

RURAL DRAG: SETTLER COLONIALISM AND THE QUEER RHETORICS OF  
RURALITY

A Dissertation

by

GARRETT WEDEKIND NICHOLS

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Co-Chairs of Committee,	Qwo-Li Driskill
	Robert Griffin
Committee Members,	Angela Pulley Hudson
	Vanita Reddy
	Susan Stabile
Head of Department,	Nancy Warren

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## ABSTRACT

In the United States, rural culture is frequently thought of as traditional and “authentically” American. This belief stems from settler colonial histories in which Native lands are stolen and “settled” by white colonial communities. Through this process, the rugged “frontier” becomes a symbol of American identity, and rural communities become the home of “real” Americans. Because settler colonization is invested in maintaining systems of white supremacy, sexism, and heteropatriarchy, these “real” Americans are figured as normatively white and straight. This dissertation analyzes the rhetorical construction of rurality in the United States, specifically focusing on the ways in which settler colonial histories shape national discussions of rural sexuality. I theorize a rhetorical practice I call *rural drag*, a process by which individuals in settler society can assert membership in white heteropatriarchy by performing “rurality.”

I trace the development of this rhetorical practice through three case studies. In the first, I analyze 19th-century Texan legislative writings during the creation of Texas A&M University. These writings and related correspondences reveal a baseline of white supremacist and settler colonial rhetorics upon which the university established its *ethos*. In the second, I look at how these rhetorics continue to inform performances of sexuality and gender at Texas A&M. These performances derive from earlier rhetorical practices designed to create a space for white settler privilege. Together, these two case studies



suggest that rhetorical practices shape and are shaped by the spaces in which they are practiced and the rhetorical histories of these spaces. In my final case study, I interrogate national discourses of rurality through an analysis of country western music to show how rhetorics of rurality are simultaneously local and national. I conclude by challenging scholars of rhetoric and queer studies to recognize that the relationship between rhetoric and place is key to recognizing our relationship to privilege and oppression in the United States. To further this, I propose a decolonial queerscape pedagogy that accounts for the multiple overlays of sexual identities and practices that travel through the academy while challenging the colonial histories and actions upon which the academy is built.

## DEDICATION

To Julián, whose love wrote this dissertation.

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CHAPTER I

“THE AMERICANS THAT I KNOW”: THE RURAL IMAGINARY  
AND SETTLER COLONIAL DISCOURSE

boy, y'all were gonna get rain  
but you done flapped your gums  
now grass gotta die hot  
tongues'll flounder all about mouths  
I had scheduled up rain  
now I'm spending my day  
scrubbin' you voice from my ear  
and clenchin' up the assholes of clouds  
– Crystal Boson, “God responds to rick perry and his national day of prayer in a  
language he can understand”<sup>1</sup>

The arguments I make in this dissertation about rhetoric and rurality emerge from a series of fleeting moments and slippages in the discourses of rural culture in the United States. They can be glimpsed in the swagger of a Texas governor running for President in a world of Web 2.0; in 19<sup>th</sup>-century legislative documents constricting the rights of African-Americans; in a “Boots and Bikinis” contest in a college bar; in a pair of

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<sup>1</sup> From *When We Become Weavers: Queer Female Poets on the Midwestern Experience* (2012).

fabricated plastic testicles hanging from the bumper of a pickup truck; or in the lyrics of a hit song about a woman's sexual attraction to her boyfriend's tractor. This dissertation analyzes the role that rural spaces play in the construction of a uniquely "American" identity, particularly as this identity relates to racial and sexual norms and the promotion of settler colonial projects. My central argument in this dissertation is that, within the settler colonial culture of the United States, the privileges of whiteness and heteropatriarchy are "naturalized" through the use of rural rhetorics. Discourses of rurality in the United States encourage a framing of rural life as traditional, authentic, and culturally insulated, allowing individuals who wish to make explicit their membership in settler society to make appeals to rurality by draping themselves in the symbols and practices of rural culture. This rhetorical practice, which I call *rural drag*, requires a settler view of rural space as the ahistorically natural birthplace of settler citizenry.

Because the rhetorics I interrogate in this dissertation work best when they go unnoticed, it is sometimes easiest to provide examples through which a theory can be illustrated. As such, I include in this chapter significant examples of my theory, examples that reveal their relationship when juxtaposed together. The two examples, a presidential candidacy announcement and a presidential campaign ad, are useful insofar as the rhetorical differences between the two also highlight particularly trenchant similarities. Together, they illustrate both the pervasiveness and constructedness of a common rhetoric about rural culture and its relation to certain forms of proper citizenship in the United States.

