, most notably in the achievement of an overall choreographic cohesion. But in addition to the functionality of holding a line (and the value on collectivity embedded in this function), the process by which it happens bears consideration. My interest lies in how these dancers practice cognitive mapping in their dancing, both in terms of a proprioceptive sensitivity but also with regard to an ideological, psychic, and social awareness that the gay and lesbian country-western dancer performs with regard to her or his identity in a broadly defined social and political paradigm of simultaneous oppression and co-option in the United States. I propose that the gay and lesbian country-western dancer sees her or himself in relationship to a larger societal construct and that his or her dancing amounts to a heated kinetic discourse amongst the dancers. This discourse is enacted by bodies that, in a De Certeauan sense, use the choreography of “Walk the Line,” with a difference and employ modes of contestation that can be read as tactical and strategic at different times. In this choreographic use of the line dances, and different stylistic interpretations of the choreography, which connote contrasting approaches to gender and sexuality, I argue that the men and women at Oil Can Harry’s model a tolerant
approach to difference within collectivity that counters a particularly reactive era in U.S. political relations.

Why do the men and women go with such enthusiasm to learn the dances, before performing them with and for their nocturnal colleagues? What is the appeal of country-western lyrics that ignore their lesbian and gay identities, of cowboy boots and hats that “straighten” many of them within an iconography of the imagined west, and of a disciplined dance form that insists upon numerous rehearsals to achieve a cowboy authenticity? In the examples of “Walk the Line” and others of the forty-plus line dances in repertoire at Oil Can Harry’s at any given time, an authentic and uncontested identity of Americanness in the form of a cowboy masculinity is exposed as a sign system that can be learned and mastered by those Americans who are often denied a legitimate American identity by the social and political hegemony of the United States. Yet in mastering this signifying kinesis of masculinity I believe that the subject who has rehearsed and reproduced Americanness risks being re-inscribed into a heteronormative paradigm, perpetuating an aesthetic discourse seen by many gays and lesbians to be counter-productive to the still-marginalized status of queer subjects. Why does the gay and lesbian country-western dancer place himself or herself in a matrix to be co-opted, and what strategies and tactics are available to resist absorption into the straight mainstream’s cartography?

Much evidence exists in the recent U.S. political sphere to warrant a pragmatic resistance to such absorption for the men and women at the bar. During the time that I observed and participated in these dances at Oil Can Harry’s, the U.S. witnessed an especially polarizing time in its political life. I first saw the line dance “Walk the Line” in the months after the World Trade Center bombings as the Bush administration successfully advocated for increased encroachment of civil liberties in the name of the War on Terror. I would continue to watch and
participate in this dance (and many others) as George W. Bush narrowly defeated Democratic Senator John Kerry in a re-election campaign that was largely buffeted by social unease with state ballot initiatives concerning gay marriage in numerous “must win” states. Political scientist Carl Cannon describes this polarization in terms of a self-imposed segregation that influences not only where an individual chooses to take a job—a computer scientist might choose the Bay Area of California over Dallas, Texas depending on her or his political leanings—but also in terms of where he or she gets her or his news and entertainment. Certainly the choices Americans have had over the past two decades regarding news sources has been bifurcated along partisan ideals. As the conservatism of red states occupied the center of the country, separating blue states and splitting the country ideologically and physically, an “us versus them” mentality increasingly led to a failure to communicate outside of one’s own political ideology. While certain agreement could be reached on a broad spectrum of issues between red and blue states, “hot button” issues to which media frequently referred—gay rights, abortion, the Iraq War, and social welfare—continued to bifurcate the country’s political will. Or at least this stands as a popular and durable account of the national political climate at the time.

My own interpretation of the political life has been influenced both by my reflections upon the complex political views of my informants at Oil Can Harry’s and sociological narratives that disrupt a reading of rampant polarization. During President Barack Obama’s 2004 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention, he criticized such shallow and reductive consideration of American public opinion. He told us:

The pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into red states and blue states: red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. But I’ve got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don’t like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the red states. We coach Little League in the blue
Sociologists Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman support Obama’s more complex view of American Public Opinion in their essay, “Partisans Without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion” (2008). While noting that few took Obama’s view of the majority of American’s hybridized political identity at face value, they posit that his sentiments came closer to articulating the reality of the complex forces at work in U.S. public opinion than did the rhetoric of extreme polarization espoused by either political party or media pundits. They determine—through statistical analysis of public opinion polls from 1972 to 2004—that polarization of ideology across the population maintained a relatively stable status and that the recent phenomenon of extreme bifurcation came more from party marketing campaigns, manipulation of media by the wealthiest Americans, and a self-perpetuating cycle wherein party partisanship and issue partisanship were conflated by the political and economic elite. The marketing of such conflation, they argue, leads to the perception of “an illusory adjustment of citizens to the renovated partisanship of the political elite” with negative consequences for parity in representation.

I similarly interpret the various political attitudes at Oil Can Harry’s with an acknowledgement for complex variance from simplistic, expected norms. In talking to my male and female dance partners, I note a wide divergence of attitudes regarding civil rights issues, immigration, U.S. policies regarding gays in the military, abortion, social welfare issues, gender equality, etc. Correlatively, I see differences in their dancing that in some bodies uphold conservative notions of masculinity and in some bodies interrogate masculine performances of cowboyness. As I have attempted to make sense of these variations, I have attended to the ways in which queerness and cowboyness come together in a potent alchemy; the ways that symbolic
codes switch, morph, and distort when mediated by a body; and the ability of multiple and even contradictory discourses to coexist within a single step. Throughout my research, I have sought to understand complex utterances of queer cowboyness that double and drift, that collide and collude, that hide and hybridize.

**Less Than One Equals Double**

Homi K. Bhabha’s theories of postcolonial mimicry deftly index the complex hybridity I see performed and choreographed at Oil Can Harry’s. Bhabha describes the colonized subject’s internalization of the values of the colonizing power as the emergence of a hybrid identity. The hybrid wrestles simultaneously with conflicting ideological and cultural values stemming from colonial contact with the native. In this, the hybridized subject struggles to achieve wholeness, which Bhabha refers to as a double bind. My application of this theory to the country-western dancer does not speak to a historical period of colonization, but does speak quite forcefully to a history of domination and oppression. The rugged masculinity that the mythic cowboy connotes stands precisely as both an object choice for many of the dancers at Oil Can Harry’s, and as an oppressive model of stoic, bound masculinity through which their own gender performance has historically been evaluated. The mythic cowboy’s capacity for violence further charges this model. Applying Bhabha’s theory of hybridity, the gay country-western dancer is gay and he is (at least on the floor dressed in cowboy boots and other accessories) a “cowboy.” He is “double,” and he is “less than one.” In claiming a sexual identity that allows for attending a gay dance club, he is less than a cowboy. In his miming of the cowboy’s masculine, he is less than gay (a fetish queen, or only a step outside of the closet to some). It is not that he is one and also another. Rather, he is not one. He is not whole. He is less than one, and he is double. This is one reading of the enigmatic bind of the gay country-western dancer. Considered from a
spatial construct, such a conception renders the queer cowboy dancer split between queer, urban enclaves and imagined sites of western fantasy.

Yet Bhabha also tells us, “The display of hybridity—its peculiar ‘replication’—terrorizes authority with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery.”40 This ruse of recognition that terrorizes authority through quotation, repetition, and mockery can be seen as politically pertinent, parodic quotation marks kinetically enacted on the social dance floor. The queer otherness of gay or lesbian can be seen as interrogating the mythic iconography of the cowboy. In this situation, mimicry gathers the power to terrorize and also rescue the hybrid from the clinicalized history of fetishism that has been used as a patrolling and oppressive strategy against the LGBT population in a modernist rubric for a large part of the early and mid-twentieth century. Further, hybridity’s mimicry signals the emergence of a third space where, according to Bhabha, colonialist self-other binaries can be exchanged for conceptions of cultural difference wherein “the meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither one nor the other.”41 At the intertwining of queerness and cowboyness, a third space of hybridized identity is formed that is neither queer nor cowboy. Bhabha’s spatialization of cultural utterance, which I have appropriated for queer purposes, sharply refutes the bias some of the patrons have against “the pink chiffon” moment that I describe in chapter one. If the butch cowboy opens his mouth and fifty-yards of pink chiffon comes flying out, this mimicry, this utterance does not mean that the queer has failed to produce cowboyness, or that the cowboy does not read as queer enough. Rather, at the intersection of queerness and cowboyness something else is produced—a third space, delightfully draped, perhaps, in pink chiffon.

The dancers at Oil Can Harry’s are not the only ones pretending to be cowboys—conservative politicians have been doing it for years. In these instances, rather than the charged
difference between cowboy and queer generating a third space of possibility, the tension between politician and cowboy replicates existing historical relationships already marked out between rancher and cowboy. Just as the rancher exploited the labor of the cowboy in nineteenth century agrarian economies, politicians have appropriated cowboy imagery in twentieth and twenty-first century political economies. I am tempted here to rehearse the cowboy diplomacy of George W. Bush and his almost unprecedented time spent away from Washington at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. However in the interest of locating the cowboys of this study within a longer trajectory of the Reagan-Bush Era, I must note that Bush can not claim originality in his co-option of a ranching tradition in the service of political conservatism. Rather, as I discussed in the introductory chapter to this project, Bush merely echoes the moves of a previous would-be cowboy. Ronald Reagan spent one full year of his presidency on vacation at his ranch in the mountains outside of Santa Barbara and was able to use the figure of the hard working cowboy to his advantage as the most popular American president in history. Journalist Ann McFeatters tells us, “Americans loved Reagan because he was comfortable in his (very tanned) skin…. They admired the way he disdained Washington.” And Americans loved Reagan, according to political historian Michael Schaller, because “It was a lot easier for him to ‘sort out a problem,’…. when he had a “horse between [his] knees.” His detractors speculated that his reliance on the ranch was an attempt to create the role of the cowboy to compensate for the lack of success his earlier acting career had with being cast in the Western films he admired. These detractors are only partially correct; his reliance on the ranch is only a part of the story. Political Scientist James Combs makes the case that Reagan simultaneously cultivated an alliance with his upbringing in the town of Dixon, Illinois. The fact that Reagan lived there for only three years in his childhood with an alcoholic father and that his family moved frequently to stay ahead of debt
collectors did not prevent him from using Dixon as a staging ground for his “America is back” themed re-election campaign in 1984, manipulating the nostalgic myth of the American small town as political leverage. Combs asserts that it is not enough to understand Reagan in an ideological/political paradigm, but rather “we must understand the broader political context of mythological themes in American culture that Reagan embodies.” Such a move examines not only what Reagan did (namely, remaining the most popular president in American history amidst verified charges of incompetence, forgetfulness, racism, cultural ignorance, class insensitivity, homophobia, sexism, and a general disdain for factual evidence), but also how the American public allowed him to do this while still feeling good about themselves and their leader. The fact that Barack Obama, as current President of the United States, has taken numerous rhetorical plays out of Reagan’s playbook vivifies the enormous symbolic impact of the Reagan Presidency on the public imagination.

Certainly Reagan’s skill as a great communicator has been hailed as his distinguishing trait. His professional training as an actor prompted him to hit his mark, to deliver his speeches with sincerity, to communicate to the camera as if it were his friend. But Combs also points to Reagan’s ability to utilize the place of his ranch in Santa Barbara and the place of Dixon, Illinois in a way as to operate symbolically from the “heart” of America. For Reagan, a dual identity, an identity of cowboy sheriff and mayor, allowed him to simultaneously portray America as peaceful and violent. This dualism becomes rendered as logic defying opposition when seen through the lens of his foreign and domestic policy as it relates to the health and well-being of marginalized Americans in the 1980s—that he secured public safety by pouring money into defending America from the threat of the cold war while simultaneously putting an entire class of Americans at risk through drastic cuts in the area of public health, that he encouraged America
to “Just Say No” to drugs as he cut drug prevention and education programs in the U.S. And perhaps more to the point of this chapter, Reagan’s manipulation of the sheriff and the mayor allowed America to feel good about itself and its leader as he allowed AIDS to spread unchecked through populations of gay men and intravenous drug users without mention until its proportions were epidemic, its victims were celebrities, and its implications for a pandemic status were no longer possible to ignore.49

Writing then, of the cowboy as a site of white, male power—I don’t mean real cowboys, I don’t mean those who made their livings performing hard labor in the Western United States beginning in the late 1880s. I mean cowboys who never were really cowboys. I mean the hybrids of power—the men who are less than one and double—the men who rallied voter support through the impediment of civil rights for gays and lesbians in the United States—the cowboy/mayors, the cowboy/politicians, the cowboy/presidents.50 To be clear: they are not really cowboys, and either are the men and women at Oil Can Harry’s—at least most of the men and women at Oil Can Harry’s know it—they see themselves on the map. While they see themselves in relationship to the other dancers on the floor during “Walk the Line,” I believe they also see themselves in relationship to other cowboys who are not present—the cowboy of U.S. mythology, the cowboy conquering new frontiers, the cowboy diplomat, the cowboy who would not say the word “AIDS.” I believe that they see themselves in relationship to these cowboys, and that they mark themselves as being a different kind of hybrid, as being in a different space on the same map.

Dancing Bodies Tracing Maps
We are dancing to “Walk the Line” again. I have a spot on the floor near the back bar, the giant cowboy hat is in clear sight as are the resting participants off of the floor. We turn. We stomp. We sweat. The disco-beat re-mix shifts (we have already been dancing for about three and a half minutes) from Shania Twain’s “From this Moment” to LeAnn Rimes’ “I Need You.” The voice sings, “I need you like water, like breath, like rain,” when a loud gruff voice to my right screams, “Come on, boys!” I turn to see Anna, her face flushed from dancing, her long, blond hair somewhat damp and her tank-top clinging to her short, muscular torso, and in the next beat, on cue, a group of male voices around me sing, “Da, da, da, daaaaaahhh,” in perfect pitch and timing with the horns that accompany Shania’s disco reinvention. A few bars later, Anna shouts again, “Come on boys!” Again, on cue, “Da, da, da, daaaaaahhh.” As I dance to the second half of the song, the chorus of “boys” comes back four or five times, and each time I can’t help but laugh out loud; at the moment, the whole cowboy masquerade seems to be more closely approximating a Broadway revue than a social dance form. Male masculinity’s strategic hold on this place seems to be taking a serious hit from the tactical interventions of female masculinity and gay male effeminacy. I turn my head to either side and see other laughing dancers and still others who are not laughing, some certainly concentrating on the steps and on holding their lines and some, perhaps, a bit miffed at this multi-directional challenge to their idea of the cowboy. But we all still agree to practice and perform this dance together. Our styles disagree, but our core vocabulary aligns.

My argument here is that a conversation is taking place, or even a debate, regarding who the real gay dancing cowboy is, or what a real gay dancing cowboy dances like. Is the effeminate male prancing the fully realized subject of this choreography? Or is it the butch dyke whose biceps rival in strength and prominence some of the butcher men in the room? Or is it
that understated, almost stiff guy near the front bar who barely tolerates the rowdy singing? I can’t pretend to know, but I know that this argument gets heated, and I think that at its best, this argument models a tolerance for ideological difference that some of the cowboy hybrids of power could learn from. I find such campy performances, exemplified by Anna rounding up “the boys,” extraordinary for the dialogic enjoyment between masculine female and effeminate male identities. Further I see such performances as pointing to camp as a tactic through which to expose the seams of hybridity—to more clearly mark the place of the subject within an ideological cartography. I use this example to suggest that camp is a tactic for exposing the double inscription of hybridity, especially as the identity of cowboy may have the authority to absorb queerness through its overwhelmingly heteronormative properties. Further, I believe that camp overtly asserts queerness within an environment that could absorb such an identity through divergent strategies and tactics such as overt masculinity by both gay men and lesbians, as well as effeminate performativity by gay men. Put another way, camp sends up a signal flare, drawing attention to the third space of queer possibility.

Moe Meyer in his Introduction to The Politics and Poetics of Camp (1994) tells us, “Broadly defined, Camp refers to strategies and tactics of queer parody.” He goes on to extensively quote Linda Hutcheon’s definition of parody as employing derivations of existing text in order to execute “extended repetition with critical difference,” while contesting and denigrating the “original” through political contestation. Meyer goes on to wrestle camp away from a non-gay, apolitical context as espoused by Susan Sontag’s influential 1964 essay, “Notes on Camp.” Using “a subtle, ongoing, and not yet stabilized” usage of the word queer, Meyer, and other contributors to The Politics and Poetics of Camp, reclaim camp as solely and unalterably queer. Casting a wide net, camp can be seen both as a strategic defense and a tactical
intervention against the potentially co-opting nature of cowboy-ness. The patrons of the bar who support the strategic image of hyper-masculine cowboy identity through their dancing and behavior off of the floor challenge the cowboy’s authority through performing this identity within the context of a gay country-western bar in the Valley. At the same time, the female masculinity performed by Anna (and others) and the male effeminacy of the singing chorus boys in the example above can be seen as tactical interventions to the overriding discourse of cisgender masculinity at the bar. Within an environment that hangs artifacts of the cowboy’s macho iconography on the walls, that plays music rich with the trauma of heterosexual heartbreak, and that indiscreetly celebrates nostalgia for the myth of the conquered frontier, such performances of camp seem to point to the saddle that hangs on the wall, only to show that no one is riding in it.

But what about the dancers at Oil Can Harry’s who wish they were riding tall in the saddle? While I enjoy, very much, this relationship between subversive/anti-heteronormative gender performances on the dance floor in relationship to the cowboy, I also have to recognize the men, particularly, who do not fear terrorizing the cowboy with effeminacy or overt displays of homoeroticism. These dancers seem to value a stoic cowboyness that flies under the stylistic radar of camp’s excess. Are these men just duplicating the power of the cowboy original, no questions asked? Are they buying into the cowboy’s nationalistic assumptions to power? And, if so, is there anything of progressive political value to be recuperated from this performance?

They dance together. This is what I know. As they shift from wall to wall and from shuffle to kick to stomp, they agree to dance together. They choreograph, for themselves, an interpretation of the footwork, and at times these choreographies do not agree. Some flirt with the feminine, some sing, some laugh, some struggle just to hold a line, some make the whole
dance look like a musical theater review, and some find a sexy smoothness and integration of the body into a single, holistic organism. Others find sexy isolations in the shoulders and ribs. Some do not find anything sexy about this dancing at all. Some make small talk with friends. Some exchange bitchy remarks about another dancer’s dancing. Some quietly ignore the bitchy remarks coming from the queens behind them. Some accommodate the spatial needs of a dancer who is having trouble holding the line. Some do not recognize that other dancers are accommodating and compensating for his or her liabilities and inexperience. Some forget the steps for a second and laugh before getting back on the correct foot. Some attempt to help a newcomer by speaking the steps while performing them. They may not agree on an interpretation of the steps, but a baseline of civility permeates the floor. They dance together. And in this, I argue they model an approach to democracy that neither ignores difference nor allows difference to derail the proceedings of the dance event.

