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Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling

Approaching Kevin Aviance

THIS CHAPTER HAS two beginnings.[1] One is a story culled from personal memory, and the other is a poem by a prominent twentieth-century North American poet. Both openings function as queer evidence: an evidence that has been queered in relation to the laws of what counts as proof. Queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence. Historically, evidence of queerness has been used to penalize and discipline queer desires, connections, and acts. When the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present, who will labor to invalidate the historical fact of queer lives—present, past, and future. Queerness is rarely complemented by evidence, or at least by traditional understandings of the term. The key to queering evidence, and by that I mean the ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness, is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera. Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor.

Jacques Derrida's idea of the trace is relevant here.[2] Ephemeral evidence is rarely obvious because it is needed to stand against the harsh lights of mainstream visibility and the potential tyranny of the fact. (Not that all facts are harmful, but the discourse of the fact has often cast antinormative desire as the bad object.) Ephemera are the remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures such as the cool look of a street cruise, a lingering handshake between recent acquaintances, or the mannish strut of a particularly confident woman.

In this chapter I want to approach the idea of queerness and gesture. So much can be located in the gesture. Gesture, I argue throughout this book, signals a refusal of a certain kind of finitude. Dance is an especially valuable site for ruminations on queerness and gesture. This theoretical work is anchored to a case study, a living body, a performer who is a master of

the pose. Kevin Aviance is a mainstay of New York City's club world. He is something of a deity in the cosmology of gay nightlife. He is paid to perform, to sing, and to move—at clubs in New York City and throughout the world. He has been flown all over North America, Europe, and Asia and has performed for devoted cognoscenti, men and women who share a global sphere of queer knowing, moving, and feeling. At the center of that international sphere of queer experience are gesture, Aviance's resonant poses, and the force of queer ephemera.

This chapter builds on and speaks to themes that animate at least three of the other contributions to the edited volume in which an earlier version of this chapter appeared.[3] Like Jonathan Bollen, I look at the dance floor as a stage for queer performativity that is integral to everyday life. I am on the same page as Bollen when he considers the dance floor as space where relations between memory and content, self and other, become inextricably intertwined. Furthermore, I also align my project with Bollen's Maurice Merleau-Ponty–inspired proposition that the dance floor increases our tolerance for embodied practices. It may do so because it demands, in the openness and closeness of relations to others, an exchange and alteration of kinesthetic experience through which we become, in a sense, less like ourselves and more like each other. In my analysis that does not mean that queers become one nation under a groove once we hit the dance floor. I am in fact interested in the persistent variables of difference and inequity that follow us from queer communities to the dance floor, but I am nonetheless interested in the ways in which a certain queer communal logic overwhelms practices of individual identity. I am also interested in the way in which the state responds to the communal becoming.

To this end I consider Paul Siegel's contribution to that aforementioned volume, "A Right to Boogie Queerly: The First Amendment on the Dance Floor," a valuable resource for students of queer dance who wish to understand not only the social significance of queer dance but the various ways in which a repressive state apparatus counters queer movements both literal and symbolic. Siegel's essay discusses the ways in which First Amendment discourse has ultimately served queer dance movements. Yet his chapter does not consider recent developments in New York City, such as the Giuliani administration's reanimation of archaic cabaret-license laws that have been used as a tool to shut down and harass various queer and racial-minority bars in New York City. Those bars that survive display large signs that read, "No Dancing—by Order of the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs."[4] This edict has not been repealed, and in this instance Siegel's optimistic appraisal of the juridical sphere does not hold. Nonetheless, the stories of queer legal victory that he recounts serve as a valuable resource for hope.

In a similar vein Paul Franklin's historical account of Charlie Chaplin's dance also stands as an incredible analysis of how queer movement, despite dominant biases against queer dance, can nonetheless provide us with a narrative of queer iconicity's force within popular culture. Although Kevin Aviance and Charlie Chaplin are an unlikely match, one a little white tramp and the other a big black queen, both are masters of the historically dense queer gesture.[5] Aviance, like Chaplin before him, calls on an expressive vocabulary beyond the spoken word. For both men, the body in motion is the foundation of a visual lexicon in which the gesture speaks loud and clear.

Dance studies has focused its attention on the idea of movement. Although a movement analysis of Kevin Aviance's work could certainly be elucidating, this chapter is instead a gesture analysis. I am not as interested in what the queer gesture means so much as I am interested in what such gestures perform. Such an analysis is inspired by what Elin Diamond has attempted to articulate, after Brecht's notion of *Gestus,* as gestic feminist criticism.[6] There is certainly something quite gestic about Aviance's performance practice, one that I argue does attempt to show its material conditions of (im)possibility and historical positionality. But although *Gestus* suggests a lot more than gesture, I wish to concentrate my focus on the precise and specific physical acts that are conventionally understood as gesture, such as the tilt of an ankle in very high heels, the swish of a hand that pats a face with imaginary makeup, and so many more precise acts. These acts are different, but certainly not independent, from movements that have more to do with the moving body's flow. Concentrating on gesture atomizes movement. These atomized and particular movements tell tales of historical becoming. Gestures transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture.