## **Rural Drag: Performing Rural Realness**

Settler colonial projects in the United States rely on specific discourses and rhetorics of rural subjectivity in order to construct a national imaginary of what constitutes “the rural.” This “rural imaginary” is constituted by commonly held stereotypes of rural aesthetics, behaviors, tastes, locations, and histories. Settler subjects in the United States, i.e. those who benefit from the colonization of Native lands, deploy this imaginary in order to produce an image of “real” or “authentic” American identity predicated on an ideal of white supremacy and cisgender heteronormativity.<sup>2</sup> Through my theory of *rural drag*, I argue that signifiers of rurality in the United States are enacted by individuals and communities, both locally and nationally, to construct an image of heteronormativity and white superiority that makes invisible the desires and cultural identifications that deviate from, challenge, or refuse power’s disciplinary tactics. It is not my intent to identify “queer rural rhetorics” as much as it is to *queer* rural rhetorics by demonstrating how rurality has been rhetorically constructed to reflect dominant cultural beliefs about race, sexuality, and citizenship. In other words, I show how our relationship to rurality in the United States is informed by the settler state’s promotion of an ideal citizenry coded as normatively straight and white.

My argument starts from the intersection of two contemporary developments in critical cultural scholarship. The first emerges from queer scholarship. Increasingly, queer theories of the past decade have worked to interrogate and interrupt a

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<sup>2</sup> The term “cisgender” is a descriptor for those whose gender identity is not at odds with the gender assigned to them at birth.

“homonormativity”<sup>3</sup> in academic scholarship that uncritically assumes a traditionally white, male, middle-classed non-heterosexual subjectivity as the basis for its analysis. (Think, for example, of the shows *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Will and Grace* as the supposedly “authentic” depictions of gay culture during the 2000s that worked hard to attract straight audiences.) As part of this move, a developing trend in queer scholarship critiques an implicit urban bias in much of queer theory in which the structures upon which queer communities are built are presumed to be predominantly urban. Kath Weston, for example, identifies “the great gay migration” as a recurring trope in queer histories that follows oppressed queer subjects to the freedom and safety of San Francisco or New York (“Get Thee to a Big City”).<sup>4</sup> Judith Halberstam names this trend “metronormativity,” arguing that “‘urban/rural’ is not a ‘real’ binary; it is rather a locational rubric that supports and sustains the conventional depiction of queer life as urban” (190). Scholars like Halberstam, Weston, and Scott Herring have

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<sup>3</sup> Lisa Duggan defines “homonormativity” as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50). Duggan describes homonormativity within a neoliberal project that inequally distributes wealth through ideals of competition and individualism, structured under *public* vs. *private* as a political master term. Roderick A. Ferguson further situates homonormativity “as part of a genealogy in which minoritized subjects demand and aspire to recognition by the liberal capitalist state” (59). As Ferguson argues, homonormativity privileges subjects who embody “a stable and healthy social order” (namely white, middle-class citizens) while those who do not (immigrants, the poor, and people of color) are rendered invisible.

<sup>4</sup> Weston’s use of “great gay migration” to describe this demographic shift both references and erases the “Great Migration” of the twentieth century in which African Americans moved from rural Southern areas to urban Northern and Midwestern cities. As such, theories like Weston’s participate in queer scholarship’s tradition of appropriating the histories and movements of racial minorities to serve the interests of white queer subjects.

effectively demonstrated that queer theoretical frameworks implicitly centered on urban queer experiences run the risk of inappropriately imposing their conclusions on communities for whom the urban experience may have little to no cultural purchase.

The second development emerges from a constellation of critical discourses concerned with questions of power. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's theories articulated in *The History of Sexuality, Discipline and Punish, The Order of Things* and elsewhere, I conceive of power as a circulation of forces and discourses that permeate the social body, constructing and delimiting cultural understandings of sexuality, race, gender, and the body. As Foucault describes it, power "is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.... [P]ower is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (*Sexuality*, 93). Among other possibilities, Foucault examined prisons, hospitals, and discourses about sexuality in Western civilization to demonstrate that power can be seen in its effects (the shape of the prison, the admissions criteria of a hospital, the psychiatric language about sexuality) and that these effects construct our individual relationships to fields of power. The prisoner, for example, internalizes the surveilling gaze of the prison guard in the tower; the man who engages in sexual intercourse with another man understands himself to *be* a homosexual, rather than a man who engages in sexual acts with men. The circulation of power (as opposed to the centrality of a will of power) means that we must look beyond binaries of oppressor/oppressed in search of power in our lives and recognize our own complicity as subjects whose discursive engagements with culture are

always already shaped by certain registers of power. Rural rhetorics, for example, are not formed in a vacuum – they reflect, respond to, and resist local, regional, national, and global discourses of rurality, as well as those of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Rural rhetorics make meaning beyond the specific rural communities within which they occur. A rural subject’s rhetorical practices reflect their relationship to specific landscapes, to their local communities, and to the “imagined community” of the nation.<sup>5</sup>

To consider how individual subjects may respond to, appropriate, and even resist the discourses of power, I turn to Michel de Certeau’s theory of strategies and practices in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau argues that individuals within a field of power employ “tactics” that take advantage of slippages between the strategies of power in order to alter momentarily the meanings that power imbues in the particulars of everyday life. “The space of the tactic,” writes de Certeau, “is the space of the other” (37). The possibility of tactical resistance by subjects constituted by relationships to fields of power tempers Foucault’s totalizing theory of power even as it recognizes the strategies and pathways by which power operates according to Foucault.