And they dance together with these rather profound discursive tensions in the midst of a political climate characterized by a failure of civility. They agree to disagree, and continue to practice their dancing, each as they wish. As the cowboy politicians and other members of the political elite consistently find themselves at ideological impasses, the men and women at Oil Can Harry’s—many of whom hold considerable contempt toward each other—each claim a right to dance the cowboy out. They shuffle and pivot and turn and kick, and they agree to do this together—no one blatantantly or intentionally wrecks the dance by purposefully stepping against the established pathways. And they all try, to the extent that they are able, to hold their line within a body of dancers that is always shifting, jockeying, and leveraging for position. They work together in a complex and deeply attentive way even as the stylistic differences between them stands metaphorically as a kind of bar room brawl.
Doesn’t this model a kind of cognitive map? They navigate each other in proprioceptive and political realms simultaneously, and agree to navigate a space on the floor for everyone who shows up. They notice the differences around them, and I believe they don’t ignore the political ramifications of cowboyness. Rather, I see them cognate the location of the cowboy they each embody and create in a dynamic and continually negotiated relationship to the cowboys that their colleagues each embody and create. They don’t all dance the same choreography the same way, rather, they demonstrate their placement on a map that is physical and kinetic and identitarian and political at the same time. Their dancing bodies trace the map.

**Cowboy Dancing AIDS**

San Francisco choreographer Joe Goode features the cowboy in a number of his choreographies, including *Gender Heroes* (1999), *Undertaking Harry* (2000), and *The Rambler* (2011). I will focus on *The Maverick Strain* (1996) because of its deep engagement with cowboyness *via* Hollywood film references and its articulation of a spatial logic that conjoins physical, ideological, and affective dimensions. The dance deconstructs key scenes of Arthur Miller’s screenplay *The Misfits* (1961), features writing that poetically cites the isolationist tendencies of the mythic cowboy, and relates this isolation to the compassion fatigue experienced by many friends and caregivers of those who died in the first wave of the AIDS epidemic. Featuring a cast of six ensemble members and original music by Beth Custer, *The Maverick Strain* remarkably rubs together notions of American politics, cowboyness, camp, and queer identity shaped by the trauma of AIDS. In this, I argue that Goode configures an affective map that places the queer subject in relationship to AIDS-related loss and the cowboy simultaneously.
Traumatic loss overwhelmingly marks *The Maverick Strain*—specifically loss from the AIDS crisis—and Goode juxtaposes this trauma, and desensitization to trauma, with treatments of iconic cowboy imagery culled from various Western films. The juxtaposition of these two historical/cultural referents—the AIDS crisis that inundated the San Francisco gay community in the mid-1990s and that of the cowboy western film—is striking in the way that it productively combines the isolation experienced by the LGBT population in the height of the AIDS crisis with the iconic isolation of the cowboy in the context of a rugged western landscape. I argue here that *The Maverick Strain* is also remarkable for the ways in which Goode posits distinctive representational modes in close proximity—in this project, camp and pastiche are of particular note—for galvanized political effect. Additionally, Goode articulates a specific spatial logic here, working between micro and macro spatial scales in resonance with the men and women at Oil Can Harry’s.

Goode choreographs this unique spatial logic in the first scene in the work, wherein he publicizes isolation and makes reclusive mourning quite spectacular. A scene for an unnamed cowboy (played by Goode) and a woman named Dottie (Liz Burritt) takes place as they recline in a bed, but Goode pushes these bodies into full visibility by raking the angle of the bed forty-five degrees. In the scene Dottie lies in a fetal position next to The Cowboy. Dottie looks a mess, dressed in a black bra and underwear and coiled in ratty, faded sheets—she lies turned away from her cowboy counterpart. Goode, on the other hand, looks ready for a night at the local cowboy bar; his shirt fringe dangles with panache, and he dons his leather chaps and ten-gallon hat crisply. Their dialogue quickly reveals Dottie’s depression, and The Cowboy tries to get her out of the house to go visit an offstage character named Jamie, who we learn lies in hospice. Yet persistent quips about the others’ appearance disrupt this somber context. Like
bitchy queens competing for a tiara, Goode critiques Dottie’s hair, while Dottie fires back regarding Goode’s cowboy attire. Significantly, when Dottie asks Goode, “what’s with the midnight cowboy?,” in reference to his black cowboy shirt, Goode retorts, “I can encompass this and don’t question it,” with all the masculinity of a Vegas showgirl.

Yet AIDS talk peppers their repartee. Dottie protests to the Cowboy’s suggestion that they visit the hospice site saying that she is done with “lesions and respirators and all those sweet pretty little men we know wasting away.” Goode, rather than showing sympathy for her survivor’s fatigue and desensitization, grills her lack of compassion with a combative dose of sarcasm; he replies, “Good. Done. Wash the hands.” Here and throughout the scene, stylized gestures and an archly enunciated, breathy speech conjoin to suggest that this exchange has all happened before. In this well-worn performance and the textual reference to “being done,” other illnesses, other lesions, and other deaths seep into the frame.

When Dottie inquires about their offstage friend, he asks acidly, “You want truth or stories?” She responds, “As I see it, it is all relational: truth, the events, your friends, my friends, who does what to who. It’s an illusion of movement. My cells are expanding and changing anyway as I lie here.” This response differs notably from the rest of the preceding scene in three ways: First, the response eludes the question not through veiled references to obscure movie quotes (which is a logic throughout the rest of the scene), but rather through a shift to a microscopic cellular imagining. Second, the text accompanies a highly abstract arcing movement in the arms—the first time Dottie moves significantly in the scene and the first time that she and Goode move in unison. Third, the text reinforces a spatial logic that is set up through the situating of the bed at an angle to allow the audience a shared view of her personal trauma; Burritt, already a spectacular locus of pathetic bitterness, invites us in to consider the
discrete movement of her cells. Indeed, the personal trauma of AIDS loss becomes “all relational” in such a context and challenges the materiality of the body. Dottie struggles for stasis, as the private/micro becomes publicized/macro in the context of the theatrical event. Her “cells are expanding and changing anyway” as she lies there in bed; the staging and text theatricalize and expand her personal trauma not just through placement on a bed that pushes her to a vertical plane of viewership on the proscenium stage, but also by the fact that her in-scene-witness to this pain is a show-girl-turned-cowboy who fails to soothe her complaints. Far from it; instead Goode pokes at her emotions with verbal attacks denigrating her hair and hygiene.

Dottie’s perception of her own materiality continues to shift as the scene continues, and this shift of materiality intimately connects with her experience of trauma from the loss of her AIDS-ravished community. When Goode as the Cowboy asks Burritt as Dottie when she intends to emerge from her room and thus her sense of isolation, she replies that she is “too big and mean to emerge.” She compares herself to “the fifty-foot woman” in one sentence and then the oversized Snoopy puppet floating above the Macy’s parade a few beats later. Her self-obsession begets feelings of grandeur, and her placement on the bed seems a self-imposed isolation and a position of power simultaneously. She describes herself as a “big inert mass of a woman” before she notices herself as a part of society’s whole. Over the following text she stands on the steeply raked bed/platform, emerging from her “soiled linens.” She no longer escapes into fetal position, but rather crouches stealthily. Her body stands low and taut and her voice similarly relishes in tense, deep, gravelly tones. She says,

There’s something out there…
Way out there on my skin:
Little snags and rips, subtle little pricks and bumps,
Little accidents, little deaths….
Nothing I can do.
I see you in there.  
I’m breathing on you in there.  
My spit could wash you away.  
Things are hiding in my folds.  
Some things are trying to climb me.  
I could flick them off, but I don’t care.  

I’m out here, big and alone.  
I can’t hear too good.  
There’s no one really talking anyway.  
And I don’t care.  
I don’t.  
I don’t.

Over the course of this text, the lights shift to obscure the bed in darkness while illuminating her face from underneath. Simultaneously, a miniature cutout of a city skyline lights up in front of her feet. The visual effect produced here shows Burritt towering over the city landscape, eclipsing the skyline with her body. The masses of people in the city below her stand as little pricks, bumps, rips, and snags. She reduces their mishaps as little accidents to be flicked off, and despite her immense size, there is nothing she can do about their little deaths, but observe them—after all, she “can’t hear too good.” Rather than staging an intervention to the struggles she notices, she contemplates their complete annihilation through a little spit or sneeze or cough, because she has lost the ability to care for anything beyond her own pain and isolation.

Looking at the work through the lens of audience reception, this desensitization to losses from the AIDS crisis would surely resonate with a San Francisco audience in the mid-1990s. How many men and women in the audience surely stood isolated and traumatized from the ravages of AIDS and connected to the spatial transformations performed by Burritt?

On the surface, *The Maverick Strain*’s opening scene seems like an unlikely pairing. What do the campy barbs of an arch cowboy have to offer a depressed woman seeking refuge from traumatic losses incurred by AIDS? I see the solitary image of the cowboy as a potent
metaphor for the traumatized reclusiveness of Dottie. Yet in action, Goode’s cowboy does not follow through with its isolationist potential. Though saucy and sharp tongued, the man in the ten-gallon hat prods Dottie to reengage with the world—a prospect that launches her into an epic break with reality and turns her into an uncaring giant, a monster. Throughout the rest of the work, which cites Western films such as *The Misfits* and *Red River* (1948) Dottie’s relationship with the cowboy emerges as a through line—he serves as her guide as she contemplates stepping out into the world again. Through this central relationship, *The Maverick Strain* maps affective and ideological connections between AIDS losses, Americanness, and cowboy masculinity.

**Mapping Trauma/Marking Militancy**

Jonathan Flatley in *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (2008) discusses cognitive mapping from the vantage point of melancholia. At the intersection of these discourses, he arrives at *affective mapping*, which he describes as the aesthetic phenomenon that represents the historicity of one’s affective, or felt, experience. He writes, “In mapping out one’s affective life and its historicity, a political problem…that may have been previously invisible, opaque, difficult, abstract, and above all depressing may be transformed into one that is interesting, that solicits and rewards one’s attention.”55 He tells us that affective mapping provides a methodology for sharing losses with others and productively locating the source of loss within an historical and social framework. According to Flatley, this methodology asks, “Whence these losses to which I have become attached? What social structures, discourses, institutions, processes have been at work in taking something valuable away from me? With whom do I share these losses or losses like them?”56 Rather than melancholia debilitating the subject through depression, Flatley argues that these kinds of melancholic social
formations can empower the subject through a malleable, historically situated, and collective subject formation in response to loss.

Flatley tells us that the subject must attain distance from her or his emotional pain for this transformation from depressed disinterest to engagement to occur. This comprises a key anti-depressive effect of the affective map. One’s life and emotions must seem strange and unfamiliar—at least for a moment—in order to form relationships to historical context. An alienation or estrangement from self must occur that allows for cognitive distance; this distance produces new and unexpected identifications. Flatley describes the texts he studies as mechanisms of self-estrangement wherein the subject can see oneself from an exterior vantage point. But he also means “estrangement in the sense of defamiliarization, making one’s emotional life—one’s range of moods, set of structures of feeling and collection of affective attachments—appear weird, surprising, unusual, and thus capable of a new kind of recognition, interest, and analysis.”

His analysis centers on literary precursors—from W. E. B. DuBois to Henry James to Andrei Platonov—that substantiate affective mapping through the emotional alienation Flatley describes, thus achieving a perspective outside of the self.

Global health activist and dance scholar David Gere discusses melancholia specifically in relationship to dance and queer communities in relationship to AIDS. In *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (2004) Gere wrests theories of melancholia away from an exclusively psychoanalytic foundation and engages with a socially cognizant theorization in relationship to the impact of AIDS in queer communities. He draws heavily from Douglas Crimp’s activist essay “Mourning and Militancy” to discuss the ways in which the failure to resolve mourning within culturally appropriate bounds stands in resistant opposition to the passivity of psychic healing. If psychoanalytic prescriptions for appropriate
grief are contingent upon reestablishing pre-loss norms, then Gere vivifies the ways in which queer communities have found deviation from this norming process to be a productive and politicized rupture from the status quo. He interrogates Freudian notions of appropriate grief in relationship to the melancholic gay male AIDS survivor.

What if the subject—the gay male subject—is unable to recover from the loss of a loved one? Or what if he grieves not just a single person but the very “ideal” of an entire culture, with its own social and sexual practices? Or what if, by reason of his fear for his own life and his anger at political and cultural forces that failed to prevent the death of the loved object, he actually chooses not to complete his mourning? Or what if he cannot, will not, return to “normal”?60

In response to historical sanctions on queer desire and social oppression of civil rights, Gere posits the AIDS choreographies in his project as politically militant responses to mourning. He describes the estrangement from normalcy as the shadow from which militantly artistic articulations arise.61

I see this estrangement from self and disregard for societal norms in Dottie’s monologue and throughout The Maverick Strain. In becoming the fifty-foot woman, her combined emotions of anger, grief, and fatigue combine to overcome her sense of reality. The aesthetic articulation of this melancholia takes her into a new world, one where she incorporates members of her community within the folds of her skin in one moment and where she blows them away with her breath in the next. Later in The Maverick Strain, Goode locates the cowboy contradictorily: at times cowboyness stands in for sexual desirability, at times for the violence of the nation-state, and at times Goode as The Cowboy acts a wise sage, eventually helping Dottie to cope with her loss. In all of this, an affective map emerges that locates Goode and Burritt in relationship to each other, and in relationship to larger structures of societal power. I argue that the dance polemically asks urgent questions in response to the AIDS crisis: How did this loss come to be?
What structures of masculine power contributed to this loss? And how is this power connected to ideas of nation and frontier?

Trauma-induced isolation that traverses public and private spheres establishes itself as a theme in the opening scene of The Maverick Strain and develops in scenes throughout the work. The dialogues between Goode and Burritt all center on how to maintain compassion in the midst of a plague. This through-line stabilizes an otherwise unwieldy work that invokes cowboyness not only in terms of Goode’s costume, but also in poetic narratives about western film stars John Wayne and Montgomery Clift. The dance also cites scenes from the film The Misfits (1961). In this, Goode posits citations of cowboyness in the middle of a work primarily concerned with AIDS-induced community fatigue syndrome and places the cowboy at the interstice of queer trauma, Americanness, and masculinity.

Themes of loss run through the work and, similarly to the cellular destabilization that Dottie describes in the opening scene, mourning threatens the stability of a fixed subject position. The interweaving loss that I discuss here is not just from the loss due to AIDS referenced in the opening scene and primary narrative, but also a more generalized loss of companionship in intimate and social relations. My reading of The Maverick Strain is based on the interconnectivity of these various losses, wherein the imminent loss of the offstage friend, Jamie, has a synecdochical relationship with other kinds of loss. For example, in one of the poetically descriptive narratives about cowboy masculinity, Goode talks in glowing homage about John Wayne and Montgomery Clift. Here, loss registers in regard to the impossibility of achieving intimacy with the cowboy and ultimately from the possibility of achieving that brand of masculine legitimacy. In this, Dottie’s failure to accept the imminent loss of Jamie resonates with another failed connection—Dottie struggles to connect with Jamie’s real condition (she
dehumanizes him as a speck to be washed away) as Goode’s cowboy fails to connect with Wayne or Clift (both of whom are dehumanized into symbols of desire and contempt). Here cowboyness stands for a loss of intimacy—not only through the stoic masculinity of the mythic cowboy, but also (in the era of the 90s U.S. in which The Maverick Strain premiered) through losses due to AIDS.

**Who is John Wayne?**

In one section of the work, dancer Wayne Hazzard enters the stage space with a slow, exaggerated walk from upstage left to upstage right—a modern dance replication of a cowboy swagger. Farther downstage, countering Hazzard’s cross in the opposing direction, Goode swaggers in a more exact imitation of John Wayne’s Western trademark. He speaks during his cross:

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It’s me
It’s John Wayne
He’s hunting in the woods
He’s hunting in the dark
He’s cursing them blasted injuns [sic]
He’s feeling a justified rage
It’s Montgomery Clift
He’s emulating John Wayne
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A quadrangle of cowboy emulations all reference John Wayne. Goode and Hazzard—*vis à vis* their presence onstage—and Montgomery Clift, through a reference in the text, all try to follow in the footsteps of John Wayne. Of the onstage portrayals of Wayne, Goode pulls this off most accurately—both in physical resemblance (Goode is a tall man and large-framed) and physical mimicry. Yet Goode pulls off this imitation for only a few seconds; Hazzard carries the load of dancing John Wayne while Goode narrates in the foreground and then out of the visual frame.
In the spoken text, Goode performs an immediate representational shift. The speaker’s subjective travel from, “It’s me,” to, “It’s John Wayne” signifies Goode’s subjective rupture from inhabiting the cowboy subject position. He does not say, “It’s me and I am John Wayne.” Thus he calls into question exactly what “It” is. The unspecified subject here shifts freely—“It” stays unknown, and “He” encompasses Wayne, Hazzard, and Clift at different times. Goode’s text reproduces a shift in the materiality of the subject that Dottie accomplishes earlier in the performance when she moves from the subject position of the isolated victim cowering in bed to the larger-than-life monster-like subject towering over the cityscape (described above). Such poetic shifts in subject stand as a unique hallmark in many of Goode’s dances. Whereas the movement in Burritt’s subjectivity manifests itself within her own capacity to embody the difference between those two personas, Goode employs Hazzard, and soon the rest of the company, to aid in this embodiment of cowboy masculinity.