Beginning One: Memory

I am young, maybe five or six. Our house is crowded by relatives who have just arrived from Cuba via a brief stopover-exile in Spain. They arrived like my family did a few years earlier, without anything. Thus, the

little South Florida house that barely held five is now occupied by eleven. The only television set is in the family room. The boy cousins, my brother, my father, and my uncle are watching boxing on television, perhaps one of those early matches between Cuba and the United States in which none of the recent refugees feels comfortable taking a side. I am bored. By this time it is clear that the culture of men and sports holds absolutely no allure for me. (Women's tennis is another matter altogether.) I walk across the red-brick floor and momentarily cross the screen. Then my oldest cousin calls out, "Look at the way he walks, how he shakes his ass. I wish I had a girlfriend who walked like that!" The other men and boys in the room erupt into laughter. I protest: "What is wrong with the way I walk? I don't understand." The taunts continue, and I am flushed with shame. I rush to my room to hide from this mockery, which I find amazingly painful.

My family has always been one that showed affection by mocking and joking. It is just our dysfunctional little way, and as those people with whom I live my emotional life today can attest, I am very much a child of that home. So it was odd, that reaction I had. I would usually have retorted by commenting on my cousin's newest and shiniest zit. This was a different wounding, one for which I had no defense, because I knew something was there, something I did not quite understand but felt at my core. This proto-homophobic attack made me sit down and think about my movement, to figure out what it was about the way I moved that elicited such mockery and such palpable contempt from a room full of males. I wanted to, needed to know: what was it about my body and the way I moved it through the world that was so off, so different? I studied movement from then on, watching the way in which women walked and the way in which men walked. I looked at the ways in which men steered a sidewalk and tried to understand how women did it so differently. I noticed a stiffness in the men around me and a lack of stiffness in the women next to them. I studied all this and applied it to my own body. I began a project of butching up, even though that is not what I understood it to be back then. I tried to avoid the fact that I was studying something that came very naturally to other boys. I avoided the fact that heterogender was a space I was strangely on the outside of—I was a spy in the house of gender normativity, and like any spy, I was extremely careful and worried that my cover would be blown. I did not understand that as long as I tried to ape the movements of heterosexuality, hardly anyone would even try to see through the facade because those around me did not want to believe in fairies. As long as I played the game, I was relatively safe. That strategy is not universal; other boys cannot or will not straighten their gesture, and for them childhood is often a degraded zone of random violence and constant policing.

Sometimes I would slip and be called out. I remember a fey boy who was part of my mother's car-pool system. He took me aside in junior high and told me that I pulled my books too close to my chest like a girl. I started carrying my books to the side, just like a little man. Every so often a boy would tell me my slip was showing, would caution me to straighten up, as though my gesture could ruin it for everyone. Part of me wants to encounter him again, now in a gay space, a march, a club, a bathhouse, and embrace him like a fellow survivor, somebody else who made it through. Yet I imagine him at home, in Miami, with a wife who might remind him every once in a while how he should position his legs when he sits down while visiting his in-laws.

That butching-up practice had a serious effect on me. Today I am not often accused of flaming. I am considered mildly butch for a gay man of my age. Yet the older I get, the more I enjoy camping it up with my nellier friends. And now I can only enjoy performing masculinity in the company of my butch female friends because something about being boys with them feels weirdly liberating. I take further pleasure in talking about being a guy with one of my friends, who is currently crossing and becoming a man. As I notice his voice deepen, his body bulk up, and his already butch mannerisms continue to evolve, I feel some kind of sweet revenge on gender.

When I encounter accomplished drag, I feel this revenge again. I am drawn to Justin Bond's Kiki, a strung-out, aging showbiz personality who is really a young white man in his thirties but plays a grizzled show-business veteran in her late sixties.[7] She is accompanied by Herb, who is actually Kenny Mellman, an attractive gay Jewish man in his thirties, who plays her homosexual accompanist, a gray little old man. Kiki cavorts and staggers as she does loungy-punk hybrids of contemporary pop songs and old standards. The drink in her hand is ever present as she stumbles from table to table. Often, she will mount the table of an unsuspecting guest, throw his cocktail to the floor, and demand that the patron sitting at the table lick her fishnet stocking because she is on fire, as intimated by the song she is singing, P. J. Harvey's "Rid of Me." The fishnets cover a dancer's set of gams, muscles that get exercised when Kiki does a fast and frantic tap number, competent and exaggerated at exactly the same time. She is visibly winded after finishing this self-consciously old-school number. She closes that component of the cabaret act with the line "Ladies and

Gentlemen! I started as a burlesque dancer in Baltimore in the fifties, and I still got it!" This line conjures a lot of showbiz divas on the decline.