Emerging scholarship in post-colonial and decolonial studies, indigenous studies, and critical race studies has implicated colonial projects and rhetorics in the construction of race, gender, and sexual categories. Jasbir Puar has argued that a developing national

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<sup>5</sup> In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that modern nations are imagined political communities made possible through the advent of print capitalism that allows individual subjects to imagine distant others as sharing particular rituals and practices of citizenship (such as reading the morning news). Similarly, I see rural rhetorics as participating in and contributing to a national understanding of “Americanness” through both local practices and national media (e.g. western films or country music).

homosexuality, what she terms “homonationalism,” has emerged in the United States that forms alliances with the U.S. empire’s “commitment to the global dominant ascendancy of whiteness,” a commitment that “is contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary” (2). As she notes, “The historical and contemporaneous production of an emergent normativity, homonormativity, ties the recognition of homosexual subjects, both legally and representationally, to the national and transnational political agendas of U.S. imperialism” (9). This dissertation interrogates the logics of settler colonialism that produce and are produced by sexuality, race, and space. Settler colonialism, as Scott Lauria Morgensen argues, “aims to amalgamate subjects in a settler society as ‘non-Native’ inheritors, and *not* challengers of the colonization of Native peoples of occupied Native lands” (ix). Settler colonialism did not end with the “closing of the frontier” to American expansionism in the nineteenth century (Turner). The logics that guided Euroamerican excursion into the Americas and resulted in the construction of settler communities still persist today, requiring settler subjects to participate in the continued erasure of Native presences and histories in order to stake a claim of inheritance to supposedly emptied lands and participate in the benefits of U.S. citizenship. Morgensen notes, for example, a trend in queer writings to identify the presence of non-heterosexual indigenous bodies prior to colonization as a way of legitimizing contemporary non-indigenous queer expression in the United States. He argues, though, that such moves require the continued erasure of native bodies and sexualities in the present in order to

position the contemporary white queer subject as the rightful heir to a queerness that existed prior to colonization.

This dissertation contributes to established work by scholars such as Morgensen, Mark Rifkin, and Andrea Smith who have argued that heteronormativity is a project invested in the logics of settler colonialism. Smith, for example, extends the “subjectless critique” of queer theory to interrogate the ways in which scholarship on decolonialism may inadvertently reestablish the logics of settler colonialism. She argues for an “identity-plus” politics (as a supplement to the current “post-identity” politics) that accommodates individual identities while situating them within their relationship to fields of power and oppression (“Queer Theory and Native Studies,” 61). Both Smith (“Heteropatriarchy”) and Rifkin (*When Did Indians Become Straight?*) have also argued that heteropatriarchy is a key element in the formation and perpetuation of the U.S. empire. In the United States, the institutional and political structures of settler colonialism demarcate physical and ideological boundaries of citizenship that condition subjects to seek acceptance in a settler society built around the aspirational primacy of the *bourgeois* nuclear family. Thus, subjects ideally reside within (or even “lead”) heteronormative nuclear family units, with collections of these family units forming self-governing communities that are in turn collected into larger structures of government (counties, states, nations, etc.). This system requires a collective agreement that such a structure is both natural and originary – family and kinship, for example, cannot be thought of outside the settler state, nor can alternative forms of relationality be considered appropriate models of socialization and governance. These structures



naturalize settler colonialism and the conditions of settler citizenship so that all subjects are bound to participate in the same discursive registers of colonization, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, regardless of how successfully they reflect or embody these ideals.

I begin my analysis at the intersection of these developing trends in scholarship on queerness, race, and colonization. My work takes up Morgensen's call to denaturalize settler colonialism in order to "displace any project that grounds queer life within the state, institutions, cultures, histories, or futures of a settler society" (230). To denaturalize settler colonialism is not to remove queer life from the structures, places, and institutions of settler society. Rather, it is to resist the imperative to see settler colonial frameworks as necessary and originary to analyses of culture. To do this, I interrogate the rhetorical elements that constitute a discourse of ruralism in order to facilitate a "groundlessness" within queer scholarship that Morgensen argues is a necessary byproduct of "critiquing settlement as a condition of [our] existence" (227). I focus my analysis through three telescoping lenses: national rural identities and rhetorics; regional rural rhetorics and legal/regulatory histories; and the local rhetorics of rurality informed by *rural drag* in College Station, Texas.