During the second half of the first stanza of Goode’s poem, dancer Vong Phrommala enters the space with the same walk as Hazzard. Miguel Gutierrez, who also performs a slow and exaggerated swagger, follows suit. Equidistant from each other in a line upstage, they stop and face front. They each stand alone, a picture of the lonesome gunslinger; the music, lighting, and the negative space between each dancer contribute to this sense of isolation. Marit Brook-Kothlow, Sue Ellen Einarsen, and Burritt then join the three men, and each pair begins a sustained partnering sequence. At first, the lifts seem to reference traditional partnering moves inscribed by heteronormative referents such as classical ballet or more traditional modern dance lexicons. Quickly however, women take on the weight of the men. The lack of eye contact and other signs of emotional connection between the dancers also prevent these simultaneous, unison duets from regressing to heteronormative standards of romantic love. As one of the men lifts a
woman or one of the women lifts a man, the lifted dancer stays rigid. They also accomplish
these lifts with a profound lack of acceleration or phrasing—the sense of time stays even
throughout. Rather than expressing a romantic feeling or capitalizing on an opportunity of
momentum, the lifts become exposed as products of labor. Rather than a simple, task-oriented
labor, the labor seems to be in direct correlation to the bodiliness of the dancer in each pair. The
bodies being lifted stay sprawled and recognizably human in their rigid passivity. In maintaining
an ambiguous indeterminacy with regard to the lifter—committing neither to compliance with
nor resistance to the man or woman lifting him or her—the body being lifted evades evocations
of subjective will. I read this weighted, suspended indeterminacy—in the context of a work
marked by AIDS—as a labored, kinetic meditation upon the dead, upon lost bodies. Over this,
Goode says:

It’s John Wayne
He’s riding in the snow
It’s Montgomery Clift
He’s thinking about the girl
But he’s riding in the snow
He’s emulating John Wayne
He’s just like John Wayne

John Wayne
Who’s hunting in the snow
Who’s hunting in the dark
Who’s driving his horses way too hard
Who’s oblivious to hunger
Who knows his way is right
Whose hand is close to his gun
Who’s forgotten about the girl
Who’s suffering in the cold
Who’s pushing himself really hard and not talking and not letting anybody know
what he’s thinking and keeping it all to himself

Each line’s subject continues to slip between “It” and “He,” a precedent continued from
the first stanza. This shifts in the final stanza (where “John Wayne” and “Who” inhabit the
subject position) and culminates in a line that abandons the meter established elsewhere in the soliloquy. In the run-on, the text exposes the incredible distance that the speaker feels from the “Who” subject position. After numerous lines wherein Goode as the speaker faithfully recounts a realistic scene of Western filmic lore, he breaks down into a subjective experience of being shut out of a desired intimacy. This object maintains proximity to John Wayne and attains distance from John Wayne simultaneously. The choreography achieves this distance by the multiple men dancing on stage (there is not one John Wayne but three), the way that the historically masculine role of lifting is shared between the men and women, by his own attempt at taking on the John Wayne image (after all, he looks more like John Wayne and moves more like John Wayne than anyone else on stage), by Goode’s offstage narration (the only man who looks anything like John Wayne is nowhere to be seen and talking about John Wayne in the third person), and by the shifting subject position of the poem (Who is “It”? Who is “He”? Who is “John Wayne”?).

Significantly, and unlike Schmitt and Kim’s choreography described in Chapter 1, a reproduced image of Wayne appears nowhere in Goode’s work. The absence of Wayne is significant here and contributes, I believe, to the overall sense of loss in The Maverick Strain. Wayne, lost in the past, and Jamie, presumably to be lost to AIDS, anchor the offstage context of this work. Whereas Kim and Schmitt’s Making a Disaster look to the image of John Wayne and say, this is what I am not and cannot be (through bringing the image of Wayne into the performance event), Goode seems to say, I reference John Wayne and imagine that I could be him.
In a layered section of the work approximately halfway through the dance, anger toward cowboy masculinity and Americanness takes the foreground. The lights come up on four dancers seated in chairs equidistantly at the front of the stage. They wear cowboy hats, which are tilted to obscure their faces from the audience. They all beat their bare heels against the floor in rhythm. Then Vong Phrommola, one of the seated ensemble members, says, “This here is Dunson. He taught me everything I know. He’s the fastest gun this side of the Mississippi.”

This text is drawn from the script of *Red River* (1948), an iconic Western film starring Wayne and Clift, wherein Wayne plays the character of Dunson, a patriarchal figure who adopts and raises Clift’s character (Matt) as a child. As this text and supporting image establishes itself, another area of lights reveal Hazzard dancing upstage of the ensemble. He slices quickly through space with arm gestures abstracted from military salutes, bar room punches, and hands drawn to the eyes for shade. In *Red River* Dunson’s relentless work ethic and cruelty form a rift between him and Matt; at the pit of Dunson’s trajectory he borders on the insane. Hazzard’s solo captures this turmoil; he turns, shifts weight, and pivots, often times with his arms outstretched, as if to conquer the space around him. His arms and legs extend in different directions in rapid succession. Lunges, grounded crouches, and small collapses in the spine interrupt his extensions. His torso spirals, darts, and soars to create a three dimensional spectacle. He moves quickly and alone. He becomes a moving, turning, balancing, and thrashing representation of Dunson.

Still sitting, the ensemble speaks in unison over the movement, rhythmically in counterpoint to the stomping of their heels. They look down to the ground over the following text, hands on knees. Their bodies, energetically bound and constrained, quake with visible muscular tension. They look like they could explode. They speak precisely in low, gravely tones:
Determination.
Determination.

He’s a bomb waiting to go off.
Boom!
Go. Off. Go off.
Boom! …

A man’s gotta do.
A man’s gotta… Do!
A maaaaaannnnn.

By the end of this, Dunson’s movement becomes spastic, a kind of kinesthetic rant against the simpler rhythmic structure provided by the ensemble downstage. It appears that the dogmatic deference to nation and patriarchy have broken down the bodily coherence and integrity of Hazzard’s body. At the end of this prolonged choreographic spasm, he returns to a wide-legged masculine stance, chin up, hands on hips. Stoic. Bound. Stable.

Or perhaps trapped. Here Goode simultaneously critiques and evokes sympathy for the rigid masculinity he choreographs. As Hazzard remains frozen in his hands-on-hips, masculine stance, a drag queen (played by Gutierrez) enters the space and performs a comic take out to the audience as if to say, “How shocking.” The queen draws many laughs as he lampoons the cowboy:

My only advice for you, girl, is drink more.
Get sloppy, spill over the lines. Get out of this movie.
Make the hair different. Make up. Overreact.
More make up.
Dress up. Drink more.
Get sloppy.

This multi-pronged approach to critique validates, I believe, the complexity with which Goode treats the image of the cowboy throughout the work. At one point, Gutierrez takes Hazzard’s cowboy hat off of his head, reducing the mythic image Hazzard had created to mere
mortal status, replete with balding. Here the cowboy has been treated as an object of contempt in one moment (when the ensemble chants “domination, nation”) and of pity the next, (when Gutierrez implores him to “get out of this movie”). Such complex, affective matrixes of desire, fear, and contempt accompany the majority of work I have studied for this project.

Goode rarely utilizes a realistic spatial logic in *The Maverick Strain*. As I have noted above, his vertical staging makes the isolation of a bed into a visual spectacle, which he quickly transforms so that the pathetic, bed-ridden reclusive character of Dottie stands towering above the city. Similarly Goode stages traditional dramatic scenes (such as the pastiche of *The Misfits*) with the dancers facing out to the audience or otherwise engaging offstage space. Also Goode stages portions of the performance in a promenade-style, wherein the audience walks to different aspects of the theater to see scenes installed in corners of the space. The vocabulary of the movement itself displays a particular hybridity of Cunningham-inspired movement, which is largely axial and planar, and much more spherical movement, showing influences from contact improvisation and capoeira.

The zenith point of the spatial experimentation that heavily contributes to *The Maverick Strain*’s identity comes at the end of the work. As Goode sings a musical version of an earlier monologue derived from *The Misfits*, an ensemble of six dancers appears outside of the theater. They all wear cowboy attire. The cowboy dancers outside the theater, seen by the audience through floor to ceiling glass windows, represent one version of the kind of distancing and vantage point Flatley describes. This happens in two ways simultaneously—by exceeding the bounds of theatrical convention and by engaging the world outside of the theater. On one hand Goode’s gesture offers a logical development of the external perspectives that have informed the dance’s context—Burritt’s sixty-foot woman, Goode’s thorough connection between AIDS and a
lone cowboy masculinity, and the showgirl’s dismissal of such posturing. From this perspective, the dancers appearing on the other side of the glass can be seen as just one more emotional estrangement in the construction of the affective map. Yet from another perspective, perhaps in exceeding the bounds of the theater, Goode shows the potential action that such an interest in the world might take. Perhaps, in a move that draws as much from Gere as from Flatley, the affective map begot from melancholia begins an action outside of aesthetics, and into the real world from which the loss began.

**Kinetic Mapping, Queerly**

The theory of space I espouse here draws from Jameson, Bollen, Pile and Flatley. From Jameson, I glean the notion of cognitive mapping as a mode of recognizing the self in relationship to larger structures of ideology. From Pile, I include notions of the psychic into the process of mapping, and the reciprocal relationship between the real and imaginary realms. From Flatley, I steep my methodology with cognizance not only of ideology and the psychic, but also the mark of history and creation of community for the melancholic subject. And Bollen allows these processes to be read as a component of bodily action. Once placed in the body, I argue that the process of cognitive mapping can be read in the bodies of the dancers at Oil Can Harry’s through their ambivalent mimicry, which draws from Bhabha’s theories of the post-colonial hybrid as well as notions of a queerly camp aesthetic. Finally Goode offers a case study wherein an aesthetic of a politicized melancholia mobilizes through an unconventional spatial logic. In this I attempt to show that numerous artists—and cowboy dancers in social settings—have located the cowboy with spheres of social and political discourse. Queer cowboy dancers move between multiple nodes of political legibility, and in their shifting between political
conservatism and political progressivism, they symbolically destabilize late twentieth century politicians in their attempt to naturalize cowboyness as a site of ideological conservatism. These dancers also hail mythic cowboyness as a source of desire and as a locus of trauma simultaneously.

Let’s look at the map. While I will not presume to know the multiple sources of trauma that affect the individual dancers present at Oil Can Harry’s, I will presume to know that the kind of masculine discourse espoused in the bar has a distinctly American bent, and that the men and women dancing “Walk the Line” know precisely where they stand in relationship to the other cowboys they dance with. When I see the men and women at Oil Can Harry’s dancing to “Walk the Line,” I see them crowding the other cowboys, contesting an uncontested, authentic masculinity, working hard through kicks, shifts in weight, and coaster steps to hold their line on the dance floor. They dance together to say gay and lesbian and cowboy and butch and femme and patriot and dissident and queer in the same moment and create a multi-faceted text of contestation. They hold their lines, mapping and marking their space upon the dance floor to challenge, at times, the very identities that surround them—creating, perhaps, a microcosm of a larger political stage. On this larger stage, this ideological and affective map, I see the cowboys of political power in the United States. These other hybrids are also dancing, but with small and increasingly hesitant steps. These established cowboys (ranchers, really), who have gained power from a mythology of cowboy Americanness, are being challenged on all sides. Strategic holds have already occurred via a gay male masculinity that performs an accurate but parodic replication of cowboyness, debunking a mythical equation of authentic-cowboy-heterosexuality. And at the same time, the tactical elements of camp manifest through an assertively butch female masculinity and the effeminate wrists and swishing hips of gay male effeminacy. I imagine that
this combination of strategic holds and tactical interventions may have the power to expose the construction of cowboyness to those hybrids of power who have mistaken the cowboy as a natural entity, who have failed to realize the price of conquering frontiers, and who have neglected the marginalized status of those with whom they share the identity of “American.” Some of the men and women dance with these other cowboys to say “I want you.” Some of the men and women dance with these other cowboys to say “I want to be more like you.” Some of the men and women dance with these other cowboys to ask, “You there, are you the source from where my trauma has come? We see you. Let’s dance.”
Conclusion: Jack and Ennis/Adam and Steve

The film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and to a lesser degree the short story by Annie Proulx (1997), have accompanied me throughout the writing of this project. The film, which was released to critical accolades, substantial media exposure, and rampant discussion in queer and straight social circles, sparked scores of emails from colleagues, friends, and students familiar with my project. The senders of these emails wanted to make sure that I knew about the film (how could I not?), and often asked for my opinion about it. “What’s your take on *Brokeback*?,” they asked. As the gay cowboy expert in the email sender’s life, I would surely be able to offer a reasoned, nuanced, and well-written response to this cultural product.

While members of my friendship network clamored for a reaction, high profile members of the LGBT intelligentsia labored to weigh in on *Brokeback Mountain* with artfully written and thoughtful praises, critiques, and contextualized summations. These precursors have shaped my own analysis substantially, and their analysis will surface throughout the pages that follow. The artistic quality of the film with regard to screenplay, direction, and performance stands out in these assessments. I similarly admire the film with regard to the craft of its cinematography, and hold Ang Lee’s direction in great esteem. I also find the performances throughout the film to be compelling and believable. Indeed, at every level of craft, I cannot deny the film’s excellence—and I write this from the perspective of a performing artist and choreographer deeply committed to craft in his own work. Yet at a level of personal and political affect, I find the work troubling. I locate this trouble at the nexus of the film’s tragic narrative, tenacious commitment to realism,
and lush imagery. In this, the film restages traumas of queer life and reproduces such traumas for queer subjects. *Brokeback Mountain* puts states of intimacy, surveillance, and aggression in potent circulation, resembling the ways that intimacies between queers have been hostilley patrolled by the straight mind at the tail end of the Reagan-Bush era. While I recognize the potential import of a film like *Brokeback Mountain* to provide points of straight identification, and thus serve as an interlocutor between queer and straight worlds, I believe the limited possibilities for play within the narrative and imagery of the film marks an important lack of imagination and continues a dark legacy of violent retribution and punishment in gay-themed Hollywood films.

I will try to summarize the plot succintly. Two ranch hands—Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist (played by Heath Ledger and Jake Gylenhall, respectively)—meet on a job in rural Wyoming where they are hired by a shady and gruff livestock owner—Joe Aguire (played by Dennis Quaid)—to tend sheep in an arrangement that involves illegally poaching on National Forest property. While working on the mountain, Jack and Ennis, despite the vows each makes in regard to his heterosexuality, begin an intimate sexual relationship. The aggression of their inaugural sexual encounter in the tent borders on violence; it is not until their second encounter that a representation of sexual intimacy surfaces. A scene of play follows immediately after this intimate exchange, but this brief utopia is followed by an image of staunch surveillance when the menacingly homophobic Joe Aguire spies on them during this romp. Ennis has plans to marry in the fall and tells Jack “this is a one-shot thing.” Yet despite the stoicism of each cowboy, each belies a deeper affection for the other. The viewer is painfully aware that Ennis’ stoic demeanor masks the shame and self-loathing that accompanies internalized homophobia—he reveals to
Jack that as a child, he witnessed a fatal gay bashing condoned and carried out by his father. In contrast, Jack remains far more open to the possibility of a committed partnership, yet minimizes such hopes in the face of Ennis’ resistance. For all the idyllic surroundings of the pastoral landscape on Brokeback Mountain, the summer ends under a cloud of negativity. Joe Aguire shames them for supposed incompetence at their work (for which he withholds promised wages) and their romantic relationship. Under this cloud of oppression based on both class and sexuality, they leave each other hastily and grumpily. Neither possesses the emotional capacity with which to bring their relationship to a satisfying closure, nor do they make any plan to reconnect in the future. Both quickly marry and have children. They do not see each other for several years. Jack, out of the blue, sends Ennis a postcard, and they begin seeing each other over sporadic fishing trips, trying—unsuccessfully for Ennis—to keep this relationship from their wives. Jack ultimately becomes fed up with the furtive and infrequent nature of this relationship, and tells Ennis—who has consistently resisted any kind of earnest commitment to the relationship, even after his divorce—that he is looking for other men to be with. When Ennis doesn’t hear from Jack for a period of months he calls his wife to find out that Jack is dead from an accident, or this is what Jack’s widow says. In the film, Lee juxtaposes the sound of her voice speaking to Ennis over the phone with fragments of a gay bashing. Regardless of the ambiguity of these images, Ennis clearly understands Jack’s death inseparably from his own traumatic memory of the gay bashing he witnessed as a child at the hands of his father. The final scenes of the film show Ennis attempting to reconnect with his now grown daughter, and wistfully looking at a picture postcard of Brokeback Mountain. Living alone in a small trailer on a desolate and dusty road, Ennis considers his fate, which looks remarkably bleak. He tragically recognizes a mistake that he cannot amend; he let his fear stand in the way of the opportunity of a life of love.
with Jack. This recognition, which Lee captures in Ennis’s softly spoken, “Oh Jack, I swear,” highlights the tragic aspects of the romantic drama.

**Aggression, Intimacy, Play, Surveillance**

*Aggression.* After watching the film in the theater, my memories of the widely discussed sex-scene-in-the-tent remained foggy—I think the violence of the intimate encounter between the two men contributed to the fuzziness in my mind. I could not objectify it sexually (as some gay men I talked to did) nor replay it in my mind’s eye. Rather than understanding the scene from a phenomenological or semiotic perspective, I knew it from its social contours—the reverberations of discourse widely disseminated in the weeks and months after the film’s release. I knew its significance as the first sexual encounter between Ennis and Jake in the critically acclaimed film, I knew it from the jokes that sprang from it (both televised on the Leno show and transmitted by friends, colleagues, and acquaintances at bars, parties, and in offices). I knew it as a plot point in an Oscar-winning screenplay, a significant moment in mainstream filmmaking that marks director Ang Lee’s second Academy Award. Yet from firsthand experience, I knew this scene from an obstructed view as my squinted eyelids and hands in front of my face obscured my ability to see.

I don’t believe my avoidance stemmed from internalized homophobia or sexual shame. Rather, I feared Ennis’ potential for violence, and like a viewer of a classic horror film, wanted to scream to stop Jack from sexually advancing any further toward Ennis. It turns out that my instincts were not unfounded; though Ennis does follow through with a sexual encounter, it is an encounter marked by roughness and physical force—Jack’s initial overture taken over completely by a compensatory and sexually aggressive response by Ennis. This was not the
same kind of aggression and domination displayed by Fred Holland and Ishmael Houston-Jones where issues of submission and consent were negotiated in-scene. Rather, Ennis’ roughness teemed with fiery anger, even hatred. My fear of this unstable combination of desire and aggression kept me from being able to see or remember the scene with any clarity or distance.

Looking back at the scene on DVD years later, I admire the craft of the cinematography, which captures the claustrophobia of the tent and sepia-tinged lighting from a lantern artfully, the admirable work of the (straight) actors, who go to great lengths in the bonus extras to explain how anxious they were about appropriately and accurately representing their gay characters (numerous critics and fans lauded their bravery), and the direction, which captured key details within frame (Gyllenhall’s ass, a cowboy hat, and a weathered leather belt) while omitting others (namely Ledger’s genitals). The tight choreography of their encounter, which excludes a kiss but includes a shove, a striking of a fist, and a hasty, shameful fuck is carefully orchestrated within the compressed space. The fear, longing, and shame of both characters radiates from the screen.