That tap-dance number itself indexes a sick camp aesthetic that the fans of Kiki and Herb love. Their camp celebrates virtuosity while reveling in an antinormative degeneracy. In this instance camp works as an index to a shared aesthetic and a communal structure of feeling. The dance is over and seemingly gone, but it lives as an ephemeral happening that we remember, something that fuels anecdotes we tell one another. Because the show was weekly, the devoted went week after week, and it all took on the feel of a ritual. It lives, then, after its dematerializations as a transformed materiality, circulating in queer realms of loving and becoming. The story with which I began this section functions that way too. It is an ephemeral proof. It does not count as evidence in some systems of reading and understanding proper documentation and loving. Making a case for queer evidence in theory seems to beg the use of such "unreliable" proofs.

Here is one of my favorite poems, Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," and a second opening:

> *One Art*
> The art of losing isn't hard to master;
> so many things seem filled with the intent
> to be lost that their loss is no disaster.
>
> Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
> of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
> The art of losing isn't hard to master
>
> Then practice farther, losing faster:
> places, and names, and where it was you meant
> to travel. None of this will bring disaster.
>
> I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
> next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
> The art of losing isn't hard to master.
>
> I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
> some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent,
> I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

> Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
> I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
> the art of losing's not too hard to master
> though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.[8]

The parenthetical remarks within the poem are most interesting for my purposes. I suggest that these remarks are graphically differentiated through grammatical devices so that they might connote a different register than the majority of the poem. The parenthetical remarks communicate a queer trace, an ephemeral evidence. I read these remarks, words that evoke the idea of gesture, as gestures. Interest in these specific lines should not derail interest in the poem in its entirety. "One Art" offers the attentive reader a theory of the materiality of performance and ephemera. It has become somewhat axiomatic within the field of performance studies that the act exists only during its actual duration. I have been making a case for a hermeneutics of residue that looks to understand the wake of performance. What is left? What remains? Ephemera remain. They are absent and they are present, disrupting a predictable metaphysics of presence. The actual act is only a stage in the game; it is a moment, pure and simple. There is a deductive element to performance that has everything to do with its conditions of possibility, and there is much that follows.

In "One Art," the poet, Elizabeth Bishop, asks the forgetful person not to become upset about the loss of certain objects because they seem filled with the intent to be lost—their loss is no disaster.[9] She asks us to accept the fluster of loss and understand that it is not a disaster. Something is embedded within those acts, traces that have an indelible materiality. The poet is inviting us to do more than simply accept this loss but to embrace it and perhaps even to understand it not as loss but as something else. She is, within a parenthetical phrase in the poem's last line, asking us to "Write it!" The word "write" is not only in parentheses but italicized, more than doubling its emphasis. This command to write is a command to save the ephemeral thing by committing it to memory, to word, to language. The poet instructs us to retain the last thing through a documentation of our loss, a retelling of our relationship to it. Thus, her mother's watch now exists, or perhaps has found an afterlife, in its transformation and current status as residue, as ephemera. It partially (re)lives in its documentation.

And although we cannot simply conserve a person or a performance through documentation, we can perhaps begin to summon up, through

the auspices of memory, the acts and gestures that meant so much to us. The poem clearly has an addressee, who is a "you." Now, we ask, who is that "you"? If we were to lean on biography—something I always caution my students against—it would be Lota de Macedo Soares, Bishop's estranged Brazilian lover who committed suicide. Much would suggest that identification ("the joking voice, a gesture I love"). The parenthetical remark contains queer content, queer memory, a certain residue of lesbian love.

One temptation is to say that Bishop was in the closet and, furthermore, that she gives frightened and furtive little signs of her lesbian desire. But that is a mistake and not what I mean by traces of queer desire. As the North American poetry scholar Katie Kent has suggested to me in a correspondence, calling Bishop's work closeted is a mistake: I am wary of calling her work more or less closeted. I think doing so reinforces this trajectory to her life that only right before she died did she claim her sexuality in her poetry and in any other way, whereas if you read her poems expecting to read about queerness, it is there throughout. A lot of the biographers and critics impose the closet on her as a way, I think, of not having to talk about the role of queer identity and queer sex play throughout her work.

Kent's suggestion, that we read with queerness as an expectation, challenges the reader to approach the poet with a different optic, one that is attuned to the ways in which, through small gestures, particular intonations, and other ephemeral traces, queer energies and lives are laid bare. The parenthetical remark in Bishop's "One Art" is a queer gesture, one that accesses the force of queer ephemera. It is utterly legible to an optic of feeling, a queer optic that permits us to take in the queerness that is embedded in gesture. The poem's narrative instructs us as to the transience of things filled with the intent to be lost, and as it does so, it retains a queer trace that lingers, tragically and lovingly, within the hold of parentheses. This poetic gesture in Bishop's masterful text is not unlike the moves that a queer artist can conjure on a dance floor or a stage. The gesture summons the resources of queer experience and collective identity that have been lost to us because of the demand for official evidence and facts.