Conventionally, drag is understood as the appropriation of dominant signifiers of gender in order to call attention to gender and level a playful critique against its constructedness. My theorization of *rural drag* follows this thinking even as it departs from it in a few significant ways. *Rural drag*, as I define it, is the physical appropriation of rural signifiers that convey white, cisgender heterosexuality and it may take form as

both conscious and unconscious performance, as well as a collective interpretation of the relative success of the performances of others. Rural signifiers may take the form of clothing (hats, flannels, boots, jeans), of property (pickup trucks, farmland, animals), or of practices and aesthetics (chewing tobacco, country-western music, saying “howdy,” muddy clothes, or even “big” hair for some regions). Though individually the presence of any of these signifiers may not carry much meaning, together they constitute a series of tropes from which individuals may draw in order to construct a performance of heteronormativity.

As a performance, *rural drag* differs from “conventional” drag in that it does not seek to transverse gender in the manner of drag kings and queens. Instead, it works to stabilize and naturalize cisgendered heteronormativity through the no less conscious appropriation of working-class rural signifiers intended to telegraph an acceptable and normative gender and sexuality. Individuals may employ *rural drag* in order to develop a working-class *ethos* that situates them as “authentic” members of a rural community even when class privilege might belie their claims to inclusion. In her discussion of the public figure of the cross-dresser, Marjorie Garber argues that “one of the most consistent and effective functions of the transvestite in culture is to indicate the place of ... ‘category crisis,’ disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances” (16). Conversely, I argue that *rural drag*’s function might actually be the negative reverse of that: to dislocate the place of “category crisis” and resolve (or at least make invisible) cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances.

At the same time that *rural drag* may be consciously or unconsciously performed by individuals, its third function shifts it to the level of camp and revels in the thinness of its own façade of heteronormativity. Queer communities may deploy what Susan Sontag calls a “Camp vision, a Camp way of looking at things” that reveals a male homoerotic current underlying the hyper-straight performances of *rural drag* and transforms the performance of heteronormativity into a reception of titillating homoeroticism (277). Thus, the cowboy with the comically snug jeans, tightly rolled up flannel shirt, five o’clock shadow, and the worn outline of a Skoal can on his otherwise empty back pockets becomes both a symbol of rugged masculinity and a camp icon of dressing up straight.

By attending to the particulars of (imagined) communities formed in specific spaces, *rural drag* is a practice of place. In his theory of how power establishes and enforces the limits placed on subjects, de Certeau argues that the construction of “place” is key to the deployment of power. “As in management,” he writes, “every ‘strategic’ rationalization seeks first of all to distinguish its ‘own’ place, that is, the place of its own power and will, from an ‘environment’” (36). An analysis of *rural drag* as a rhetoric of settler privilege and power reveals how the “‘strategic’ rationalization” of the settler nation-state seeks to establish “the rural” as the “place” of settler power in the United States. The practice of *rural drag* rests on set distinctions between the categories whose crises it attempts to solve. In de Certeau’s words, “it is an effort to delimit one’s own place in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other” (36).

While *rural drag* is a practice of place, it is of a place that highlights the historicity and naturalization of whiteness and heteropatriarchy. “The rural” is not just the location in space of settler privilege, it is also a location in time, allowing settler citizens to articulate their practices as “traditional” and “authentic,” terms rooted in a sense of the past. Interestingly, for an ideology in which the acquisition of space is of tantamount importance, settler colonial logics in the United States often place a greater value on history and time, with space operating as merely a backdrop to the events that makeup the identity of the settler nation. Vine Deloria, Jr., articulates this key difference between settler and Native epistemologies:

American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind. Immigrants review the movement of their ancestors across the continent as a steady progression of basically good events and experiences, thereby placing history—time—in the best possible light. ...

Western European peoples have never learned to consider the nature of the world discerned from a spatial point of view. (61-62)

This difference, writes Deloria, prevents Natives and settlers from engaging in productive discourses since their view of both the problems and the solutions to settler colonialism are fundamentally different. “Before any final solution to American history can occur,” he argues, “a reconciliation must be effected between the spiritual owner of the land—American Indians—and the political owner of the land—American whites” (75). Through this project, I hope to provide a vantage point from which readers can

understand the ways that place and land continue to structure American settler cultural practices, and how these places (or images of place) are converted into temporal locations through the settler imaginary.

A theory which interrogates the role of space and place in the construction of sexuality must make room for the specificity of discourses between and among places. In order to do so, I rely on three case studies with which to focus my argument: 19th-century regulatory writing and technical communication in College Station, Texas, and the state of Texas; cultural performance and embodied practices of *rural drag* in College Station; and the country-western music industry in the United States. Local rhetorics of rural sexuality and queerness simultaneously participate in and reflect national rhetorics of rural life and proper citizenship. In order to recognize and resist the sexual and racial interpellations of settler colonialism, we need to uncover and denaturalize the discursive relationship between the nation and the local that constitutes the rural imaginary.