*Intimacy.* The second encounter from inside the tent stayed with me a bit more clearly as I left the theater. In this second scene of intimacy between Jack and Ennis, Ennis enters the tent and crouches before Jack. Unlike their first encounter, Ennis timidly approaches Jack and kneels before him. Jack then, in a move emblematic of their relationship wherein he bravely pursues Ennis and breaks down Ennis’ steely stoic demeanor, kisses Ennis. He then almost inaudibly whispers, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” shamed by his attraction for Ennis, and an advance that cannot be dismissed by an alcohol-induced confusion or an animal, sexual urge. The kiss, at least in this scene, points toward an intimate connection rather than the rushed, forced fucking that inaugurated this awkward pairing. The tension in the scene resolves as Ennis whispers, “It’s alright,” and they embrace fully, lying down into the tent, and kiss fully, with open mouths.
Their embrace shifts as unstably as the volatile mix of desire, fear, shame, and aggression that drives their relationship—neither can open his eyes, and Ennis’ face registers a level of pain commensurate with processing of trauma more than sexual arousal. Jack tightens his grip on Ennis, as if bearing the impact of Ennis’ emotional explosion. As the scene ends, Jack shifts himself on top of Ennis, not in a move of power or dominance, or even of a lover pleasing his partner, but rather with the attentiveness of a medic tending to the injured, kissing his head in an attempt to heal Ennis’ psychic wounds.

Play. A jump cut takes the viewer to an extreme long shot of the camp. This is the scene that has stuck with me from the first time I saw the film in the theater during the winter of 2006. The camera shows the viewer Jack in the midst of buttoning his jeans; both he and Ennis are shirtless. Ennis darts behind Jack and gives him a hard poke on his right shoulder before shifting quickly to the left. Ennis wears his white cowboy hat and carries his white shirt, which unfurls behind him in his antics. Provoked into play by this rowdy tap, Jack pursues Ennis, trying to catch him. Ennis evades Jack for a bit, then changes direction to collide into him. Each man redirects his weight into this abrasive contact, pushing toward the other. Each man jockeys for position so as to take the other to the ground in a series of awkwardly executed arm holds. From the distant vantage point of the camera, the viewer hears their laughter faintly—reinforcing the sense of play and the remoteness of their location. Simultaneously, a much louder squeak of leather emerges—its volume and texture suggests this sound’s source sits much closer to the camera’s point of view. Here I notice that the far edges of the screen are darkened throughout this shot. The sound of leather rubbing against itself (a saddle against stirrups?) continues as Ennis and Jack tumble to the ground, kissing behind the camouflage of the white cowboy hat. This entire joyous, frolicking sequence takes less than 15 seconds, yet remains indelibly etched
as a primary association with the first half of the film. (After seeing it in the theater, I was astonished to watch the film on DVD and find out that it was such a short scene.)

*Surveillance.* A jump cut takes the viewer to an extreme close up of Joe Aguire who pulls binoculars away from his face. The creaky sound of leather comes from his saddle strapped to the horse that he mounts. He watches the men play with a sneer. This sneer fades to a stoic disgust as he pulls the binoculars away from his face. The viewer learns that Jack and Ennis’ play has been under surveillance—menacingly patrolled.

The scene of play sticks with me more than any other; I remember it with a confusing assemblage of eroticism, joy, and fear. Yes, I find the playful wrestling erotic—Jake Gyllenhall and Heath Ledger embody gym-body cowboys with a hairless muscularity that would make many of the men at Oil Can Harry’s rush to offer a spin on the floor. And the playful nature of the scene invites a smile, even laughter, especially after the claustrophobic nature of the intimate encounter in the tent that comes immediately before it; finally, I remember thinking, they can enjoy this relationship that has been such a source of anxiety for the two of them. I also read this playfulness as predicated upon the intimacy of the scene before. To a lesser degree, the playful scene also recalls the violent sexual aggression of the first scene described above; they press into each other with the same degree of force as their first sexual encounter, probably more, but the intent here motions toward rejuvenation, not retribution or fear. Nor does this intimacy gesture toward the processing of trauma that marks their second encounter in the tent.

More to the point, I believe that the scene I have titled “Play” sticks with me precisely because of the lack of play between Jack and Ennis elsewhere in the film. Other moments of physical play between them (earlier in the film) can be attributed to alcohol, but this moment
relies on sober wakefulness in daylight. The only other time we see this kind of play in the film is between Ennis and his wife as they sled down a long hill in a fluffy, winter wonderland—this functions as a key moment in their bonding. But for Jack and Ennis, aggression, intimacy, and surveillance mark their trajectories once Joe Aguire sees them through his binoculars. Play disappears from representations of same-sex desire.

Intimacy, aggression, and surveillance don’t exist in isolation, rather they circulate in combination. The film portrays forceful intimacies, aggressive surveillance, and sexual closeness closely patrolled: Jack’s attempt to playfully lure Ennis out of a foul mood on the morning of their last day together quickly bypasses intimacy and ends in a violent punch. Ennis’ tortured retching in an alley after Jack drives away from Brokeback Mountain ends with him screaming “What are you looking at,” to silhouetted onlookers. In the reunion scene between Jack and Ennis, Ennis’ wife watches their forceful and intimate encounter with horror. Ultimately, the viewer understands that Jack’s need for intimacy with other men led to his death by gay bashing—this aggressive surveillance leads to tragic consequences. In such a context, the fifteen-second scene of play stands out as the single moment where same-sex desire and the physical dexterity of the cowboy meet. Their brief exchange also registers as the most physical and choreographic of their scenes together. Yet from the perspective of plot, the scene of play serves only as a springboard for the punishment and retribution of Joe Aguire.

**Intimacy Aggressively Patrolled**

The circulation of intimacy, aggression, and surveillance that I read in the film resembles the treatment of the LGBT population in the U.S. in the same historical moment. Looking a few years after the release of *Brokeback Mountain*, I am reminded of the way that Rutgers University
student Tyler Clementi’s kiss with another man in his dorm room was video recorded—without Clementi’s knowledge—and later cyber broadcast in 2010. When Clementi jumped out of a building the day after the broadcast, issues of gay bullying received national attention. In the same month that Clementi died, four other U.S. teenagers committed suicide in response to victimization that targeted their sexuality. While this happened at the same moment that Robert P. Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute showed increasing support for gay marriage—reporting approval ratings tipping narrowly above the fifty percent marker—hate crimes against gays actually increased from 2008-10.\(^2\)

Bracketing Brokeback Mountain’s release several years prior, physical intimacy between gay men came under public scrutiny unknown since homophobic rhetoric against anal sex emerged at the beginning of the AIDS crisis in the mid-1980s. Almost twenty years after linkages between gay men, anal sex, and AIDS were publicized and cemented in the popular imaginary, increased attention came to gay male sex practices, this time under monikers of “the down low,” “bug-chasers,” and “barebacking.” The down low is a phrase that came to describe African American men who compartmentalize their same-sex sexual encounters from the rest of their lives. The phenomenon of African American men keeping their homosexual activities “on the down low” was first reported in the popular press as early as 2001,\(^3\) but became more mainstream in 2003 through feature articles in New York Times Magazine and regular focus on The Oprah Winfrey Show.\(^4\) These mainstream accounts largely pit the homosexual desires of these men against interests of public health, and the down low was seen as the primary factor for HIV transmission to African American women. African American gay cultural critics Jason King and Frank Leon Roberts both criticized the sensationalist nature of mainstream reports on the topic and noted the asymmetry of these accounts as they rendered African American’s
behavior pathological even though closeted sexualities were also widespread by non-African American men.\textsuperscript{5}

Similar sensationalism accompanied mainstream media coverage of bug chasing and barebacking. Bug chasing is a phrase used to describe HIV negative men who actively seek HIV infection through anal sex without a condom—sometimes with multiple partners whom they know to be HIV positive. Barebacking, which traditionally refers to riding a horse without a saddle, had, by the late 1990s, come to signify unprotected anal sex between gay men.\textsuperscript{6} The disregard for safer sex practices developed in the 1980s had been credited with the resurgence of HIV-infection in gay male populations after the advent of antiretroviral treatment. While bareback sex drew some mainstream attention in the nineties, it was largely content for gay glossy magazines such as \textit{The Advocate} and local LGBTQ newspapers. However, in the early 2000s, mainstream media popularized bareback sex in connection with bug chasing and disseminated details about the sexual practices of gay men with similar punishing and homophobic reverberations as when the AIDS crisis first drew attention to anal sex in the U.S. popular imaginary. Of particular note is a 2003 article in \textit{Rolling Stone} by Gregory Freeman titled “In Search of Death.” As the title indicates, the trend piece sensationalizes issues of willing HIV-infection as Freeman interviews two men notable for their inflammatory potential—an All-American boy attending a Midwest university who vehemently regrets submitting to voluntary infection and a thirty-something gay man who volunteers for the non-profit AIDS service organization, the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, distributing condoms while leading “a secret life” as a bug chaser. Freeman also interviewed a number of public health and HIV/AIDS service workers, the majority of whom refused to engage in the topic, encouraged him not to write the piece, or encouraged him to be careful not to use bug chasing “as an easy way to
disparage all gays and lesbians as sex-crazed addicts.” However in the two men that Freeman interviewed for the piece, he perpetuated stereotypical constructions of lost innocence, sexual pathology, and an underground web of hedonistic self-destruction. In the cases of the renewed mainstream attention to gay male sexual practices, in the surveillance and subsequent suicide of Tyler Clementi, in the attention to victimization of gay youth, and in the media coverage surrounding the gay marriage debate, I see similar circulation of intimacy, aggression, and surveillance as populates the narrative and imagery of Brokeback Mountain.

Serious Play

Where else, besides the scene that Joe Aguire patrols, can a playful combination of physicality and same sex desire be found? It does not exist on the dance floor. Instead, dancing symbolizes normative sexuality for both Jack and Ennis. The film uses the social dance floor as a stepping-stone to wedlock in a sequence of scenes wherein Jack meets his wife-to-be, then drinks with her, then dances with her, then has sex with her in the back of her car. From the car scene the film jump cuts to Jack holding their newborn child. The logic of this scene sequence—boy meets girl, boy and girl have sex, resultant infant traps boy and girl in marriage—leverages the act of dancing as part of the inevitable progression towards hetero-matrimony. As for Ennis, after his divorce, the dance floor becomes an anxiety-producing site of masculine performance wherein a waitress persuades him to dance as a part of courtship—he looks positively miserable.

Whereas Brokeback Mountain shows representations of cowboyness without the symbolic play of irony, or camp, or aesthetic distancing, the choreographers and dancers elsewhere in this study take on cowboy masculinity while also saying, “I am not he. I am not the cowboy I resemble.” In contrast to the stoicism of Jack and Ennis, the men and women at Oil
Can Harry’s use play as an integral part of their engagement with cowboyness. They accomplish this through a variety of strategies. In the two-step the men and women queer the dance’s historically constituted heteronormativity by unlinking gender associations from the roles of leader and follower. Like the two-step, the Shadow at Oil Can Harry’s destabilizes gendered assumptions regarding divisions of labor between leader and follower, but the Shadow also re-choreographs the two-step’s embrace so as to reinvigorate gay male sex practices within the dance. I argue that line dances such as “Walk the Line” exhibit the potential for a politicized collectivity between divergent discourses of sexuality and gender. Each of these choreographies repeatedly stage cowboy choreographies with an energized ambivalence, gesturing toward and negotiating between polarities of queerness and heteronormativity with admirable dexterity.

On the concert stage, similar compositional playfulness abounds. Marianne Kim and Lee Anne Schmitt in The Many Deaths of John Wayne, Part II: Making a Disaster recognize the potency of iconic cowboyness in Cold War era empire building; they depict John Wayne’s last screen death and his off-screen battle with cancer with reverence for a bygone hallmark of American masculinity. Yet they also criticize this symbol as they pay homage. In an all-female, multi-racial casting, in appropriations of Butoh aesthetic conventions, in a multi-disciplinary assemblage of dance, theatre, and film, and in a treatment of cowboyness that alternates inconstantly between a compassionate remembering of Wayne and a stinging appraisal of his legacy, Making a Disaster invites its audience to experience compassion and contempt for Americanness in the context of Cold War reactionary patriotism.

Like Kim and Schmitt, Holland and Houston-Jones acknowledge the potency of cowboy masculinity while simultaneously levying a critique. Yet in addition to looking to film for precursors, Holland and Houston-Jones also interrogate works by mid-twentieth-century modern
dance and ballet choreographers. Further, they look beyond the concert stage to create film and audio documents of their own, based on interviews with Hal Foster. Like Kim and Schmitt, they critique cowboyness in relationship to gender through the improvised dancing prowess of Yvonne Meier and her accompanying text that questions masculine authority. Yet Holland and Houston-Jones focus simultaneously on same-sex desire through ritualized improvisations that incorporate same-sex desire and sado-masochistic play. They play, too, with the very nature of dancing itself, valuing missteps and stuttering improvised fragments with the same weight as virtuosic accomplishment. In this they choreograph a document speaking to race, gender, and sexuality in equal parts. Just as Kim and Schmitt author a document that resists a climate of U.S. political conservatism during the presidency of George W. Bush, who leveraged cowboy legitimacy via his Texas ranch, Holland and Houston-Jones improvise a score that levies a critique of cowboyness and Reagan’s anti-gay and frequently racist rhetoric wrapped in Western-themed nostalgia. *Cowboys, Dreams, and Ladders* does this not through diatribe, but rather through modeling alternative values of queer cowboy possibility. The piece creates as close to a utopia as I have seen in researching this project, inclusive of multiple and shifting subject positions with regard to gender, race, generation, and sexual-orientation.

Joe Goode’s *Maverick Strain* shares Kim and Schmitt’s interest in cinematic cowboy precursors, and, like Houston-Jones and Holland, Goode looks to cowboyness with a queer leer that highlights male desire. Also, like *Cowboys, Dreams, and Ladders*, Goode’s work interrogates a historically specific cowboyness situated in the Reagan-Bush era. Yet Goode’s work more sharply cites concepts of nation and locates its critique in the devastation of the AIDS crisis. Whereas Holland and Houston-Jones utilize a deadpan irony—historically traceable to precursors in the 1960s Judson Church era experiments—to incorporate the tension between
masculinity and queerness, Goode uses highly dramatic, richly layered aesthetic conventions that remind the viewer of the political efficacy of camp for queer subjects. Goode balances acerbic exchanges between Liz Burritt and himself in the early minutes of the work with duets that attend intimately to the weight and velocity of another dancing body. In this, I argue that Goode builds compassion for those left behind by the first-wave of AIDS deaths and speaks poetically to this melancholic bereavement.

Whereas *Brokeback Mountain* and numerous dancers at Oil Can Harry’s labor to naturalize a relationship to cowboy precursors, Kim and Schmitt, Holland and Houston-Jones, and Goode all transparently cite relationships to previous filmmakers and dancemakers working with the cowboy image. A brief comparison of *The Many Deaths of John Wayne* and *Maverick Strain* highlight the ways in which the Western shadows the dances in this project. Both Kim and Schmitt and Goode reference John Wayne—the epitome of the cowboy hero—but each finds resonance at opposite ends of his career’s timeline. Goode makes explicit references to *Red River* (1948), Wayne’s first Western with director John Ford, whereas Kim and Schmitt dig into his last screen appearance in *The Shootist* (1976). These dances trace complex affections and desires for John Wayne as iconic Western hero, while contesting each film’s political underpinnings. If *Red River*’s premier date falls in an environment of rising optimism and post-World War II nation-building in the late-forties, then *The Shootist* marks the end of the Western as it had been known at mid-century amidst the internal dissent and shame at the close of the Vietnam War in the mid-seventies. Each evocation of John Wayne marks an important nexus point of masculinity, U.S. imperialism, violence, and power, and each finds an uncomfortable tension between nostalgia and disdain for the cowboy image.
Perhaps more important, particularly when compared to the mass-duplication of media integral to the production of a film like *Brokeback Mountain* or a television show like *Boy Meets Boy*, is the small scale of these works. One could argue that these boutique dances—which showed to hundreds of audience members versus the thousands to millions of audience members reached via a cable television show and Hollywood film—are better viewed as idiosyncratic exceptions to cultural norms. However, this study assumes, that in comparing discourses that share an investment in cowboyness and queerness—regardless of their scale of production, duplication, and reception—the relationship between the mythic cowboy of masculine power and its queer shadow of subversive possibility can be better understood.

There are certainly connections to be made between *Brokeback Mountain* and the dances in this project. In the pairing of queerness and cowboyness together, these works position rugged and stoic masculinity as an object of desire, and frequently, an object desired by other rugged and stoic masculinities. All of these works leverage cowboyness and queerness as signifiers that legitimize or compromise the other. In *Brokeback Mountain* cowboyness simultaneously legitimized gay desire for a target heterosexual audience while also providing the impetus for Ennis and Jack’s unfulfilled relationship. Ennis’ adherence to stoic masculinity meant that he wasn’t “no queer.” And the improbability—for mainstream America—that a tough guy like Ennis could fall in love with Jack (or any man) was precisely the hook that made *Brokeback Mountain* so deliciously sexy and sad for gay men, and equally compelling to the straight women on whom the production depended for its box office success.⁸ In *Brokeback Mountain* and (to varying degrees) all of the dances that I have studied for this project, the uncanny pairing between same-sex desire and cowboy masculinity undergird the representational power of the work.
However, and though I make this comparison cautiously, I argue that *Brokeback Mountain* has as much in common with *Boy Meets Boy* as it does with any of the dances in this project; the relative scale in terms of distribution and reception of the works in comparison to the other dances in this study is only one aspect of these similarities. Similarly to *Brokeback Mountain*, *Boy Meets Boy* supplemented the possibility of a gay love story with an avenue for straight identification. *Boy Meets Boy*, as I discussed in chapter three, accomplished this supplementation through the plot twist that some of the “mates” on the show were straight interlopers vying for a cash prize. In *Brokeback Mountain*, screenwriters Diana Ossana and Larry McMurty added what American studies scholar Lisa Arenallo has described as “the straight supplement.” Arellano critiques the screenplay for limiting representations of queer love, for amplifying the heteronormative context of domesticity, and for showing same-sex desire and intimacy as a precursor to violence and tragedy. In “The ‘Gay Film’ That Wasn’t: The Heterosexual Supplement in *Brokeback Mountain*” (2007), she closely compares the screenplay to the short story on which the film is based. She finds much more hope in Proulx’s short story for the ways in which Proulx endows Ennis with an inner life—most notably through memories of his time with Jack on Brokeback Mountain long after Jack’s death. She also notes that in expanding the short story into a feature-length screenplay the relationship between Jack and Ennis remains tightly structured within the boundaries delineated in Annie Proulx’s short story. However the screenplay develops the married lives of both Jack and Ennis; the playful sledding scene that I refer to above is part of this addition. In effect, this shift in proportion takes away from the queer possibilities of hope in *Brokeback Mountain*. The married lives of Jack and Ennis get a far greater focus in the film than in the story, thus minimizing queer experience and developing viewers’ sympathy toward the heterosexual wives of the two cowboys. She writes
that the film demands queer viewers accept a heteronormative privilege that renders queer characters powerless victims, queer desire a precursor to tragedy and death, and queer love invisible.