We can understand queerness itself as being filled with the intention to be lost. Queerness is illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight minds' mapping of space. Queerness is lost in space or lost in relation to the space of heteronormativity. Bishop's poem should be read as a primer for queer self-enactment or queer becoming. To accept loss is to accept

the way in which one's queerness will always render one lost to a world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws. To accept loss is to accept queerness—or more accurately, to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and entitlement. To be lost is not to hide in a closet or to perform a simple (ontological) disappearing act; it is to veer away from heterosexuality's path. Freedmen escaping slavery got lost too, and this is a salient reverberation between queerness and racialization. At this historical moment, one that can be described as being characterized by encroaching assimilationist ideology in the mainstream gay and lesbian movement, some gays and lesbians want to be found on a normative map of the world. Being lost, in this particular queer sense, is to relinquish one's role (and subsequent privilege) in the heteronormative order. The dispossessed are appropriately adept at critiquing possession as illogical. To accept the way in which one is lost is to be also found and not found in a particularly queer fashion.

A Body: Approaching Aviance

This section's subtitle is meant to connote a few things. I invoke the phrase "approaching Aviance" because I want to cast a picture from life, the scene of Aviance's being approached. To travel through the gay world of New York City with Kevin Aviance is certainly to call attention to oneself. Aviance is six foot two, bald, black, and effeminate. In or out of his unique drag he is immediately recognizable to anyone who has seen his show. To walk the cityscape with him is to watch as strangers approach him and remark on one of his performances. They often gush enthusiastically and convey how much a particular performance or his body of performances means to them. One will hear such things as "I'll always remember that one show you did before they shut the Palladium down" or "You turned it out at Roxy last week." Kevin will be gracious and give back the love he has just received.

His work, his singing and his movement, is not the high art of Bill T. Jones or Mark Morris, but I would venture to say that more queer people see Aviance move than have witnessed Jones's masterful productions. I do not mean to undermine the value of Jones's work. I only want to properly frame the way in which Aviance's nightlife performances matter. The gestures he performs matter worlds to the children who compose his audiences. Aviance is something of a beacon that displays and channels worlds

of queer pain and pleasure. In his moves we see the suffering of being a gender outlaw, one who lives outside the dictates of heteronormativity. Furthermore, another story about being black in a predominantly white-supremacist gay world ruminates beneath his gestures. Some of his other gestures transmit and amplify the pleasures of queerness, the joys of gender dissidence, of willfully making one's own way against the stream of a crushing heteronormative tide.

The strong influence of vogueing practice in his moves affirms the racialized ontology of the pier queen, a personage who is degraded in New York City's aboveground gay culture. Often, one gesture will contain both positive and negative polarities simultaneously, because the pleasure and pain of queerness are not a strict binary. The conversations that ensue after his performances, the friends and strangers that approach him on the street, the ads in bar rags, the reviews in local papers, the occasional home-video documentation, and the hazy and often drug-tinged memories that remain after the actual live performances are the queer ephemera, that transmutation of the performance energy, that also function as a beacon for queer possibility and survival.

To understand the lure of Aviance's performance it is useful to describe a performance from Montreal's Red and Blue party. The Red and Blue is part of the circuit-party system. The circuit is just that, a loosely aligned social circuit of dance parties that happen throughout the year in major cities throughout North America. Aviance was invited to perform at Montreal. Another drag performer, a black queen in traditional illusionist drag, appears on stage and introduces the fierce and legendary Kevin Aviance. Aviance emerges from behind an ornate red curtain with gold trim. He is wearing a fantastical suit that features puffy, exaggerated purple shoulders that rise to the length of his ears.

As he sings his first club hit, his microphone emerges from his lapel, permitting his hands total freedom to move in gestures that are familiar to those conversant with vogueing and break-dancing styles. In the middle of the song his entire body becomes involved as he feigns cold robotic motions. The monster walks. He then sings his club hit "Cunty."[10] He sings, "Feeling like a lily / Feeling like a rose," and as he stands in place, his body quivers with extravagant emotion. He stands center stage, and as he screams, he quivers with an emotional force that connotes the stigma of gender ostracism. His gender freakishness speaks to the audiences that surround him. His is an amplified and extreme queer body, a body in motion that rapidly deploys the signs, the gestures, of queer communication,

survival, and self-making. Spectators connect his trembling with the ways in which he flips his wrist and regains composure by applying imaginary pancake makeup.