### **Methodology**

My dissertation contributes to the study of cultural rhetorics. In the western academy, the study of “rhetoric” has been traditionally concerned with what Aristotle described as the “ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (37). For centuries, Aristotle’s definition, and variations on it, guided academics who understood rhetoric to involve the study and practice of language as persuasive, whether inclined towards actions or attitudes. While this definition has merit (people must persuade, after all), the preoccupation with a disembodied “persuasion” practiced between rhetors has tended to ignore the fact that rhetoric is practiced by

rhetors with bodies, who live in cultures, and who must navigate power differentials in order to be persuasive. As such, issues of privilege and oppression tend not to factor into these discussions, meaning that the “disembodied” rhetors may actually more closely resemble the bodies of those with privilege: white, male, and with money.

In response to this, a cultural rhetorical approach presses on the “available means of persuasion” to ask us to consider how power, culture, and access intersect within rhetoric to shape not just the “persuasion,” but also the “available” and the “means.” For example, Jay Dolmage offered the following definition of rhetoric in *Octolog* III at the 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication: “I see rhetoric as the strategic study of the circulation of power through communication” (Agnew et al. 113). Later in the same *Octolog*, Malea Powell called scholars to “move our conversations and our practices toward ‘things,’ to a wider understandings [sic] of how all things are rhetorical, and of how cultures make, and are made by, the rhetoricity of things” (122). Cultural rhetorical approaches ask us to expand our understanding of rhetoric to account for power and the cultural situatedness of all rhetorical practices (be they verbal, written, symbolic, or material). A cultural rhetorical study of *rural drag* must therefore interrogate the rhetoric’s historical development as well as its cultural influence. Thus, this dissertation draws from and engages in conversation with a number of different disciplines beyond rhetoric, including history, sociology, philosophy, legal studies, music studies, and pedagogy.

In this dissertation, I employ a queer, rural, decolonial methodology that interrogates the ways in which cultural constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class,

and colonial participation are not only formed coextensively but are also imbricated with spatial rhetorics of the rural United States. My intention is not to reveal, resolve, or refute a tension between urban centers and rural communities. Tensions in relationship exist not because of some *a priori* animosity between urban dwellers and rural folk. At their roots, both urban and rural life in the United States owe their existence to the history of a still-active settler colonialism. That is where the tensions will lie, and that is where I will center my analysis.

This methodology requires that any analysis of sexuality, gender, race, or class cannot begin from within the colonial logics of settler discourse and indeed must actively denaturalize such discursive formations. It also requires accountability to the communities and cultures with which my work intersects, and in this case, my dissertation interrogates not only the formation and practices of present-day rural Texas communities, but also indigenous communities who were displaced to make room for these settler outposts, queer communities whose struggles for safety, recognition, and rights sometimes align with the same settler sensibilities that perpetuate their exclusion, and an academic community that owes its existence to settler patronage, and white, male heteropatriarchy but that is at the same time populated by scholars like myself who use it to challenge its own preconditions. In *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action*, Jeffrey Grabill argues, “If we want to work effectively within communities, then we all need to understand more fully how institutions operate, how the powerful operate, and how infrastructures are designed and made” (4). This dissertation is an attempt to understand the institutions and infrastructures through which

modern rural sexual identities are made legible. It is also an attempt to facilitate the “possibility of allied work for decolonization” that grows in what Morgensen describes as “the space that opens up when non-Natives release attachments to place, while Native people contest how place might be known or controlled” (227).

A queer, rural, decolonial methodology is a methodology of the margins committed to destabilizing and decentering the privileges of heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism as they intersect with a U.S. urban-rural binary. As a decolonial project, my dissertation seeks to make alliance with Native and Two-Spirit scholars and activists to bring attention to traumas of colonization and “end the occupation and wounding of [Native] homelands” (Driskill, “Yelesalehe,” 5). “When we speak of a decolonial approach to scholarship,” writes Qwo-Li Driskill, “we must be committed to current struggles for Native people. The struggles of Native people—inside and outside of the academy and the discipline—should be of pressing concern to Native and non-Native people alike” (5). This dissertation contributes to decolonial struggles by revealing the ways in which settler colonial ideologies permeate American beliefs about rurality, race, and sexuality. As such, I am answering Andrea Smith’s call for Native Studies to make use of the “subjectless critique” employed in queer theory. “A subjectless critique,” argues Smith,

can help Native studies (as well as ethnic studies) escape the ethnographic entrapment by which Native peoples are rendered simply as objects of intellectual study, and instead can foreground settler colonialism as a key logic that governs the United States today. A subjectless critique helps



demonstrate that Native studies is an intellectual project that has broad applicability not only for Native peoples but for everyone. It also requires us to challenge the normalizing logics of academia rather than simply articulate a politics of Indigenous inclusion within the colonial academy. (“Queer Theory,” 46).