Akin to Arenallo’s assessment, I see the brevity of their physical play, and the fact that this play is only known through the binocular view of Joe Aguire, as a missed opportunity to represent queer possibility. Similarly to the way that Andra accuses the producers of Boy Meets Boy that it was not enough for the show to be about gay men finding connections with each other, that there had to be a twist, I remain incredulous that the audience of Brokeback Mountain could only know play—sexy, caring, joyous, connected, and healing play—through the hateful gaze of Joe Aguire’s binoculars. While I can certainly agree that the film naturalized queer love for some straights and can appreciate the immensely thoughtful craft that permeates virtually every moment of the film, at a level of affect, Joe Aguire’s binoculars cut at the same level as the twist of Boy Meets Boy. Queer play was not enough, there had to be a reprimand to this play for straights to watch it. This, I am to believe, is the cost for moving from queer subculture to mainstream commodity.

Cultural critic W.C. Harris, writing in an edited volume dedicated to analysis of Brokeback Mountain, notices a tension between an historic setting ripe with possibilities for queer subjects—the plot takes the viewer from pre-Stonewall to the beginning of the AIDS crisis (1963-82)—and a decidedly ahistorical treatment of the era. Harris describes the film as a no-win situation for queer subjects. In “Broke(n)back Faggots: Hollywood Gives Queers a Hobson’s Choice,” he interrogates the marketing campaign for the film, which worked against the specificity of a gay or queer cowboy film and the producers’ choice to pitch the film as a love story with ubiquitous resonance. Following from Vito Russo, author of the influential The
Celluloid Closet, Harris calls out universalizing impulses as antithetical to the specific textures of queer experience, and notes that while Brokeback Mountain confronts homophobia with the ostensible intent to challenge oppressive discourses, the film comes off as anti-gay with regard to the death of Jack Twist. Here, Harris notes that the tragic form of the story could succeed without Jack’s death; Ennis, as the protagonist, could tragically recognize his failure to commit to a way of life with Jack without Jack’s death—Jack could simply move on to another lover. In such a light, Harris reveals Jack’s death as gratuitously violent and excessively punitive. He argues that the film reproduces homophobic discourses reflective of the culture that received it with warm reviews.

Cultural studies scholar Thomas Piontek similarly critiques the political progressiveness of the film. In “Tears for Queers: Ang Lee’s Brokeback Mountain, Hollywood, and American Attitudes toward Homosexuality” (2012), Piontek traces portrayals of gays in Hollywood gay-themed films beginning in the 1960s. Piontek rebukes claims by numerous supporters of Brokeback Mountain that the film helped to change attitudes toward homosexuality in the U.S. by comparing it to the 1993 film Philadelphia, which starred Tom Hanks as a man dying of AIDS. He describes both Philadelphia and Brokeback Mountain as deploying a “sentimental pedagogy” in that it elicits sympathy for queers at a level of feeling without drawing attention to structural components of heteronormativity and homophobia. He notes that many reviewers of the film exchanged phrases of “tragic romance” and “gay romance” interchangeably in their accounts, pointing to the byproduct of sentimental pedagogy—sympathetic portrayals of gays in love are allowable so long as straight audiences don’t have to see them happy. Further, Piontek points to Brokeback Mountian’s reproduction of values from gay-themed Hollywood films of the 1960s wherein the consequence of homosexuality was death. Films such as The Children’s Hour
(1961), The Fox (1967), and Reflections in a Golden Eye (1967) all end with tragic consequences for sympathetic gay characters. This connection leaves Piontek to write about Brokeback Mountain,

the film’s inability to imagine love between two men as anything but a tragedy that gets at least one of the lovers killed in the last reel links it to one of the darkest chapters in the representation of gay men and lesbians in Hollywood cinema: the long line of films in the 1960s that warned of the dangers of homosexuality by picturing its deadly consequences.  

I share Piontek’s assessment that the narrative logic of Brokeback Mountain similarly offers the hope of queer fulfillment only at the cost of death and isolation.

Or, to appropriate an argument offered by theatre scholar Sue-Ellen Case over two decades ago, realism functions as a dead end for queer subjects. In “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic” she critiques canonical theatrical works of twentieth century modern realism by Sam Shepard and Marsha Norman. She writes that pseudo-feminist representations of women in such plays actually reduce the possibilities for feminist agency. Applying Baudrillard’s discussions on pornography, Case tells us that realism “degrades” and “impoverishes” suggestion through excessive means of representation (197). I similarly see the realism of Brokeback Mountain as an impoverishing logic for queers that degrades the possibility for queer agency. In compartmentalizing the oppression of queer subjects in the past, and in a rural western landscape foreign—even exotic—to the urbanites who first saw the film, Brokeback Mountain provides a congratulatory nod to the neoliberal oppression-disguised-as-acceptance that I have attempted to describe in chapters three and four.

Who Knew About Jack?
So what, exactly, is my concern with play? The answer to this question lies in my investment in understanding the cowboy in relationship to trauma. I’m grateful to *Brokeback Mountain*, and one fellow theater patron with whom I saw the film, for allowing me to see the political importance of playful distancing when approaching the cowboy with a queer leer. As I described earlier, the profound lack of levity in the film and especially Ennis’ isolation at the end left me emotionally bereft when I saw it in the theater. I stayed through the credits, as many in the theater did that night. As the lights rose I shifted through the aisle to leave, but still felt the heaviness and the bleakness of Ennis in that trailer. I saw the film by myself, and noticed the hushed tones of the audience, I would guess a mixed population of gay and straight. Part of me wondered about their reactions to the film, but part of me was too wrapped up in my own dark thoughts. I walked behind two gay men about my age, a couple judging from their body language, and briefly made eye contact with one of them. Judging from his expression, he and I shared a similar degree of despair in response to the film. Then, in a voice loud enough to break through the solemn tones around us, his friend turned to him and said, “Who knew Jake was a bottom?” Laughter erupted, reluctantly from his friend and from me, and I could hear a few people chuckling, interspersed in the crowd around us. This joke, which cleverly pits Jake Gyllenhaal’s heterosexual heart-throb status against his role as the submissive, anal-receptive partner in the first tent scene with Heath Ledger, made a temporary community of those around him who could get the logic of the joke—it was not evenly approved of or understood judging from the reactions of those around me. More importantly for me, the sharp intake of breath, the shifting of the cheeks, the engagement of the diaphragm muscle, brought me back to my body, to the present, and thankfully, away from that lonely trailer in the West.
Given the oppressive connotations that cowboyness holds, play is an essential ingredient throughout the dances in this study. To make this point, I need to develop a brief understanding of trauma in queer worlds that straddles disciplinary boundaries of critical theory and therapeutic models of trauma. Trauma can be defined as any experience that leaves the subject with a profound sense of powerlessness and with memories, hallucinations, or other symptoms that interfere with healthful living after the initial event. Researchers have studied the ways in which traumatic events disrupt the assemblage of implicit memory—that which one knows simply as a past event—into narrative memory—those memories which accrue symbolic significance in making meaning of one’s life. The emergence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a commonly described psychic state speaks to the ability of a traumatic external event to transform itself into a subjective reality.

A study published in the December 2010 issue of the American Journal of Public Health confirms what many queers already know—trauma pervades the LGBTQ experience. The study, conducted on a sample of nearly 35,000 adults over a two-year period beginning in 2004, shows far higher rates of exposure to potentially traumatic situations by gays, bisexuals, and heterosexual men and women with same-sex partners. The categories of trauma exposure studied by the authors included the following: childhood maltreatment (in forms of neglect as well as sexual and physical abuse); adult interpersonal violence (unwanted sex, domestic violence, bashing, mugging and stalking); and life threatening accidents or illness. In every category by which the authors measured trauma, the LGBT population exceeded the exposure of their straight counterparts.

Authors specializing in trauma from both theoretical and therapeutic paradigms have begun to directly tie trauma to oppression. Social worker and educator Laura van Dernoot
Lipsky discusses trauma as inseparable from social inequity and argues that systemic oppression is the chief perpetuator of trauma. Systemic oppression, she writes in her 2009 book, *Trauma Stewardship*, rides against a societally urgent need to believe that we live in a just and safe world; thus, the oppressed are blamed for their own suffering. English literature scholar Cathy Caruth, who has commented extensively on Freud’s writing on trauma, predates Lipsky’s connection between societal oppression and traumatic experience. In an essay from 1991 titled “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History,” she describes trauma as a multifaceted process: psychic (often accompanied by physical) injury occurring at the moment of the catastrophic event, the sense of powerlessness at the suddenness of the event, and the disavowal of catastrophe afterward. Taking Lipsky and Caruth together, the wounding of trauma continues, not because of the cognition of the event, but because of a failure to cognate, or process, the catastrophic threat. A key ingredient in this failure to process is a community or societal failure to understand the oppression that leads to trauma. For Caruth, “The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all.” The latency of the traumatic event in the subject’s mind leads it to be reproduced in anxious dreams or vigilantly defensive behavior, and the opaqueness of the oppression within the event at a social level functions as a double wound.

Caruth looks to the phenomenon of play—specifically game play—as a means by which trauma can be processed. In “Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival” (2001) she closely reads Freud’s two case studies in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920)—namely, soldiers suffering nightmares in the wake of World War I and a child playing a game to process the death of his mother—in order to understand trauma as intricately related to ideas of survival. Here she
looks at the creative act of the child playing “here and there” (fort and da) with his spool as a repetitive act of creative invention. Caruth, who also looked to a recent interview of a child who was processing the loss of his best friend, theorizes play as a central function to making sense of trauma.

Research in the fields of behavioral health and art therapies also support the idea that play—and humor—function to mitigate the residue of trauma exposure. In studies that range in focus from humor-focused art therapy in a population of adult, male war veterans to the various modes of humor used by social workers attending to children at high risk for criminal behavior, researchers have shown the value of humor and play in recovering from trauma. Similar approaches have been discussed in interpersonal therapeutic settings where attention is paid to the neurophysiology of laughter; Jacqueline Garrick in “The Humor of Trauma Survivors: Its Application in a Therapeutic Milieu,” discusses humor as one component available to restoring the subject to their sense of self after a traumatic event. Additionally, humor and play have the benefit of allowing a patient to regulate the rate with which a traumatic event or memory is processed.

Here I would like to consider camp as a playful avenue that queers have historically used to process trauma. The playful moment I witnessed in the theater at the end of Brokeback Mountain reminds me of the ways in which humor—or camp—can restore me to my queer self even in the tyranny of straight nihilism. Richard Dyer’s “It’s Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going” informs my perspective. He writes about camp in two different senses. He describes “camping about,” in terms of “mincing and screaming” and generally carrying on, what one of my informants would likely describe as the moment when “fifty yards of pink chiffon” comes out of a gay man’s mouth in conversation. He also writes about camp in terms of
an artistic sensibility or approach to taste. He describes camping about as a defense mechanism that keeps away “the real awfulness” of a queer’s situation, as a kind of group identity formation, and as a resistance to heteronormativity. Yet he also holds camping about accountable as a polarizing aesthetic (pitting, at times, those who camp about from those queers who do not, or cannot), as a participant in male chauvinism, and as a component in trivializing the lives of queers.

With regard to an aesthetic sensibility, Dyer describes camp as a response to an object or situation that values style over content. In this, he argues, lies the potential for demystifying dominant discourses, such as masculinity. Important to my discussion here is Dyer’s theory that queers come to camp through the oppression of the closet. He argues that queers understand the style of things because we have,

had to be good at disguise, at appearing to be one of the crowd, the same as everyone else. 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 an ear for surfaces, appearances, forms—style.

Dyer aptly points to the distancing effect of camp sensibility as being predicated on a learned ability to understand the style of a counterintuitive situation or context. To develop form over feeling. Queers have learned to pass by behaving in a way that contradicts feeling in order to avoid detection of their sexuality. This leads Dyer to describe camp as a product of queer oppression which, in a best-case scenario, is able to mark the contours of and resist that oppression. However he uses the example of John Wayne to describe the dangers of camp in straight hands. He writes that while straight men might find the form of Wayne’s swagger and bluster to be very camp (in large part because of the battering Wayne’s image took during and after the Vietnam War), they are likely nonetheless to identify with the content of masculinity
that Wayne embodies. “Camp allows straight audiences to reject the style of John Wayne; but because it is so pleasant to laugh, it also allows for a certain wistful affection for him to linger on.” In this, they value the content over the form of Wayne’s masculine performance. Dyer says this wrests camp from its critical and progressive possibilities.

Advocating for a relationship between camp and trauma is a tricky business. Throughout Dyer’s essay he reminds the reader of the pitfalls of camp; its triviality, its acquiescence to the objectification of women, and its potential for appropriation top the list of his concerns. Further, trauma just isn’t funny. However when the representation of oppression in discussion is the cowboy, I think a studied attention to artifice can be a very good thing. Dyer reminds us that when camp draws our attention to the artificiality of art it stops us from prematurely buying the representation of life that art offers. For example, when I imagine Ledger and Gyllenhall’s chiseled physiques roughhousing on a mountain under the leer of Dennis Quaid, I feel a mixture of arousal, kinesthetic enjoyment, and fear. If I add to this image the accomplished performance of a queen in the background raising her voice just enough to be heard over the morose sound score saying, “Who knew Jake was a bottom?,” I am reminded, thankfully, not to take any of this too seriously, that there is another way to see Brokeback Mountain outside of the tragic resonance its creators intend. I am reminded, or at least asked to hope, that there is, in fact, a difference between a gay love story and a tragic love story, and that it is the camp that keeps me going until I can finally forget Ennis all alone in that tiny, battered trailer…and until Hollywood makes a story queers deserve.

I’m reminded that before incomplete trauma recovery was called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, it was commonly labeled John Wayne Syndrome as veterans returned to the United States at the end of the Vietnam War. Linking John Wayne Syndrome to the high rates of
trauma exposure experienced by queers at the end of the Reagan-Bush era makes camp, as a culturally specific form of play, an ideal approach with which to look at the cowboy. Many of the patrons at Oil Can Harry’s as well as Marianne Kim, Lee Anne Schmitt, Fred Holland, and Ishmael Houston-Jones have all found the distance—through some combination of camp, play, and/or humor—from which to separate the style of the cowboy from the content of masculine entitlement. The rich content of the works I study here is derived precisely from the tension between cowboy style, queer imagining, and masculine domination. What better way to undo the trauma attributed to John Wayne’s hypermasculine swagger, than to point out, precisely, how close his swagger is to a swish? Though Brokeback Mountain attempts, with unwavering earnestness, to paint a sympathetic portrait of gay lives in the rural West, its failure to incorporate play into its narrative folds renders the film a product of the straight mind.

This is not to say that Jack and Ennis needed to be a couple of prancing queens while they tended sheep on Brokeback Mountain, but rather that a more full and complex representation of queer love—replete with trauma, play, joy, and bravery might enter the frame, safe from the menacing leer of Joe Aguire. In this way, poor Ennis, and the queer audience that cannot help loving him, might have a little bit more to smile about as the lights in the theater grow bright.

If You Can Dream It, You Can Become It

As an antidote to the queer nihilism of Brokeback Mountain, the film Adam and Steve offers a glimpse of the kind of play I imagine in the processing of queer trauma. The 2005 film, written and directed by Craig Chester (and released several months before Brokeback Mountain), chronicles the romance of Adam and Steve (played by Chester and Malcolm Getz, respectively). At first glance, the film is one more validation of white male privilege in a gay context, as the
plot mimics the heteronormative love story of boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl back again. However, I believe the ways in which this formula is recalibrated to incorporate queer play warrants consideration here. Rather than reproducing trauma through narrative representation, Chester uses the cowboy figure to recuperate and reprocess trauma through camp.

The plot unfolds from a shared trauma concerning body fluids—shit and vomit to be exact. Adam and Steve meet in 1987 in a large dance club. Steve dances in a cheesy stage show and Adam, dressed in feminized gothic extravagance emblematic of many queer identifications of the era, admires Steve’s performance and physique with his obese best friend, Rhonda (played by Parker Posey in a fat suit). Afterhours, Adam and Steve connect over cocaine (Steve introduces Adam to the drug for the first time that evening) while gazing upon the World Trade Center Towers from the Brooklyn Bridge. They then go back to Steve’s place. After more speedy conversation the two begin to set the stage for sex. As part of this, Steve begins exhibiting his chiseled muscles to Adam’s inebriated delight. Unfortunately, due to the effect of the cocaine, which they suspect has been cut with baby laxative, Steve’s flexing exhibition is marred by “Hersey squirt” diarrhea. To make matters worse, Adam responds to the diarrhea with projectile vomiting. The two part ways hastily, ashamed and unfulfilled.

Cut to seventeen years later. Adam is a sober addict still marred by misfortune, which he attributes to a family curse. (A scene with his family shows every possible ailment and malaise imaginable, which the family members meet with comic good cheer.) Aside from Rhonda and his dog, he lives a profoundly isolated and unlucky existence. Part of this comes from the fact that every time he shows affection toward another man in public, “some asshole from Jersey” throws a beer bottle at him (Chester’s screenplay and direction relentlessly and humorously
adheres to this convention throughout the film). He maneuvers awkwardly through the gay
world he inhabits, tripping over himself as he tries to engage with potential suitors.

Steve’s life developed a bit more functionally, at least at the surface. He keeps a
neurotically clean home and body. Yet despite the fact that Steve appears more competent in the
ways of the world—a decidedly metropolitan world marked by high-class ornaments befitting
midtown Manhattan—the viewer soon recognizes Steve as neurotically controlling and fearful of
commitment. He has never cultivated a substantial relationship and acts out in anonymous sexual
encounters.

Both Adam and Steve suffer from low self-esteem stemming partially from the sexual
shame that they experienced earlier in the film (read: Hersey squirts and projectile vomiting).
But we learn also about deeper, more foundational traumas that follow both characters through
their lives. In addition to the family curse, undercurrents of homophobia and heteronormativity
infiltrate their lives, particularly for Adam. As much trouble as Adam has finding a place as a
queer man within the straight world (dodging beer bottles thrown whenever he shows affection
in public), he also struggles in gay cultural enclaves. As a sober addict he is marginalized from
aspects of gay life that center around drugs and alcohol, as a man of limited coordination and
physical aptitude he struggles with the gym-body perfectionism demonstrated by his peers, and
his general lack of self-esteem renders him an awkward, if adorable to the audience, presence in
numerous social situations in the film.