By this juncture in the performance, the jacket is removed and the silly pants are removed. He is revealed in a body-embracing prismatic body stocking. He begins to bounce around the stage, offering the audience a particular version of runway—the vogueing practice of walking as though one were a supermodel. One particular Aviance gesture worth noting is the way in which his ankles fold or crack as he walks, or rather stomps, the runway. This gesture permits him to be quicker and more determined in his steps than most high-heeled walkers. This gesture connotes a tradition of queenly identification with the sadism of female beauty rituals. The move—walking with heels in such an unorthodox fashion—constitutes a disidentification with these traditions of gay male performances of female embodiment.[11] Aviance's refusal to wear wigs is a further example of this disidentificatory dynamic. The determined walking is replaced by a particular sway-back walk in which his buttocks and chest are both outstretched, exaggerating the features of a racialized body. To do so, I want to argue, is not to play the Venus Hottentot for a predominantly white Canadian audience; it is, instead, to insist on the fact of blackness in this overwhelmingly white space. Aviance then throws himself into the audience and is held aloft by it. He is lost in a sea of white hands; this being lost can be understood as a particularly queer mode of performing the self. That is how the performance ends. This amazing counterfetish is absorbed by the desiring masses. He has opened in them a desire or a mode of desiring that is uneasy and utterly important if he is to surpass the new gender symmetry of the gay world.

Aviance's biography is, in and of itself, a testament to queer survival. He grew up as Eric Snead in a large family in Richmond, Virginia. His first experience in drag was in the seventh grade. As a youth he escaped the narrow confines of the small town and moved to the nearest gay metropolis, Washington, D.C., where he worked as a hairdresser, did drag as an amateur, and developed a disabling drug habit. He eventually overcame crack with the help of the House of Aviance. The House of Aviance is not exactly like the vogueing houses of Jennie Livingston's film *Paris Is Burning*, since it does not compete. The House of Aviance is something of a queer kinship network in which members serve as extended, pretended, and—some would argue—improved family that supports and enables its members. Kevin Aviance was the name he took after initiation.

Aviance eventually landed in New York City, where he first made a name for himself at the now legendary Sound Factory, a queer club that began as a predominantly Latino and black space. He distinguished himself on the dance floor, grabbing the attention of major DJs and nightlife promoters, and soon became a professional performer. Today he is one of a handful of New York drag performers who can distinguish himself as living solely off his performance. He forsook traditional drag and the world of wigs early in his career. His look is reminiscent of the legendary group of black soul divas called LaBelle, the group that wrote the almost perfect disco hit "Lady Marmalade."[12] I think of Aviance's look when I study the album cover for LaBelle's phenomenal 1974 album *Nightbirds*. All three women, dressed in metallic outfits, are portrayed as swirls of space-age Afro-glamour. LaBelle's Afro-futurism was a strategic move to make the group look freakish and alien, to make blackness something otherworldly and uncanny.

Aviance, like LaBelle, reconstructs blackness as a mysterious Lost-in-Space aesthetic. Other comparisons can be drawn between the punk performance style of Klaus Nomi, the deranged disco divinity of Grace Jones, the insane and beautiful drag of Leigh Bowery, and the spaced-out elegance of the hip-hop artist Missy Misdemeanor Elliot. But Aviance's look is definitely his own. I have seen him in many outfits, including fantastic gold lamé jumpsuits, sheer polka-dot minidresses, and leopard-skin body stockings. Although he does not wear wigs, he sometimes adorns his bald head with a hat.

Both his appearance and his performances are in no way attempting to imitate a woman. He is instead interested in approximating a notion of femininity. Queer theory has made one lesson explicitly clear: the set of behaviors and codes of conduct that we refer to as feminine or masculine are not slaves to the biological.[13] Women, straight and gay, perform and live masculinity in the same way as many a biological man inhabits femininity. Sometimes technology aligns people's gender identity and their biological self. Others relish the antinormative disjuncture between their biological gender and their performed or lived gender. Aviance's masculinity, partially informed by his biological maleness, is never hidden—he wears no wig, and he does not tuck (conceal or hide the male genital bulge while in drag). Indeed, in his performance we see a unique cohabitation of traditional female and male traits.

To perform such a hybrid gender is not only to be queer but to defy troubling gender logics within gay spaces. Bollen's chapter on queer

performativity and the dance floor catalogs different dancing styles—such as girly poofter (Australian slang for campy and feminine male dancing) and the standard macho style of dancing that dominates many gay dance venues. Bollen notes but does not delve into the femmephobia apparent on many queer dance floors, where those who break the gay-clone edict to act like a man are de-eroticized and demoted to second-class citizenship.

I observe that tension when I find myself at the Roxy, the sceniest place to be for a certain stratum of New York gay men. I am overwhelmed by the throngs of shirtless dancers with gym-crafted bodies. Their dance style is aggressive yet rigid; the moves they make are meant to show off the rewards of hours of gym workouts. They do not spread out but instead dance closely together, almost in packs. They are often awash in the effects of club drugs, such as Ecstasy and Special K, and huddle together as they dance. For the most part, they do not let themselves flow and keep close to one another, enjoying the ways in which their gym-sculpted muscles rub up against those of the next clonish dance-floor compatriot.