In interrogating the rhetorical construction of rurality in the United States, then, I am committing myself to an analysis of how this construction supports the settler colonial appropriation of Native lands, bodies, and practices and facilitates the erasure of Native peoples from the land.

In employing this methodology, I am committing myself to a critique of power that may often include myself. As such, it is imperative that I lay my cards on the table, so to speak, and reveal both my investment in this project and what I stand to gain or lose in the process. My interest in the rhetorical intersections of settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and rural culture are partly rooted in my own history as a queer-identified male of European ancestry raised in a rural logging community in northern Idaho. I grew up on land my parents owned on the Coeur d’Alene Reservation, land they were able to procure because of longer histories of damaging U.S. legislation such as the Dawes Act, which divided indigenous lands into individually owned allotments in an attempt to force indigenous peoples to assimilate into U.S. society (Nichols, “The Quiet Country Closet”). My life and experiences have thus been informed by my own investment in the unearned privileges of white settlerhood and the harsh realities of closeted queerness in a primarily evangelical rural community. I hold this tension

between mutually informing forms of privilege and oppression as I conduct my analysis, looking not only for the ways in which one group might exploit and oppress another but at the way that we are all informed by our active participation in reinforcing multiple overlapping hierarchies.

My personal investment in this research and my desire to interrogate the histories of privilege in the communities I inhabit is part of the reason I choose to focus my analysis on College Station. As a doctoral student at Texas A&M University, I have become a member of a community that ties much of its identity to its relationship to the university. At the same time, the community also explicitly identifies itself as rural, specifically in distinction to larger neighboring cities like Austin, Houston, and Dallas. I use College Station as a case study in part because of the very specific *ethos* that the city promotes but also because I want this research to speak to a community of which I am a member, even temporarily. It is also an attempt to make known the active presence of communities who have been traditionally been excluded from the histories and traditions of white settler patriarchy.

This dissertation also makes cultural critiques about rhetorics that extend beyond College Station. Whenever possible, I situate my archival and cultural research into the town of College Station within broader rhetorical histories and trajectories at both state and national levels. The development of a rural rhetoric in College Station is informed by national and Texan cultural discourses about rural space, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. This is a rural rhetoric that all U.S. residents participate in constructing, regardless of whether we live in rural communities. Thus, I seek out

examples of *rural drag* at the national level, such as in country music, to identify moments and rhetorics that shape national discourses of rurality. As I demonstrate in this dissertation, the construction of an image of “ideal” rurality is essential to the development of a distinctly “American” *ethos* in the United States. The development of a rural rhetoric predicated on white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and settler colonialism, for example, not only benefits white rural stakeholders; it also supports larger imperial projects of the United States.

### **“These Are the Americans That I Know”: Rurality and American Exceptionalism**

To illustrate how *rural drag* operates in relationship with both local and national rhetorics of rurality and relies on the imperial logics of settler colonization, I turn to two moments in a failed presidential campaign by Texas governor, Rick Perry. On August 13, 2011, during a scheduled session at the 2011 RedState Gathering in Charleston, South Carolina, Governor Perry announced that he would be seeking the Republican nomination for the Presidency of the United States of America. In his address, Perry began by praising the people of South Carolina for electing “true conservatives” like Governor Nikki Haley and for loving “the greatest fighting force on the face of the earth, the United States military.” Further aligning “true” conservatism with U.S. military force, Perry then called for a moment of silence to “think about those young Navy SEALs,” who had recently died in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan, “and the other special operators who gave it all in the service of their country.” Leading his audience in prayer, Perry encouraged them to “Just take a moment to say, ‘Thank you, Lord, that we have those kind of selfless, sacrificial men and women. Their sacrifice was

immeasurable, and their dedication profound. And we will never, ever, forget them” (Perry, “Presidential”).

As a presidential campaign announcement, Perry’s invocation of conservatism, the military, and religion was neither unexpected nor out of line with traditional political campaign rhetoric in the United States. Perry was not the first political candidate to construct an *ethos* of military patriotism and conservative religious adherence, nor will he be the last. Even Perry’s presumptive opponent, Barack Obama, made similar appeals in declaring his candidacy for president in 2007. “Thank you so much,” Obama said to the crowd gathered on the steps of the town square in Springfield, Illinois, “Giving all praise and honor to God for bringing us here together today” (“Presidential Announcement”). And, despite campaigning on promises to put an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and close the military detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Obama made a point to convey his respect for U.S. troops in his 2008 speech accepting his party’s nomination. “Now let there be no doubt,” he said. “The Republican nominee, John McCain, has worn the uniform of our country with bravery and distinction, and for that we owe him our gratitude and respect.” Later in his speech, he praised the resilience of “the military families who shoulder their burdens silently as they watch their loved ones leave for their third or fourth tour of duty. ... They work hard and give back and keep going without complaint. These are the Americans that I know” (“Acceptance Speech”).