The two meet at a hospital where Steve works as a psychiatrist and they immediately
connect, though neither remembers the other from their brief encounter seventeen-years prior.
Country-western dancing becomes a prime metaphor in their relationship for the different ways
each moves through the world. Soon after they start dating, Steve invites Adam to an evening of
two-stepping (to which Adam replies, “Two-step? I can barely one-step!”). Not surprisingly, Adam’s clumsiness follows him to the dance floor and he spends the majority of the evening stepping on Steve’s toes apologetically. Though Steve is a patient teacher, tension arises when a former trick of Steve’s approaches them. His name is Andy.

Andy’s chiseled features and gym-sculpted body stands in as the norm for gay desirability in the film. Andy immediately approaches Adam hostiley, greeting Adam’s large nose and dark features with a condescending, insincere, and anti-Semitic, “Shalom, cowboy.” In addition to possessing intimidatingly good looks, Andy intimidates Adam as the dance instructor at the club. He follows his acerbic exchange with a series of back handsprings across the floor—highlighting a combined athleticism, coordination, and corporeal confidence Adam sorely lacks. Yet such masculine imperatives don’t define Adam and Steve’s relationship and they easily recover from the uncomfortable scene over the decidedly un-masculine revelation that they each have an inner Hollywood actress that they identify with. (Adam identifies with Julia Roberts and Steve with Meg Ryan.) Following this revelation, they enjoy a substantial kiss in public space, and no asshole in Jersey is around to throw a beer bottle at Adam. It seems that Adam’s extended run of bad luck and his relationship with homophobic violence may be shifting.

Trouble in the relationship does arise, however, when Steve recognizes Adam from his role in their shameful sexual encounter from seventeen-years prior. This revelation happens for Steve when the two of them are on a romantic walk on the Brooklyn Bridge—a key site where they connected prior to the Hersey-squirt trauma. Steve, upon having the flashback, feels shame in regard to losing control over his own bowels—Chester posits Steve’s hyper-vigilant cleanliness as a post-traumatic, hyper-vigilant response to the episode. Steve also feels shame about getting Adam started on the road to drug abuse. In response to this, Steve panics and runs
away; he then acts out sexually and abruptly ends the relationship. When Adam later learns why Steve ended the relationship, he sets out to find Steve and attempt reconciliation.

The pivotal moment when Adam wins Steve back again takes place on the country-western dance floor. After a madcap chase looking for Steve that takes Adam, Michael, and Rhonda instantaneously from a twelve-step meeting to the country-western dance floor (a delightful moment of discontinuous editing that defies logics of time and space and exemplifies Chester’s approach to comedic direction), they end up in the country-western dance hall in Midtown. They all arrive dressed in Western attire, magically transformed through the same convention that brought them to this space. Couples perform the choreography of The Shadow dance around them as Rhonda whispers to Adam, “If you can imagine it you can achieve it, if you can dream it, you can become it.” Her enigmatic text—spoken in a send-up of Zen-influenced popular psychology—speaks not only to the ensuing confrontation Adam will instigate with Steve, but also to Adam’s relationship to cowboyness.

After a few seconds, the camera lands on arch-nemesis Andy leading Steve in a passionate duet. Andy wears a t-shirt that reads, “Cowboys make better lovers.” Adam, uncharacteristically enraged, tears them apart from each other with a grunt, accompanied by an abrupt silencing of the music. An awkward silence follows. No one knows what to do, including Adam. Then, as if by magic, he throws his hands out to his sides with the country blues guitar that plays from the band. With a look on his face that conveys his body has been taken over by an unseen force, Adam begins to shift his hips in time with the music. He grabs an anonymous partner and begins a stylized version of The Shadow. Emboldened by his love for Steve, his anger toward Andy, and the absurdist conventions that have denied realistic conventions in the latter part of the film, Adam instantly becomes an elegant and striking dancer.
The choreography combines country-western dance moves such as The Shadow with steps, chugs, pivots, and turns from line-dances and acrobatic flourishes to create a spectacular fantasy of flamboyant high drama.

Intertwined with the showy athleticism and bound pedestrian quality that exemplifies much country-western line dancing, the choreography by Troy Christian also intersperses campy snaps, hip wiggles, shoulder rolls, and other movements that similarly cite Broadway musical conventions. The song that accompanies this movement is an original composition by Roddy Bottum titled appropriately enough, “Shit Happens.” Serving as a humorous rebuke to Steve’s neurotic cleanliness and shame of his own bodily functions, the song contextualizes the choreography with such lyrics as, “They say that life is just a bowl of cherries, but they don’t write greeting cards about dingle berries.” In this, Adam’s spectacular redemption on the dance floor—he handily wins the West Side Story-inspired dance-off—rubs uncomfortably against the internalized shame of the male anus. The scene thoroughly queers hypermasculine codes and integrates effeminate physicality while leveraging the symbolic power of the cowboy to legitimate this amalgam.

Looking together at Ang Lee and Craig Chester’s differing approaches to gay cowboy representation highlights the ways that isolated masculinity limits queer possibilities. As seductive as gay audience members found the physiques of Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhall in Brokeback Mountain and as believable as their performances were, the commitment to masculine authenticity undermined any possibility for queer hope. In contrast, Chester uses the cowboy image as just one symbol in a comedy decidedly unconcerned with masculine codes. If Ledger and Gyllenhall received praise for reproducing the cowboy likeness in consonance with Hollywood conventions of masculine behavior, then the success of Chester and Getz depends on
the achievement of cowboyness by two gay characters who identify more with Julia Roberts and Meg Ryan than they do with John Wayne and Montgomery Clift.

While *Brokeback Mountain* revels in the cowboy’s tragic possibilities, *Adam and Steve* re-imagines cowboy possibility through campy departures from the aesthetic conventions of realism. This can be seen most clearly through a comparison of Adam with Ennis and their contrasting journeys to reconcile foundational traumas in their lives. Adam’s brief engagement with cowboy masculinity occurs when, fueled by the magic of queer love, he spontaneously ignites into competent cowboy dancing in the face of an aggressively butch opponent, Andy. This action rewrites Adam’s lack of assertiveness and facility throughout the narrative. Whereas the cowboy comically propels Adam into queer heroics, Ennis’ adherence to cowboy masculinity forces him to retreat from gay love and into shamed isolation, and Ledger’s nuanced performance of this stoicism serves as a cornerstone of the film’s aesthetic. The foundational trauma of *Brokeback*—Ennis’ isolation and introversion that comes from witnessing a deadly gay-bashing as a child—resolves itself only partially in the closing frames, as he allows himself to commit to Jack’s love posthumously. Yet Adam’s foundational traumas—which could be argued to be his family curse, or the relentless bottle throwing assholes from Jersey, or the botched one-night stand with Steve in the 1980s, or the tyranny of gay gym body perfection—become fully reconciled through embodying the cowboy and winning Steve back. Both films look at the cowboy as a sign of oppression for queer subjects. Lee treats this oppression as non-negotiable, universal, and mythic—a trauma that dare not speak its name. Chester, on the other hand, leverages the cowboy’s oppressive symbolism to represent the possibilities for queer recuperation from traumatic histories.
Brokeback Mountain was produced on a far larger scale than Adam and Steve. In securing blockbuster leading men (Ledger and Gyllenhall) and supporting women (Michelle Williams and Anne Hathaway) with sizeable name recognition and assembling a crew that could support his distinctive approach to capturing the lush imagery of the West, Ang Lee could not make a boutique, gay film. Rather, supported by the straight supplement of McMurtry and Ossana’s screenplay that played up points of identification for straight audiences, the film’s producers pitched a universal love story to attract a larger audience base and ensure box office success. While the inclusion of major Hollywood stars, their compelling performances, and the striking cinematography evoked sympathy for queers, it did so by relying on narrative conventions of punishment and retribution for sexual deviance that first emerged in the gay-themed Hollywood dramas of the 1960s.

Produced in the same year, Adam and Steve worked on a much smaller budget. Functioning as director, screenwriter, and lead actor, Craig Chester was able to produce a distinctively queer world that still opened possibilities for straight identification via the secondary romance between Rhonda and Michael (Chris Kattan). Unconcerned with representing a universal love story to mainstream America, Chester depicted a love story that comically marked numerous oppressive and traumatic forces through camp. The cowboy emerges as a critical, if delightfully incongruous, vehicle through which Adam and Steve’s relationship is solidified.

Taken in tandem, Adam and Steve and Brokeback Mountain remind me that the cowboy has limited use for queer subjects if left untouched by queer aesthetic tactics. The cowboys of Brokeback Mountain do a great job of eliciting nostalgia, desire, and pain. Some viewers may take comfort in the film’s placement in the then and there of 1960s-70s rural Wyoming, but to
my viewing, the oppression and trauma experienced by Jack and Ennis hits a little close to the discrimination and hostility still lived by queers in the here and now.

Returning to Sue-Ellen Case’s theorization of camp within butch-femme aesthetics clarifies the value of wit and humor in Chester’s work. Case theorizes camp as a technique to distance straight imperatives and as a weapon against the “American Literalist Terror of Straight Reality.” I see Chester’s use of camp as a bright counterpoint to *Brokeback Mountain*’s queer nihilism. Frequent mugging, relentless physical comedy, poop jokes, projectile vomit, and sharp verbal wit stand in for the escapist imagery and stoic realism of Lee’s cowboy. Particularly in the magical transformation through which Adam becomes a magnificent country western dancer over the course of a few beats of music, *Adam and Steve* shows the audience that the symbol of the cowboy can be most advantageous for queer subjects if not taken too seriously. Play is the key.

One could argue that *Adam and Steve* does little more than validate a neoliberal gay political agenda that José Muñoz elegantly critiques in *Cruising Utopia*. The whiteness of the casting and the absence of lesbian characters stands out in this regard, as does lack of recognition of the oppressive cost of living in midtown Manhattan (with the exception of Steve, no character in the film could afford the life they live based on the low-paying jobs they occupy). Yes, the film valorizes gay marriage and other bourgeois norms, but at the same time the film does the very important work of placing masculinity in its rightful place as only one component—and a rather small one at that—of gay male cultural moorings. It shows that for gay men to develop resiliency in response to the traumatic histories many of them face, playful trajectories between numerous identifications must occur. Meg Ryan must hold equal footing with John Wayne, and the incorporation of Ryan with Wayne must be fluid.
Along the way, Chester shows that gay pragmatism does not exist in opposition to queer utopia but as an immediate response to the very real discrimination and resultant trauma faced by those who identify as gay and those who identify as queer. As small of an identitarian bubble as the film portrays, I find the camp tactics of Chester’s direction a potent and timely antidote to the ahistorical and universalizing tendencies of Brokeback Mountain. Whereas Brokeback Mountain gives into trauma as an unstoppable force of nature disguised as love, Adam and Steve values the hard work of working through traumatic histories in order for love and connection to occur.

In Adam and Steve and the dances I have studied for this project, a rough handling of cowboy masculinity has hit a sweet spot that ignites gay pragmatism and queer utopias simultaneously. On one hand, every dance in this study has objectified the cowboy as a sex object, and in this a stoic, rugged, and dominant masculinity—a masculinity associated with anti-gay politics in the Reagen-Bush era of U.S. politics—has been reproduced. This reproduction has also involved—with the exceptions of Boy Meets Boy and Brokeback Mountain—a repurposing of the cowboy iconicity to legitimate gay pragmatic assertions. The Shadow, the two-step, and “Walk the Line” all call for a reconsideration of the straight mind’s assumptions.

Pushed further, these dances also mingle with ostensibly queerer works by Kim, Schmitt, Holland, Houston-Jones, and Goode in that they trouble the very notion of Americanness in an era marked by conservative ascension. In appropriating cowboy imagery, concert dance choreographers and social dance floor practitioners enter a conversation with the primary symbol of U.S. expansionism. Moving on the wooden floor of Oil Can Harry’s or on the worn marley floors of experimental dance stages, these dancers remind those who watch them that they are not the cowboy they resemble. In the process they critique U.S. empiricism and masculine oppression in ways that connect to sexuality and gender, but also race and class. They reward
and reprimand the cowboy image through embodiments that are at once cheerful and charged, reverent and volatile. These dances replay traumas of early U.S. expansionism, relate them to later injustices ranging from the Cold War to race discrimination to the AIDS pandemic, and then dissolve the potency of the very symbol that made these linkages possible.

**Chasing Shadows**

Can we imagine Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar at Oil Can Harry’s? Would they even want to go? What would such a feat of time travel and reckless ahistoricity look like? It might be really sexy, or makings for a disaster…

I want to picture them in their late twenties, a bit after their time together on Brokeback Mountain. And, for the purposes of this fantasy-driven-analytical maneuver (a fantanalytical choreology?), I want to picture the Annie Proulx version, rather than the Ang Lee version, of the characters. Far from Lee’s chiseled heartthrobs that would immediately garner a high status in the bar, Proulx describes average looking men with physical oddities: a concave chest, razor thin lips, buck teeth, etc. Though still young, both of their bodies bear the signs of a working-class life and in their skin and body composition one can see a lack of attention to balanced nutrition, aerobic exercise, and skin-care regimen to offset the harsh, arid conditions of the Rocky Mountain States. Would anyone ask them to dance? Would they be willing to learn?

I imagine one of my favorite dance partners, I’ll call him Jerry, approaching the awkward pair as they order beer from the bar. (Jerry is in his mid-to-late fifties, a former rodeo rider, and the smoothest two-step lead I have ever had the pleasure of following.) Assessing the faded blue jeans and worn boots that Jack and Ennis wear, Jerry asks in a put-on affected voice, “Gee, are you two real cowboys?” citing and excessively feminizing Debra Winger’s opening line to John
Travolta in *Urban Cowboy*. Neither Jack nor Ennis get the joke and stammer as they think about how to explain their presence here. Jerry reads their discomfort and decides to take it easy on these newcomers. Laughing, he says, “Oh geesh, I didn’t mean to frighten you. Which one of you fellas will dance with me?”

Ennis scowls, buries his hands in his pockets and mutters, “I’m not too much for dancing.” Then he turns away from Jack and Jerry and orders a shot from the bartender.

Jack, witnessing Ennis’ all too familiar withdrawal, sighs, looks Jerry in the eye, takes a large gulp of beer, and says, “Why the hell not.” Jerry leads him to the dance floor and asks, “mind if I drive?” Jack acquiesces by standing in front and facing backward, waiting for Jerry to cue their first steps. Jack confesses, “I’ve never done this backwards before, so bear with me.” To this Jerry reassures the newbie, “Oh, Honey, you’ll be fine. This is all just for fun.”

Ennis takes down the shot of whiskey and enjoys a deep breath. He leans with his back against the bar and takes in the view. He sees Jerry and Jack take their first few steps and chuckles just a little as Jack messes up the step sequence almost immediately. He looks around the room at all the men and women talking, laughing, and dancing. He notices their odd jeans and shirts, which looks like his but are sharper and newer. He wonders how much they all paid to look like this. As the familiar heat of whiskey settles in his chest, he smiles. There’s something odd and uncomfortable and exciting about this space. He sees Jack smiling as Jerry spins him. Jack seems to be getting his dancing legs back.

Jack feels like he’s starting to get the hang of this following thing. Jerry’s lead feels smooth and reassuring, and even though he hums the song a bit out of tune, Jack appreciates the feeling of his breath against the left side of Jack’s neck. Jack can’t help but smile as they execute a perfect turn. He spots Ennis smiling by the side of the bar (what a relief!), and this
distraction almost throws him from the slow, slow, quick, quick of steps that he tries to maintain. He looks over Jerry’s shoulder to get his bearings, and this is when he notices all the shadows crossing over the floor. One of the shadows looks like it’s coming from a tall, rugged, statuesque cowboy and Jack looks up to see if he can find the object that blocked that shadow from the light. However, the multitude of light sources in the bar casts shadows in all directions and though he tries, he cannot connect the shadow to the object from which it came. The bodies move through the space and the shadows move with them, but in so many complex variations that Jack resigns from this quest. He turns his nose in toward Jerry’s neck, noticing the pleasure of his spicy cologne. Then he closes his eyes and feels the two-step’s infectious rhythm through which he is just now beginning to glide.
Notes to the Introduction

1 Rather than promoting identity as a fixed status or entity, I use the qualifier identitarian as descriptive of relational and categorical movements by a subject. For robust discussions of subjectivity via feminist incursions to psychoanalytic conceptions of identification see Diana Fuss, Identification Papers (New York: Routledge, 1995). For a discussion of the need to analyze identities as processes rather than fixed entities, see Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity’,” Theory and Society 29[1]:1-47, esp. 15-17, 2000. For discussions of queerly identitarian shifts in response to hegemonic forces see José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).


4 Writing for Texas Monthly in November 1998, journalist Gregory Curtis claims that an article about Gilley’s (the famed bar in which Urban Cowboy is set) in Esquire in 1978 began a national interest in all things cowboy, catalyzing the impact of the 1980 film. In Curtis’ words, “Overnight, huge honkeytonks, each with a dance floor and a mechanical bull, sprang up in every self-respecting town west of the Atlantic Ocean” (Vol. 26:11, p. 7).


6 Toby Keith, “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)” performed by Toby Keith, Dreamworks Nashville 450815.


Conquergood, “Performance Studies,” 151.

I base this development of Conquergood’s framework on my choreographic training research into talking dances. Susan Foster’s *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002) has been an influential resource for this work. Discussing the dances of Richard Bull, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Bill T. Jones, and Trisha Brown, Foster historicizes the emergence of choreographies that combine text and movement within the artistic experimentation begun in the 1960s.

*Bareback Into the Sunset* (2003) is an evening-length that premiered in October 2003 at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, California as the culmination of my M.F.A. in dance from UCLA’s Department of World Arts and Cultures. Credits: Choreographed and written by Peter Carpenter; performances by Carpenter, Lynn Johnson, Kim Vetter, Sri Susilowati, Steven Thaengthong; rehearsal understudies—Jackie Lopez and Kristen Smiarowski; lighting design by Sam Jones; costume design by Yoon Mi Choi. Faculty Advisors: Angelia Leung and David Roussève (co-chairs), Dan Froot, and David Gere.

Subsequent performances of *Bareback Into the Sunset* (both full-length and excerpted versions) have since been performed at numerous locations in Los Angeles and Chicago. Subsequent cast members have included: Olivia Bustos, Varris Holms, Jennifer Hudson, Allison Kenny, Nako Okubo, and Olivier Tarpaga.

I created *My Fellow Americans* (2009) with significant financial support from a Lab Artist Grant by the Chicago Dancemakers Forum, a faculty development grant from Columbia College Chicago and a space grant from the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs. *My Fellow Americans* premiered at the Hamlin Park Fieldhouse in Chicago in October 2009 and was remounted in May 2010 at Northwestern University’s McCormick Auditorium.