Through the mist of the smoke machine I watch Aviance elevate himself above the crowd. He is dancing on a small platform that is about five feet high, the kind of ministage usually occupied by a gym-built go-go boy. Go-go boys mostly just bump and grind. There is not much room for steps, and Aviance does not need them. This particular dance is about his hands. His hands move in jerky, mechanical spasms. They frame his face and his outfit. He dances to the house music that the DJ is playing especially for him. He is elevated from the dance floor but also surrounded by dancers who are now dancing with him. He is both onstage and one of the throng, one with the music. It makes sense that he is elevated. He is there not because he is simply a better dancer than the other clubgoers around him (he is) but because he is the bridge between quotidian nightlife dancing and theatrical performance.[14] He defies the codes of masculinity that saturate the dance floor. His gestures are unapologetically femme. His fingers swiftly minister to his face, as though applying invisible makeup. His movements are coded as masculine (strong abrupt motions), feminine (smooth flowing moves), and, above all, robotic (precise mechanical movements).

What does it mean that in this space, where codes of masculinity dominate, Aviance is a local deity? What work does his performance do in this venue? Furthermore, what about his blackness in this space that is overrun by sweaty and shirtless white torsos? One response would be that he is a fetish in this space, a magic juju that lets white and effeminate gay men

be fabulous while not being progressive around gender, race, and sexuality. Such a reading would miss the point. Aviance is extremely aware of the audience, and when the time comes to play the race man/woman, he will certainly do so. I have seen it occur onstage on many occasions. At La Nueva Esculeita, a Latino queer space in midtown, I have seen him convert the dance club's stage to a pulpit between musical numbers and have witnessed him denouncing the fascist regime of the city's mayor and his racist police force. Aviance speaks out regularly at venues both white and racialized. He has also read the racism of New York's privileged gay community. Aviance is conscious about the ways in which he can be made into a fetish, but he disidentifies with such a role in very particular ways.

Marxism tells us the story of the commodity fetish, the object that alienates us from the conditions of possibility that brought whatever commodity into being.[15] The fetish, in its Marxian dimensions, is about occlusion, displacement, concealment, and illusion. Some drag artists prefer the gender title of illusionist. Aviance does not work in illusion; he becomes many things at once. His performance labors to index a fantastic female glamour, but his masculinity is never eclipsed. If the fetish is about illusion, Aviance disidentifies with the standard notion of the fetish and makes it about a certain demystification.

When he is on that stage, he performs gestures that few others can perform. His gestures are not allowed in the strict codes of masculinity followed by the habitués of most commercial queer dance spaces. Paul Franklin's chapter on Charlie Chaplin's gestures speaks to the fear of effeminacy that has haunted the history of the male dancer in the West. The same arguments are lucidly conveyed in Ramsay Burt's writing on the Male Dancer.[16] This antieffeminate bias has, ironically, resurfaced in many gay male dance spaces. As an icon, a beacon above the dance floor, Aviance uses gestures that permit the dancers to see and experience the feelings they do not permit themselves to let in. He and the gestures he performs are beacons for all the emotions that the throng is not allowed to feel.

These pumped-up gym queens started out, in most cases, as pudgy or skinny sissy boys who attempted to hide their gestures. Many of them, like the *I* from my earlier autobiographical account, attempted to walk like men and hide the telltale queer gesture. This culture needs to be critiqued for the normative gender paradigms to which it subscribes as well as for the exclusionary logics it applies to people who do not make its normative

(often white and decidedly masculine) cut. Nonetheless, though this symbolic violence is not justifiable, one can certainly understand this desire to be masculine. These men did not stop at straightening out the swish of their walk; they worked on their bodies and approximated a hypermasculine ideal.

I do not want to extend energy in moralizing against this route to survival in a heteronormative world. It makes sense, especially when we consider that these men came into masculinity as they were surrounded by the specter of the AIDS pandemic. The AIDS catastrophe provides a lot of reasons to build up the body. But imagine how hard it must be to try to look and act so butch all the time. Indeed, these men become their own fetish of masculinity in that they hide the conditions of possibility that lead to their becoming butch. Aviance reveals these conditions. That is the function of the counterfetish. He performs the powerful interface between femininity and masculinity that is active in any gender, especially queer ones. In this fashion he is once again a counterfetish, elucidating the real material conditions of our gender and desire.

Imagine the relief these gym queens feel as Aviance lets himself be both masculine and feminine, as his fabulous and strange gestures connote the worlds of queer suffering that these huddled men attempt to block out but cannot escape, and the pleasures of being swish and queeny that they cannot admit to in their quotidian lives. Furthermore, imagine that his performance is something that is instructive, that recodifies signs of abjection in mainstream queer spaces—blackness, femininity/effeminacy—and makes them not only desirable but something to be desired. Imagine how some of those men on the dance floor might come around to accepting and embracing the queer gesture through Aviance's exemplary performance. More important, imagine what his performance means to those on the margins of the crowd, those who have not devoted their lives to daily gym visits and this hypermasculine ideal, those whose race or appearance does not conform to rigid schematics of what might be hot. Those on the margins can get extreme pleasure in seeing Aviance rise from the muscled masses, elevated and luminous.