Indeed, perhaps we could call these kinds of campaign rhetorical gestures an attempt to build an *ethos* of “Americans that I know,” to show not only the speaker-

candidate's familiarity with "ordinary" Americans but also to position his or herself as belonging to this group of familiar Americans. In the same vein as polls that ask likely voters which candidate they could see themselves downing a beer with, this "Americans that I know" *ethos* establishes a bond of accessibility and familiarity between the candidate and the voter. Obama and Perry's rhetorical gestures indicate that, at least for Americans in the know, these bonds may be stretched along the lines of military patriotism and shared Christian faith values.

By demarcating the qualities of "Americans that I know," Obama (and candidates who participate in this *ethos* of familiarity) simultaneously creates a negative-image of "Americans that I [don't] know." Objecting to/refusing U.S. military interventionist policies and actions, for example, challenges one's inclusion in the imagined community of Americans that Obama knows. When this logic of familiarity translates from campaign rhetoric into national policy, "unknown" Americans may struggle to find themselves represented in the processes and products of democracy.

Shared military patriotism and Christian belief systems, of course, are only two of many characteristics that political candidates emphasize to articulate their familiarity with voters, but they are two of the most obvious ones.<sup>6</sup> In his candidacy declaration, for example, Perry built this *ethos* of familiarity through a progression of four specific – and

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Jerit has theorized that emotional appeals are a more reliable and enduring rhetorical choice in political campaigns in the United States. Appealing to emotions such as fear, anger, and disgust, she argues, are more enduring appeals across elections, but that they also serve to encourage the electorate to form identifications with candidates. "[E]motional appeals," she writes, "allow candidates to show their support for widely shared values and goals, enhancing their ability to attract the support of broad segments of the electorate" (567).

interrelated – rhetorical gestures. As mentioned above, he began by praising the military might of “the greatest fighting force on the face of the earth,” before invoking his *bona fides* as a Christian by leading his audience in a prayer of gratitude (and not, it should be noted, of intervention) for the sacrifices required to make this force “the greatest,” pledging that “we will never, ever, forget them.” Rhetorically, Perry’s faith in the U.S. military is not separate from his faith in the Christian God. To Perry, military success (and military sacrifice) requires God’s benevolence and intervention. “Thank you, Lord,” he prayed, “that we have those kind of selfless, sacrificial men and women. Their sacrifice was immeasurable and their dedication profound” (Perry, “Presidential”). God provides the men and women, and the men and women provide the sacrifice.

Just as Perry intertwines these appeals to military patriotism and Christian faith, he segues directly from these into a discussion of his next two appeals: rural identification and privileging of the heteronormative settler family unit. And just as Perry’s patriotism makes sense only in within the logics of Christian faith, his narrative of heteronormative reproduction is similarly tied to the centrality of his rural experience. In the following lengthy quote, Perry confirms his participation in reproductive heterosexuality, a sexual identity made possible by the interventionist policies of the U.S. military and the rustic authenticity of rural culture:

I stand before you today as the Governor of Texas, but I also stand before you the son of two tenant farmers: Ray Perry, who came home after thirty-five bombing missions over Europe to work his little corner of land out there, and Amelia who made sure my sister Mil and I had everything

that we needed, including hand-sewing my clothes until I went off to college.

I'm the product of a place called Paint Creek – doesn't have a zip code; it's too small to be called a town – along the rolling plains of Texas. We grew dryland cotton and wheat, and when I wasn't farming or attending Paint Creek rural school, I was generally over at Troop 48 working on my Eagle Scout award.

Around the age of 8, I was blessed – didn't realize it, but I was blessed – to meet my future wife, Anita Thigpen, at a piano recital. We had our first date eight years later, and she finally agreed to marry me sixteen years after that. Nobody says I am not persistent. You know, there is no greater way to live life than with someone you love, and my first love is with us today, my lovely wife, Anita.

We're also blessed to have two incredible children, Griffin and Sydney, and they're also here with us today, and our wonderful daughter-in-law Meredith. I'd just like to introduce those to you.

You know, what I learned growing up on the farm was a way of life. It was centered on hard work, and on faith, and on thrift. Those values have stuck with me my whole life. But it wasn't until I graduated from Texas A&M University and joined the United States Air Force, flying C-130s all around the globe, that I truly appreciated the blessings of freedom. You know, [to] paraphrase Abraham Lincoln and Ronald

Reagan, I realized that the United States of America really is the last great hope of mankind. What I saw was systems of government that elevated rulers at the expense of the people, socialist systems that cloaked, maybe in good intentions, but were delivering misery and stagnation. And I learned that not everyone values life like we do in America or the rights that are endowed to every human being by a loving God. (“Presidential”)

Perry began his speech lauding the accomplishments of his ideal citizens: “true conservatives” and “selfless, sacrificial men and women” of the U.S. military. Here, he begins to carve out a place for himself as both descended from and participating within this ideal citizenry. In fact, Perry bookends his personal narrative with the image of global military flight, his father’s “thirty-five bombing missions over Europe” and his own experience “flying C-130s all around the globe.” More importantly, though, are the credentials he includes between these two images of U.S. military interventionism: settler inheritance and work ethic, roots in rural culture, and monogamous reproductive heterosexuality.