See Susan Foster’s introduction to Foster, ed. *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power*, pp. x-i (New York and London: Routledge, 1996). She writes that interests in bodily action in the field of anthropology, history, literary studies, and gender studies figure predominantly in an interdisciplinary approach to bodily movement that attends simultaneously to cultural, historical and material concerns (iix).


17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 19.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid. My assertion that capitalism is the mean by which queers attained spaces and communities separate from hegemonic norms is founded primarily on the writing of Alan Sinfield in *Gay and After: Gender, Culture and Consumption* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1998). I deal explicitly with the tension between queer radicalism and gay/lesbian capitalist pragmatism in chapter three.

21 Duggan, p. 16.

22 Ibid.


24 Ibid., p. 347.


27 Ibid., p. 615.

28 Ibid., p. 616.

29 See Byron Price, “Cowboys and Presidents” *Convergence*, Autry National Center Magazine, Special Edition. Spring/Summer 2008. Roosevelt spent three years as a cowboy and rancher in South Dakota. The lore follows that these years of work transformed his body from a slight build of a privileged, East Coast intellectual and politician to a virile westerner. He helped propagate this lore through the publication of two books on his life in the West. His post as
Lieutenant Colonel of the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry during the Spanish-American War confirmed his claim to cowboyness. And it is this success as a war hero that catapulted him to the status of a national celebrity; a measure of this success comes in his easy win of the New York governor’s post in 1898. Two years later he joined at the VP ticket with McKinley, and after their win of the White House in 1900 and McKinley’s assassination in 1901 led Roosevelt to the Oval Office. Price writes:

To many Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt embodied the rugged, masculine and independent cowboy here of literature and popular culture…. He skillfully used his cowboy persona to political advantage as well, particularly when courting Western voters, and largely avoided the dictatorial and un-statesmanlike behavior that his detractors feared when he assumed high office (22).

30 Ibid., 43.

31 Ibid. Emphasis added.

32 Price notes that in the Cold War era, the cowboy became a “potent symbol of American foreign policy” (37), and Dwight B. Eisenhower referred to the “Code of the West” in the settling of disputes. Eisenhower called for face-to-face resolutions of differences that was compared in the press and political cartoons to a shootout in a Western film. He was an avid fan of Western film and literature.

Though President Nixon was also a fan of Westerns, it was his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who reveled in unilateral approaches to diplomatic negotiations. In reference to Middle East peace talks he told Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci in 1972,

[t]he main point stems from the fact that I’ve always acted alone. Americans admire that enormously. Americans admire the cowboy leading the caravan alone astride his horse, the cowboy entering a village or city alone on his horse. Without even a pistol, maybe, because he doesn’t go in for shooting. He acts, that’s all; at the right spot at the right time. A Wild West tale, if you like (44).


34 Le Coney and Trodd quote Richard Slotkin’s Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America (New York: Atheneum, 1992): “Tropes and symbols derived from Western movies had become one of the more important interpretive grids through which Americans tried to understand and control their unprecedented and dismaying experiences in Vietnam” (Slotkin, p. 586 in Le Coney and Trodd, p. 165).

35 Le Coney and Trodd, p. 165.
36 Ibid. p. 166.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., p. 178.

39 Ibid.


41 Though Le Coney and Trodd fail to mention the role of the Imperial Court in their account of IGRA history, their essay does note that gay rodeo participation does offer “the opportunity to embrace homosexuality without being pigeonholed as an Oscar Wilde swish” (179).

42 This observation is based on my own attendance and observations at IGRA events in Reno and Los Angeles 2002-2005.


45 Le Coney and Trodd, p. 179.

46 Ibid., p. 181.


48 See Jan Zita Grover, “AIDS: Keywords” in Douglas Crimp, ed. AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism, pp. 17-30 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 24. Grover theorizes the self/other distinction embedded within concern for the general population in reference to Reagan’s entire malaise with leadership around the disease. She writes, “Gary Bauer, President Reagan’s assistant, told Face the Nation that the reason Reagan had not even uttered the word AIDS publicly before a press conference late in 1985 was that the Administration did not until then perceive AIDS as a problem: ‘It hadn’t spread into the general population yet’” (23).


Ibid., p. 458. Chibbaro notes that this quote was challenged by at least one reviewer, and Morris did admit to fabricating quotes in support of his controversial biography. Despite these challenges, sound evidence exists in regard to Reagan’s symbolic and practical disavowal of “high risk groups” with regard to advocacy for AIDS research, and Reagan’s protection of an America in line with his own moral values.


Ibid., 31-32. Italics and capitalization found in the original.

**Notes to Chapter One**

1 Many gay men that I talked to in encounters outside of my fieldwork couldn’t believe that I “went over the hill” (the low mountain that separates Hollywood from Studio City in the San Fernando Valley) two to three times a week for this project. The distance was not so much physical as hierarchical, as “The Valley” is seen as a more working class region than the areas surrounding the nightlife epicenter of gay male life in Los Angeles, West Hollywood. The hierarchical geography of queer Los Angeles is partially articulated in Moira Rachel Kenney, *Mapping Gay L.A.: The Intersection of Place and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

3 Ibid., 27.

4 Bill Kenner and Pat McLaughlin’s, “It’s Alright to Be a Redneck” (performed by Alan Jackson, Arista Nashville 69102) encourages pride in manual labor, drinking beer, driving trucks, seducing women and other cliché symbols of rural blue-collar masculinity.

5 Alan Jackson, “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning),” performed by Alan Jackson, Arista Nashville 69129.

6 Phil Vassar and Craig Wiseman, “American Child,” Arista Nashville xxx recording number needed.

7 Toby Keith, “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American),” performed by Toby Keith, DreamWorks Nashville 450815.

8 ABC news anchor Peter Jennings took exception to the angry lyrics and requested Keith tone down his rhetoric in preparation for a television special that Jennings was to host. Keith’s heated refusal to comply with the network’s request and his subsequent blame of Jennings’ Canadian citizenship for the censorship on CBS’ *60 Minutes* garnered widespread media attention. See Michelle Orecklin, “Hey, He’s Canadian,” *Time* 159, no. 25 (June 24, 2002): 77.


10 Ibid., pp. 17, 19.


12 Ibid. p. 15.

13 The 1969 version of *True Grit*, stars John Wayne as Cogburn, an aging gunslinger. His ethical trajectory in the film moves from performing ambivalently at the intersection of patriarch/maverick to embodying patriarchal power more fully. By the end of the film he somewhat tames the mannish frontier woman, Mattie, and with the flourish of his horse jumping over a fence and into the horizon, Cogburn reasserts a masculine, patriarchal, virile cowboyness. Wayne won the 1970 Oscar Award for Best Actor for this role (Dir. Henry Hathaway, Screenplay by Marguerite Roberts from the novel by Charles Portis, Paramount).
The two-step is by far the most frequently occurring dance at the bar. The Shadow, which I discuss in chapter three, is next, happening anywhere from four to seven times in an evening. East coast swings and waltzes will happen two to three times a night. The west coast swing and shuffle may or may not happen in an evening, and the limited opportunity to become proficient with these dances is one way of separating the upper-echelons of dancers.

My own training in modern dance inhibited, to some degree, my own trajectory of learning. Coming from a background predominantly culled from values passed down from Erick Hawkins technique and José Limón technique, I was taught to value large steps and an aggressive spatial attitude. Such impulses, ingrained in my body after years of training, opposed the small, gliding cadence the two-step requires. Contact Improvisation, with which I was also proficient, proved more beneficial, at least in the following role, as I was able to aptly read and respond a leader’s cues via studied attention to shifts in weight.

Sometimes groups of women occupy the pool table in the corner, interacting with dancing friends only sporadically and cultivating another set of skill-based hierarchies.

Sedgwick quotes a definition of patriarchy by Heidi Hartmann: "relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (quoted in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* [New York: Columbia University Press. 1985], 3).

Sedgwick in *Between Men* draws upon writing by American feminist authors Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodrow as summarized by English and Woman's Studies Scholar Coppélia Kahn to conclude,

> there are many an thorough asymmetries between the sexual continuums of women and men, between female and male sexuality and homosociality, and most pointedly between homosocial and heterosexual object choices for males; and on the other hand that the status of women, and the whole question of arrangements between genders, is deeply and inescapably inscribed in the structure even of relationships that seem to exclude women—even in male homosocial/homosexual relationships (24-25).

Ibid., 5.

See the episode titled “Sex and Social Dance.” Produced by Thirteen/WNET in association with RM Arts and BBC-TV, 1993.


23 Wittig, xiii.

24 Wittig, 2.

25 Wittig, 12.


27 Case, 56.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 56-57.

30 Ibid. [Check page number.]

31 Ibid., 65.


33 Ibid., p. 497.

34 Ibid., p. 493.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.


38 Marianne Kim currently creates interdisciplinary performances involving the body, multimedia installation and image through live and recorded media. She received her MFA in Dance from UCLA Department of World Arts and Cultures and a BS in Theatre from Northwestern University in 1993. Her work has been produced nationally and internationally. She is currently an Associate Professor in the Interdisciplinary Art Department at Arizona State University.

39 Lee Anne Schmitt works as a writer and director of film and performance events. Her work centers on creating ritualized art events from quotidian, American source material. She holds an
MFA from the School of Film/Video at the California Institute of the Arts (2003) and a BS in Performance Studies from Northwestern University (1993). She is on faculty at the California Institute of the Arts.

My reading of this work is based on viewing the live performance as well as numerous viewings of the performance via a DVD provided by the artists. Additionally I have been friends and artistic colleagues with both Kim and Schmitt since 1990 and have been privileged to see the development of their work from that time. The pair worked on *Making a Disaster* in Chicago when I was living there and they were based in Phoenix (Kim) and Los Angeles (Schmitt). As a result, Schmitt edited a great deal of the video footage from her laptop computer editing system while staying with me in Chicago, and I was luckily privy to a number of process-related conversations between the pair during the making of the work.

*Making a Disaster* was created as the second of a three part work the pair envisioned. The production was produced as part of a performance workshop sponsored by Hedwig Dances (a Chicago-based contemporary dance company under the artistic direction of Jan Bartozek in residence at the Chicago Cultural Center) over a three-week period in July of 2006.


Case, p. 57.

Notes to Chapter 2

1 Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s influential monograph, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press), describes the Africanist aesthetic as embracing discord and conflict. Following in the footsteps of Robert Farris Thompson, but with a step to the side, Gottschild identifies this value through polycentrism, polyrhythm, high-affect juxtaposition (sharp movements in quality and tone with disregard for smoothing out transitions), and ephebism (kinesthetic vitality and intensity). She also describes the aesthetic of the cool as an “all-embracing” principle that pairs formal clarity with emotional detachment (pp. 13-19).
2 Gottschild describes the Africanist aesthetic as an unacknowledged foundation of U.S. culture. “Like electricity through the wires, we draw from it all the time, but few of us are aware of its source.” Digging the Africanist Presence, p. 23.


5 Ibid., p. 146. Though many have reprinted this statistic, the source of this number remains unclear. See Blake Allmendinger, Ten Most Wanted: The New Western Literature (New York and London: Routledge, 1988) for a clear lineage of this information (p. 190-91 [n. 7]).

6 Katz, p. 147. Katz’s work offers a thorough and highly accessible account of African American presence in the West. He notes black slave presence in every aspect of frontier settlement including: early explorer expeditions from Spanish colonies, fur trading camps, colonial life (including long standing frontier settlements of black slaves), cowboys, homesteaders, and participation in the infantry and calvary of the Civil War.

7 Ibid., xv. See also pp. 1-12. In the first chapter of Imagining the African American West, Allmendinger writes that Beckworth omitted that his mother was a slave. He also describes the early frontier as a place of somewhat increased mobility for African Americans who were likely to be perceived as agents of civilization via employment for fur traders. “Beckworth used [white] as an honorary term to indicate that the trapper was not a Native or ‘savage’ but a member of ‘civilization’ who worked for one of the American companies” (4). Allmendinger reads Beckworth’s monograph as a deeply complex treatise on the possibility for identitarian and physical mobility on the early frontier.


9 Ibid., 18.

10 Ibid., 19


12 Allmendinger, Imagining the African American West, p. 74.

13 Ibid., 79.
See also Michael K. Johnson’s *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2002) who looks at western literature by African American men and the ways these works deploy the frontier as a place where dominant, oppressive racial discourses were loosened.

Ibid., xvi-xvii, 3-5, 49-50, 57-58. Further support for my reading of the image as a lynching can be found in the work of historian Douglas Flamm. Flamm conducts a critical analysis of the biography and collected writing of Harlem Renaissance author Arna Bontemps to show the complex ways in which southern black culture and multiracial cultural enclaves in Western coastal cities blended, coexisted and eclipsed each other in the African American western imaginary. In “A Westerner in Search of ‘Negro-ness’: Region and Race in the Writing of Arna Bontemps,” Flamm explains how Bontemps grew up in Watts, California from the time that his family arrived in the region in 1906 to the time that Bontemps left for Harlem in 1924 (In Valerie J. Matsumoto and Blake Allmendinger, eds., *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999], 85-104.) In spite of this history in the West and the North, Bontemps wrote his first novel about the black South, where he had never been (95). Flamm accounts for this through family members maintaining Southern cultural values and transmitting black southern history via oral traditions. I argue that such porous borders between imaginaries of the black South and the black West support my reading of the hanged body. *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* acknowledges the fact that the vast number of blacks who populated the West came from southern states and transmitted southern histories, cultural values and traumas—such as lynching—from the black South (91).

Queer studies scholar Phillip Brian Harper sharply points toward travel as an activity that vivifies discriminatory treatment against minorities. In “The Evidence of Felt Intuition: Minority Experience, Everyday Life, and Critical Speculative Knowledge” (*GLQ* 6:4, pp. 641-657) he mines his travel experiences “for possible critical insight into the meanings of identity, citizenship and U.S. nationality” (641). He writes about the ways in which travel heightens an exhausting indeterminacy wherein the minority subject is forced to decipher unfamiliar discriminatory codes rendering “even the most routine instances of social activity and personal interaction as possible cases of insidious social distinction or discriminatory treatment” (643). He continues, “[I]n my estimation travel only increases the likelihood of one’s finding oneself amid such indeterminacy, incessantly encountering new unknown persons whose reactions to one cannot be predicted and very likely will throw one yet again into a state of confusion that, because it cannot be resolved, feels profoundly debilitating” (644).

Allmendinger in *Imagining the African American West* compares literature from the Watts Riot with the 1991 Los Angeles Uprising following the Rodney King trial. He describes Marquette Frye, whose arrest was the catalyst for the Watts Riot, “as an example of those who had come to Los Angeles, seduced by the myth of the urban frontier.” Frye came with his family to Los Angeles after the collapse of the mining boom in Wyoming. Drawing from Jerry Cohen and William S. Murphy’s *Burn, Baby, Burn! The Los Angeles Race Riot, August, 1965* ([New York: Dutton, 1966], 44) Allmendinger writes, “Frye decided that he had been happier in rural Wyoming, where there had been fewer African Americans but also less racism” (104).
For a detailed consideration of the ways in which black invisibility contributed both to the racial inequity that prompted the Watts riots and the unsympathetic white reaction to this inequity in the wake of the riots see Paula B. Johnson, David O. Sears and John B. McConahay, “Black Invisibility, The Press and the Los Angeles Riot,” *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 76, No. 4 (Jan., 1971), pp. 698-721.


Ibid., 201.

Ibid., 202.


In ballet terminology, *bourrée* describes a series of quick short steps on pointed toe. Whereas this step frequently appears in ballet choreography to provide the illusion of weightlessness, Houston-Jones had built his career trajectory on a far more weighted and visceral (rather than ethereal) vocabulary.

Though Houston-Jones makes reference to both Martha Graham and Agnes de Mille, I read the accompanying dance as an acute reference to the latter’s choreographies. Graham’s *Frontier* (1935), *El Petitente* (1940), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944) however, are all notable for their relationship to the phenomenon of the U.S. frontier.


30 Ibid., p. 35.

31 Ibid., p. 40.

32 Ibid., p. 36-40.

33 The work of Holland, and Houston-Jones especially, enjoys a substantial video archive at the New York Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center.

34 My impulse to read his work as deriving from heightened attention to sensuality comes both from workshops I took with Houston-Jones in the summer of 1996 and from Foster’s analysis in Dances That Describe Themselves, pp. 198-202.xss

35 Dudley, “What We’re Fighting For,” Mercury Records, 72500.


37 Tom T. Hall, “Hello Vietnam” performed by Dave Dudley on There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere, Mercury Records, MG 21057/SR-61057.

38 “Filipino Baby” performed by Dave Dudley, Mercury Records SR-61057.

39 Hal David and Burt Bacharach, “(The Man Who Shot) Liberty Valence” performed by Gene Pitney, Musicor Records, MU 1020.


41 Ibid., p. 22.


Reagan’s confusion and even disdain for historical accuracy is well documented by a wide range of journalists and scholars. Schaller discusses this phenomenon throughout *Right Turn* and in his previous monograph, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and Its President in the 1980s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). See also Timothy Raphael, *Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009). In particular, Raphael offers a chillingly deft account regarding the ways in which the willing suspension of disbelief that is the end goal of stagecraft becomes “statecraft” in the “evolution of electronic media’s status as the church of contemporary politics” (20).

Ibid., p. 116.

Ibid., p. 154.

Susan Foster’s analysis of Houston-Jones’ work shapes my evaluation here. Discussing *Part 2: Relatives* she writes, “He willingly shows his failure to achieve something he sets out to do, whether a movement investigation or a task, and he is dedicated to valuing equally both failed and successful improvised endeavors” (Foster, *Dances That Describe Themselves*, p. 202).

Notes to Chapter Three

1 Tango scholar Marta E. Savigliano informs my reading of the gaze in social dance settings. The power dynamics she theorizes between the dancing pair and the spectator can be seen most clearly in “Fragments For a Story of Tango Bodies (on Choreocritics and the Memory of Power)” (in Susan Foster, ed., *Corporealities: Bodies, Knowledge, Power* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996). She writes:

   In thinking about two and tango it is the male/female couple who rush in, dancing Otherness and exoticism, but it actually takes three to tango: a male to master the dance and confess his sorrows; a female to seduce, resist seduction, and be seduced; and a gaze to watch these occurrences. The male/female couple performs the ritual, and the gaze constitutes the spectacle. Two performers, but three participants, make a tango. However, the gaze is not aloof and static; rather, it is expectant, engaged in that particular detachment that creators have towards the objects of their imagination (223).