For the racialized cognoscenti, his gestures function like the sorrow songs of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. In that paradigm-shifting text Du Bois meditates on the power of Negro music and the embedded and syncretic meaning found in these testaments to the culture of slavery.

> What are these songs, and what do they mean? I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrases, but I know something of men. Knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world. They tell us that life was joyous to the black slave, careless and happy. I can easily believe this of some, of many. The Old South cannot deny the heart-touching witness of these songs. They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.[17]

I risk sounding a bit overdramatic by using this analogy. I nonetheless invoke this classic text in African American letters for the express purpose of calling attention to the pathos that underlies some of these gestures. Vogueing, for instance, is too often considered a simplistic celebration of black queer culture. It is seen as a simple appropriation of high fashion or other aspects of commodity culture. I am proposing that we might see something other than a celebration in these moves—the strong trace of black and queer racialized survival, the way in which children need to imagine becoming Other in the face of conspiring cultural logics of white supremacy and heteronormativity. The gesture contains an articulate message for all to read, in this case a message of fabulousness and fantastical becoming. It also contains another message, one less articulated and more ephemeral but equally relevant to any understanding of queer gestures, gestures that, as I have argued, are often double- or multivalenced. So while the short-sighted viewer of Aviance's vogueing might see only the approximation of high-fashion glamour as he moves and gestures on the stage, others see/hear another tune, one of racialized self-enactment in the face of overarching opposition.

Conclusion: The Not-Vanishing Point

Even New York clubs eventually close for the night; most close the next afternoon, but they do close. The performances come to an end. Club kids stumble into taxis in broad daylight, and Aviance and other performers pack up their outfits and makeup and go home for a restorative nap. Is this performance's end? That moment when the venue closes? Has the vanishing point been reached? In Marcia Siegel's influential book of dance criticism, *At the Vanishing Point: A Critic Looks at Dance*, Siegel provocatively

links dance to the notion of a vanishing point: dance exists as a perpetual vanishing point.[18] At the moment of its creation it is gone. All the years of training in the studio, all the choreographer's planning, the rehearsals, the coordination of designers, composers, and technicians, the raising of money and the gathering together of an audience—all these are only a preparation for an event that disappears in the very act of materializing. No other art is so hard to catch, so impossible.

Siegel certainly knows that every vanishing point signals a return, the promise of the next performance, of continuation. She argues that dancers and audiences must have been aware of this ephemerality and are used it. I agree with the revered critic. Queer dance is hard to catch, and it is meant to be hard to catch—it is supposed to slip through the fingers and comprehension of those who would use knowledge against us. But it matters and takes on a vast material weight for those of us who perform or draw important sustenance from performance. Rather than dematerialize, dance rematerializes. Dance, like energy, never disappears; it is simply transformed. Queer dance, after the live act, does not just expire. The ephemeral does not equal unmateriality. It is more nearly about another understanding of what matters. It matters to get lost in dance or to use dance to get lost: lost from the evidentiary logic of heterosexuality.

For queers, the gesture and its aftermath, the ephemeral trace, matter more than many traditional modes of evidencing lives and politics. The hermeneutics of residue on which I have called are calibrated to read Aviance's gestures and know these moves as vast storehouses of queer history and futurity. We also must understand that after the gesture expires, its materiality has transformed into ephemera that are utterly necessary.

26. For these statistics and more recent ones on antigay violence, see the LAMBDA Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project website at http://www.lambda.org/glnvah.htm.

27. See Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 12.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. I am grateful to Carol Martin and Jane Desmond for advice on this chapter. Aviance has been helpful and generally divine. I appreciate Ari Gold's introducing him to me.

2. For more on the trace, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 24–65.

3. Jane C. Desmond, ed., *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on and off the Stage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001). The contributions to that volume that I directly engage are Paul B. Franklin, "The Terpsichorean Tramp: Unmanyly Movement in the Early Films of Charlie Chaplin"; Paul Siegel, "The Right to Boogie: The First Amendment on the Dance Floor"; and Jonathan Bollen, "Queer Kinesthesia: Performativity on the Dance Floor."

4. For more on the Giuliani cabaret-license laws in relation to queer performance, see Shane Vogel, "Where Are We Now? Queer World Making and Cabaret Performance," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2000): 29–60.

5. By "historically dense queer gesture," I mean a gesture whose significance and connotative queer force is dense with antinormative meanings.

6. See Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London: Routledge, 1997).

7. That Kiki would be in her late sixties seems a bit unlikely because, according to the oral biography that Kiki and Herb recite during their performances, they began performing during the Great Depression. When I asked Bond about Kiki's age, she explained that her "official age" is sixty-six.

8. Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art," in *The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).

9. In some ways this idea echoes Peggy Phelan, who has famously argued that disappearance is the very ontology of something that is performed. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

10. The word *cunty* is black gay slang that describes a certain performed mode of femininity. Although its misogynist implications cannot be underemphasized, it should be understood that the term *cunty*, unlike *cunt*, is not meant to be derogatory. A good queen strives to achieve a high level of "cuntiness."

11. For more on the process I describe at length as disidentification, see my book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

12. The members of LaBelle were Patti LaBelle, Nona Hendrix, and Sarah Dash.

13. I take this opportunity to refer readers to Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

14. I argue for the notion of resistance through dance/nightlife culture in the introduction that Celeste Fraser Delgado and I wrote for our edited volume, *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

15. Marx articulates the theory of the commodity fetish in *Capital: Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990).

16. See Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

17. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 1989), 179–180.

18. Marcia Siegel, *At the Vanishing Point: A Critic Looks at Dance* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972).

Notes to Chapter 5

1. Imamu Amiri Baraka, *The Toilet* (New York: Sterling Lord Agency, 1964); hereafter cited in the text as *T.*

2. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

3. I am covering some territory that Moten has already tread quite expertly, and I am hoping to build on his formidable analysis. See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

4. Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

5. Moten, *In the Break*, 169.

6. Whatever currency the term *alternative* might have at this historical moment is certainly up for grabs. *Minoritized* here is meant to connote racialization in relationship to a scene dominated by whiteness, but it is also relational to the term *minoritarian*, which I often use to talk about sexual and racial minorities.

7. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

Notes

Notes to the Introduction

1. This brief biographical sketch of Bloch draws heavily on Vincent Geoghegan's excellent *Ernst Bloch* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Although *Cruising Utopia* employs some of Bloch's critical thinking, it nonetheless does not pretend to anything like a comprehensive introduction to Blochian theory. Indeed that book has already been written, and it is Geoghegan's.

2. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols., trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 1:146.

5. Ernst Bloch, *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron and others (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 341.

6. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

7. Ibid., 178–181.

8. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

9. Gavin Butt, *Just between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

10. Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

11. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

12. See Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), esp. 18–70.

13. Ibid.

14. Bloch, *Literary Essays*, 340.

15. Bloch, *Utopian Function of Art*, 71–77.

16. Frank O'Hara, "Having a Coke with You," in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 360.

17. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 339.

18. Bloch, *Utopian Function of Art*, 78–102.

19. Ibid.

20. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 100.

21. Agamben, *Potentialities,* 178–181.

22. Bloch, *Literary Essays,* 339–344.

23. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

24. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

25. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

26. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

27. Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

28. Bloch, *Principle of Hope,* 144–178.

29. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation,* trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2008), esp. 9–66.

33. Ibid., 18.

34. Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages,* trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 104.

35. Eileen Myles, *Chelsea Girls* (New York: Black Sparrow, 1994), 274.

36. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005).

37. Here I am thinking of Delany's novel *The Mad Man* (New York: Kasak Books/Masquerade Books, 1994).

38. Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). Delaney's paradigm is carefully interrogated by Ricardo Montez, in "'Trade' Marks: LA2, Keith Haring, and a Queer Economy of Collaboration," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 3 (2006): 425–440.

39. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 15–50. Although Foucault's innovation is undeniable, the work of many historians of sexuality who have written in his wake has become rote.

40. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Elizabeth Freeman, "Packing History, Count(Er)Ing Generations," *New Literary History* 31 (2000): 727–744; Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography," *Social Text* 84–85 (2005): 57–68; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and Dolan, *Utopia in Performance.*

41. For an example of this queer-of-color critique, see the special issue of the journal *Social Text* that I edited with David and Judith Halberstam: "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" *Social Text* 84–85 (2005).

42. Lauren Berlant, "'68 or Something," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994): 124–155. Notable publications by Berlant that followed this earlier essay include *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); and *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

43. Along with Berlant's work, some other work that exemplifies the Public Feelings project includes Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); and Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

44. See the group's website, www.feeltankchicago.net.

45. See Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Pres, 2008).

Notes to Chapter 1

1. Third World Gay Revolution, "Manifesto of the Third World Gay Revolution," in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation,* ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 367.

2. Evan Wolfson, "All Together Now (A Blueprint for the Movement)," *Advocate,* September 11, 2001; available online at http://www.freedomtomarry.org/evan_wolfson/by/all_together_now.php (accessed February 6, 2009).

3. See Lisa Duggan, "Holy Matrimony!" *Nation,* March 15, 2004, available online at http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040315/duggan; and Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim, "Beyond Gay Marriage," *Nation,* July 18, 2005, available online at http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050718/kim.

4. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy,* ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

5. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2005).

6. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope,* trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

7. Here I draw from Judith Halberstam's notion of time and normativity that she mines from a critique of David Harvey. I see her alerting us to a normative