My understanding of the functions of the spectacular and desirous gaze at Oil Can Harry’s, and specifically within *The Shadow*, have been shaped through Savigliano’s work. Much of the dancing competence, for example, discussed in chapter one and assessments of *The Shadow* are influenced by her theory of the constitutative relationship of the spectator to the dance event.

2 Susan Foster, in “Choreographing Gender,” *Signs* 24 (1) charges that,
Ethnographic frameworks, in their attempt to negotiate the difference between ethnographer and ethnographic site, examine the individual’s encounter with difference, sometimes at the expense of summoning up the sociality of that difference. The investigator, as soloist, stands in for the role of any viewer in response to the performance, channeling that response toward individuated forms of reaction and away from collective rubrics that produce and sustain meaning, away from an examination of the structures of power inherent in the ethnographic encounter (17).

I agree with this assertion. In some ethnographic essays, including earlier drafts of this chapter, the very reflexivity that was meant to de-center structures of ethnographic power, in fact, reproduces inequity in writing through an inapprehension that the power structures are still present if only represented reflexively.

Western Literary scholar Blake Allmendinger has written several significant essays that look for connections between the mythic and historical realms of the West, often offering complicated portraiture of male sexuality that problematize stereotypical assumptions. In his 1992 volume *The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in American Work Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press) he writes about the inter-related cultures of labor and leisure inhabited by cowboys who lived for long period of times isolated from women and families—living and working exclusively with other bachelors. In a chapter titled “Frontier Gender: Livestock Castration and Square Dancing” he describes the contingent relationship between a cowboy’s bachelor status and his employment noting that, “In a sense, cowboys were metaphorically castrated when they were cut off from society, isolated from women and families, and allowed to live only with other single men on ranches out West” (51). In several instances regarding both their work and their leisure activities, Allmendinger shows how men formed homosocial relationships wherein men were feminized through performing domestic labors such as cooking or assuming the women’s following role in partner dancing. Occasionally, this emasculation took the form of cross-dressing (donning a women’s apron for cooking, for example) or in verbal address, yet Allmendinger is careful to point out that this emasculation was “not perceived as erotic” (Ibid.). Thus I exclude consideration of The Shadow as possibly being attributed to this era. Earlier in the book he writes on the point disturbances in gender roles as opposed to sexual desire and identity formation in some detail.

[M]ention of the cowboy’s cross-dressing might suggest that homosexual or homoerotic behavior was common out West. However cross-dressing cannot be equated with these forms of behavior in the absence of textual historical proof. While it is tempting to speculate, it is also important to note that due to stigmas attached to such behavior or to a sense of decorum that may have led to self-censored omissions, no cowboy writer or poet whom I have read mentions same-sex relations. The reader will have to decide whether I have gone too far or not far enough in investigating the extent to which cross-dressing and dancing influenced the cowboy’s real sense and artistic formulation of maleness (13).

While the degree to which homosexual behavior existed in cowboy cultures will likely never be fully determined, Allmendinger provides numerous disciplinary perspectives (including literary, folkloric, historical and cultural/pop-cultural sources) to open the space for a discussion of sexual orientation in the West.
Historian Susan Lee Johnson in “Bulls, Bears, and Dancing Boys: Race, Gender, and Leisure in the California Gold Rush,” *Radical History Review*. 60 (Fall 1994) briefly documents the practice of male partner dancing in the Southern California Gold Rush and remarks at “just how successfully Gold Rush demographics and contests for meanings had unsettled normative notions of gender” (26). Yet with regard to sexuality she tells us that the miners mainly sought the comfort of the few women in the towns and rarely “reached for a friend in the heat of the night” for male sexual companionship (25). She further documents that in isolated incidents of homosexual encounters, the miners viewed sex between men as a vice, “but not as an indicator of a particular identity (Ibid.).

My own brief visits to gay country-western bars in Chicago, Austin, and Oklahoma City, and rodeos or other such country-western events in San Francisco and Reno show sporadic affection for The Shadow. Further research needs to be conducted to validate the theory of The Shadow’s Los Angeles origins, but there is certainly a widespread belief of this origin by many country-western dancers in Los Angeles and other cities.

I feel it important to note that the majority of men and women who come to Oil Can Harry’s do so for the expressed purpose of dancing as opposed to finding sexual partners. The homosociality without the overt sexual tension of a "meat market" is an appealing facet of Oil Can Harry's for many. Yet this is not to say that a sexual flirtation is not operating for the men and women who go there. Returning to Los Angeles in January of 2005, I went to Oil Can Harry's and ran into Zach, who used to be a frequent two-step partner and a fixture at the bar on Tuesdays and Thursdays. As I was only in town for ten days, Zach considered our meeting fortuitous. He explained that since being involved in a relationship, he rarely went dancing anymore. It simply was not as much fun to flirt with all the boys now that sex was off limits.


Ibid., xvii.

Ibid., xvii.

Ibid., 38.

Ibid., 97.

Ibid., 129.

Ibid., 42-3.

See Foster, “Choreographing Gender.” Judith Butler claims the gendered body as a historical situation that simultaneously exhibits the values of a culture and reproduces these values in repeated actions that “bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts” (Judith

15 Foster, Choreographies of Gender, 4.

16 Ibid., 29.

17 My thoughts about the passionate attachment of The Shadow to the two-step original stem from Judith Butler’s discussion of agency and subject formation. In The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), Butler explores subjection as a paradoxical form of power that “signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (2). She brings together postulations of subject formation as espoused by Althusser (interpellation) and Foucault (discursive production) while deploying psychoanalytic theory to account for a psychic domain that is not accounted for in either case. Butler works with the Foucaultian notion of “subjection as the simultaneous subordination and forming of the subject” and adds the psychoanalytic view that “no subject emerges without a passionate attachment to those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent” (7). Yet, as a resuscitation of agency for the subject, she identifies a possibility-infused discontinuity between the power that brought the subject into being (the dependent and passionate attachment) and the power that the subject then wields (12). And yet, she tells us, the power of the subject is not free. It remains ambivalently tied to the conditions of its possibility. Butler uses the Foucaultian notion that power is only visible in its effects to say that the condition of the subject’s formation is eclipsed by the effect of that power as enacted by the subject—as agency. Thus, “the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence; it eclipses power with power” (14). The subject is not constrained by its conditions and, “Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled” (15). This excess is not a matter of degree but the purpose of a subject’s agency which power does not intend. But Butler reminds us that, “Exceeding is not escaping, and the subject exceeds precisely that to which it is bound” (17). Again, agency is not free. Rather, the subject is passionately tied to the objects that wielded such power.

For Butler, the process of subjection is never fully completed but must be repeatedly performed. Performativity thus contributes the component of time/history to her theory of subjection and exposes the shift and reversal by which power is falsely perceived as an agency inaugurated by the subject.


20 Ibid., 161-2.


22 Sinfield, 162.


24 Sinfield, 170.

25 Ibid., 171-4.

26 Ibid., 179.

27 Ibid., 182. See Michael P. Jacobs, “Do Gay Men Have a Stake in Male Privilege? The Political Economy of Gay Men’s Contradictory Relationship to Feminism” (in Ann Gluckman and Betsy Reed, eds., *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community and Lesbian and Gay Life* [New York and London: Routledge, 1997], pp. 165-184) for a discussion of the complex relationship between feminism and gay male political/economic interests. He states that gay men and lesbians both require a securing of sustainable income outside of heteronormative paradigms—frequently a source of women’s oppression in the domestic sphere. “But in public spheres, such as the labor market, their concerns diverge, because gay men’s economic interests are aligned more with other men than with women” (166). Jacobs encourages readers not to conflate the political/economic realities of gay men and lesbians for this reason. I am (somewhat reluctantly) inclined to agree with his assessment and thus focus this chapter primarily on the economic realities of gay men. That said, I have tried to find opportunities for more diverse gender inclusion in discussions of the dancing and in shared political realities.

28 This analysis of *Boy Meets Boy* was conducted through repeated viewings of the DVD release of the series (*Boy Meets Boy: Complete Season 1* [2003], Director: Becky Smith; Writers: Dean Minerd, Douglas Ross, and Elyse Springer; Producers: Amy Introcaso, Clay Murphy, Minerd, and Ross.). Significant developments from episode to episode are noted in the body of this essay as are insights and observations garnered from the bonus features disc.

29 The connection to the infamous "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy is more than symbolic. One gay contestant, Jason, according to the bonus features disc, was dishonorably discharged from the military for violating the policy by participating on the show. He then became an activist in the fight against it. His discharge and subsequent activism has been widely documented by the


35 This thesis stems from readings of dance scholar Randy Martin and anthropologist José Limón. See Randy Martin, “Dance as a Social Movement,” *Social Text* 12:54-70 for a theorization of the dance company wherein “choreographer and company exist as state and people, capital and labor, patriarch and gender, as a totality which finds its representation and as such identity or consciousness of itself through an external authority” (57). This analysis leads to the proposition that dance uniquely satisfies a desire to act politically that is present but not acted on in society. José Limón in *Dancing With the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), theorizes the social dance floor at the club *El Cielo Azul* as a space where *mexicanos/as* are able to recreate a condition of high modernity. For Limón, such a condition allows *mexicanos/as* to achieve “the artful management of the human body” and to act upon a desire to move politically in resistance to the dominating effects of postmodernity that increasingly encroaches upon their lives (166).

36 Even within advertisements for gay and lesbian country-dance events or rodeos, The Shadow is not pictorially represented. Instead, the cowboy (or occasionally cowgirl) stands alone in his/her attainability.

37 Many patrons I have talked to credit Oil Can Harry’s as providing a lot of entertainment value for the dollar. Certainly, as a graduate student on a limited income, I welcomed the relatively low price of a night out at Oil Can Harry’s over the West Hollywood club scene. Most patrons suspect that the disco nights on weekends provide most of the revenue for the bar. Due partially to the lesser technical demands of free-style disco dancing, I observe the volume of liquor sales to be significantly higher. These nights also draw larger crowds and can be seen as subsidizing the country-western nights to a certain extent. Most gay country-western bars that I have visited nationally craft a relationship between country-western patrons—who compromise a small but
remarkably stable income with a more fickle but potentially lucrative gay popular music (disco, diva pop, alternative rock, etc.) crowd.

38 In fact, it has been shown that the appearance of homosexual identity is enough to provoke punishment. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick develop Butler’s performativity theory to homosexuality, in part, through their 1995 critique of the Clinton administration’s “don’t ask, don’t tell, don’t pursue” policy regarding gay and lesbian military personnel and the necessary distinction made between the performance of homosexual acts and the construction of homosexual identity (5-6).

39 See Charles Kaiser, “Throwing the Backlash Off Balance,” Advocate (14 October 2003) for a journalistic summation of the backlash with the gays in the military debate of the Clinton administration as connected to the 2003 Supreme Court annulment of anti-sodomy laws. See also Neil Cobb, who in “Contagion Politics: Queer Rights Claims, Biopower and the ‘Public Health’ Rationale for the Repeal of Sodomy Laws” argues that public health legislation has contributed to a highlighting of “queer rights claims as crisis management” at the expense of queer pleasure (Jindal Global Law Review 4, [August 1, 2012]: 60.

Notes to Chapter Four

1 At other bars I attended, the DJ made no announcement to cue the next dance. Dancers learned by rote the dance associated with a particular song and the musical introduction to the song—these prompts alone signaled the dancers to start the correct choreography on the same beat.

2 A ninety-degree rotation is standard for a four-wall dance, which is the most commonly performed line dance at Oil Can Harry’s. There are also two-wall and one-wall dances.


6 Ibid., 39.
7 Ibid., 51.

8 Ibid., 48-9.

9 Ibid., 49.


11 Jameson, 51.


13 Ibid., 8-9.


15 Pile, 247.

16 Ibid., 249.


18 Ibid., 297.

19 Ibid., 297.

20 Note here on kinesphere.

21 Ibid., p. 299.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., p. 300.


25 Ibid., p. 304.

26 Ibid., p. 306
This one still makes me blush. One time I was dancing a line dance, I forget which one it was, but I remember it was one of the slower dances and I was somewhat bored with the footwork with which I had become proficient. At this point in my Oil-Can-Harry’s-specific dance training I was proficient with a number of the line dances but was still trying to figure out what to do with my hands. I tried to put my thumbs in my front jean pockets the way I had seen other dancers do it. I’m getting used to this, feeling the way the restriction of the hands comfortably allows for subtle spirals to be executed between the shoulder and opposite foot. This momentary sense of accomplishment was disturbed harshly by a voice from Robert who danced behind me. He said, “Pete, stop dancing with your thumbs in your pockets. Stop trying to be all butch, just dance natural.” Another, more subtle reprimand came from a colleague of mine who was visiting Oil Can Harry’s as part of a “field exchange” we were engaged in at the time for a graduate course. When she was noting different styles of dancing she agreed with certain assessment she had read of mine for class essays and then she noted my own dancing style (which at this point had been honed by numerous spoken and unspoken critiques since Robert’s intervention mentioned above and had arrived at what I considered to be a somewhat gender-ambiguous, subtle movement of the hands around the sides and in front of the body) when she said, “Oh, yeah, there’s that really subtle thing that you’re doing which is really, um, cool…and I’m sure it’s really sexy.”

Insert note here on Foster’s use of the word “style.”

Bollen, p. 309.

Robert John Lange and Shania Twain, “From This Moment On” performed by Twain, Mercury 574 701-2, 1998.


Cannon describes the increasingly volatile rhetoric between blue and red states as part of a larger phenomenon between urban and rural political affiliations. See also Michael Lind, “Civil War by Other Means,” Foreign Affairs Vol. 78, no. 5, pp. 123-42.


37 Baldassarri and Gelman write, we have found that the main change in people’s attitudes has more to do with a resorting of party labels among voters than with greater constraint in their issue attitudes. This has occurred mostly because parties are more polarized and therefore better at sorting individuals along ideological lines. Such partisan realignment, although it has not induced realignment in issue preferences, does not come without consequences for the political process. In fact, party polarization may have gained momentum as party voters have become more divided. This, we believe, is the feedback mechanism that has allowed parties to continue to polarize and still win elections. In addition, increased issue partisanship, in a context in which the issue constraint of the general public is extremely low, may have had the effect of handing over greater voice to political extremists, single-issue advocates, and wealthier and more educated citizens, thus amplifying the dynamics of unequal representation (p. 443).

38 Ibid., 441.


40 Ibid., 115.

41 Ibid., 53.


43 Ibid.


47 Ibid., p. 5

See Schaller, 1992, pp. 92-93 for a discussion regarding Reagan’s relationship to and silence regarding the AIDS crisis from a standpoint of political history.


The cattleman [or rancher] creates language and allows cowboys to become a medium for printing brands on stock that he owns. Workers do not own brands or the stock on which brands appear, nor do they determine the meaning and interpretation of signs as they move through herds on ranges and in pastures. As writers, cowboys are subject to the dictates of a rancher who controls the pen, or the brand, and who owns the page, or the stock, on which the words of the branding language appear (29).

I am interested in the cross-historical correlations between the rancher/cowboy of the late-19th Century and the cowboy-politicians (aka political elite) and the country-western dancers at Oil Can Harry’s. Particularly in light of Baldassarri and Gelman’s research, I find the different bodily writings of the dancers in the line dances to be indicative of a way of subverting the power dynamics between rancher and cowboy in contemporary danced and political contexts.

The song being played during this particular observation (November 2002) was a remix of the two songs set to a decidedly urban disco beat. It is worth noting that many line dances at Oil Can Harry’s are danced to a number of different songs. While the choreographer will designate a specific song for the choreography to be danced to, local dance hall disc jockeys and dance instructors will offer new music choices to accommodate personal taste, the preferences of a particular clientele, and newly released pop or country-western singles. This particular remix of Twain and Rimes was a favorite of Oil Can Harry’s since it came out in early 2002 and remained a popular selection for over a year and a half. Dennis Matkosky and Ty Lacy, “I Need You” performed by LeAnn Rimes, Curb 8573 88126-5, 2000.


In particular, Gender Heroes, Part II: Undertaking Harry (2000) looks at the cowboy from a queer perspective. See Octavio Roca, “All’s Well With Choreographer Joe Goode: ‘Harry,’ ‘Heroes’ Come to Yerba Buena,” San Francisco Chronicle (January 9, 2000). See also, Sarah Kaufman, “Joe Goode,From Cowboy Boots to Toe Shoes,” Washington Post (March 5, 2001). Many thanks to Joe Goode for permitting access to video documentation of Maverick Strain and other dances for the purposes of writing this project. I am also grateful to Goode for sitting down for a conversation in the summer of 2006, which clarified some of my perspectives here. Also, special thanks to Liz Burritt who performed the arduous work of digging through her archives to find the actual documentation for me.

Ibid., p. 3.

Ibid., p. 7.

Ibid., p. 80.


Gere, p. 101. Emphasis found in original.

Gere writes:

...the topography of gay mourning and gay elegy is a primary component in all the activist art making of these times. Or, rather, it is more than a component of activism: It is its twin, its double, its ghost, its shadow (143).

**Notes to the Conclusion**


2 Margaret Talbot, “Pride and Prejudice”, *New Yorker* 86, no. 33 (October 25, 2010: 29.


In the choreographic research methods (mentioned in the introductory chapter) that contributed to this project, I explored connections between bareback sex and bareback horse riding for connections to cowboyness.

Cathy Reena in Gregory Freeman, “In Search of Death,” Rolling Stone no. 915 (February 6, 2003): 44.

Thomas Piontek in “Tears for Queers: Ang Lee’s Brokeback Mountain, Hollywood, and American Attitudes toward Homosexuality” (The Journal of American Culture, 35:2 [2012], pp.123-134) writes, “In an effort to reach a wider audience beyond the gay community, Focus Features, which produced and distributed the film in the U.S., decided early on to market the film aggressively to women of all ages by emphasizing Brokeback’s romance over its Western setting” (126).


Piontek, 128.

Ibid., 128-9.

Ibid., 131.


Jacqueline Garrick in “The Humor of Trauma Survivors: Its Application in a Therapeutic Milieu,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 12, No. 1/2 [March 2006]: 169-182) discusses

The metaphor of applying the brakes on trauma is taken from Babette Rothschild, “Applying the Brakes,” *CPJ: Counseling and Psychotherapy Journal* 16 Issue 1 (February 2005): 12-16. Rothschild discusses numerous case studies wherein clients were overwhelmed by trauma processing techniques and, instead of healing through the process, engaged in self-destructive behaviors to avoid the unpleasant sensations. She describes the processing of trauma through the metaphor of driving the car and encourages therapists to provide the patient with numerous techniques with which to apply the brakes before digging in to the root of traumatic memories.


Ibid., 110-11.

Ibid., 115.

Ibid., 114.

Ibid., 115.

Ibid., 115.

Case, 190.