While Perry begins his speech by praising what I have called “his ideal citizens,” I want to extend that observation to the purpose of Perry’s preamble. By running for President, Perry (and all presidential candidates) makes a claim that he is the ideal citizen – the most patriotic, the most successful, the most “American.” When Presidential candidates list their qualifications for the office, they are, in essence, listing



the characteristics of what they consider to be, and what others hopefully agree to be, the ideal citizen.<sup>7</sup> For Perry, these characteristics include:

- 1) A military heritage. As a former Air Force pilot and the son of a former pilot, Perry can claim to belong to a family tradition of patriotism and service to one's country.
- 2) A monogamous and reproductive heterosexuality. Perry's childhood romance of his future wife and their ability to have (ostensibly heterosexual) children not only mark Perry and Anita as promoting "traditional" family values but also reaffirm Perry's virility as a heterosexual man able to father children.
- 3) A rural identity. Perry's claims to a rural heritage connects him to the land, grounding him both geographically and ideologically within the United States, even when flying around the planet for the U.S. Air Force.

Three characteristics: military heritage, monogamous and reproductive heterosexuality, and rural identity. Of these three, though, it is Perry's rural identity and upbringing through which he makes sense of the other two and is, in fact, what teaches him the lessons that guide him through his military and political careers. Not only does Perry portray rural culture on the same level as "traditional" American values like

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<sup>7</sup> To be clear, I am not conflating the rhetorics of a candidate's claims to being the ideal citizen with the belief that they actually *are* an ideal citizen. Instead, candidates construct an ethos of perfect citizenship by propping up those characteristics that prove their point and downplaying, spinning, or ignoring those characteristics that contradict it, what Jerit calls "priming" the agenda (564).

patriotism and nuclear family values, but he also shows it as intertwined: his father returns from his military exploits “to work his little corner of land out there;” he meets his future wife at a piano recital in Paint Creek; he earns his Eagle Scout award when he “wasn’t farming or attending Paint Creek rural school;” and he, himself, works (and inherits) the family dryland cotton and wheat farm, which teaches him the values of “hard work,” “faith,” and “thrift” that “stuck with me my whole life” but didn’t completely sink in until “flying C-130s all around the globe” as a pilot in the United States Air Force.

This narrative brings the narrative of citizenship and service full-circle: the military service of his father makes possible Perry’s rural experiences and values which are then only fully appreciated through the lens of U.S. military interventionism and the stark contrast between the doctrines of U.S./capitalist prosperity and foreign/socialist programs of “misery and stagnation.” In this logic, the rural United States becomes both the end game of and imprimatur for foreign military interventionism. The soldier fights for his country abroad, returning home to tend to the land he fought so hard to defend; the lessons of this land – hard work, faith, thrift – in turn become the justification for further military projects abroad.

There is another symbolic, though decidedly more subtle, equation happening here, too: that of rural culture with heteronormativity. In the first instance, Perry introduces his audience to the slice-of-life vignette of his tenant farming parents: his father working the land, his mother sewing and caring for the children. This *Ozzie and Harriett-meets-Little House on the Prairie* scene establishes both the family values upon

which he would later structure his own family as well as the rural values that will prove so important to him in his C-130 fighter jet. And just as the rural serves as the backdrop for the development of his values of hard work, faith, and thrift, it also becomes the setting in which he develops his heteronormative values, meeting and courting his future wife for sixteen years in Paint Creek, raising his two children, and watching them marry.

If this last observation about rural culture and heteronormativity seems less-than-groundbreaking, that's because it is. It should come as no surprise to anyone that a rural kid might grow up to become a patriotic heterosexual. It's become a truism of American culture that rural communities are, if not outwardly hostile to queer expressions and peoples, at least not terribly welcoming. Instead, I pursue this extended analysis of Perry's speech precisely *because* of his skill at suturing his rural background to his development of heterosexuality and citizenry in the United States, because it seems so natural, and because it contrasts so well with his later inability to mask the seams between rural culture, heteronormativity, and the aegis of military imperialism: his 2012 "Strong" campaign ad, which I will address shortly. Perry's speech, with its evocation of rural culture to justify both the imperial expansion of U.S. military power and the heteronormativity of the American family, exemplifies my central thesis for this dissertation: the project of settler colonialism in the United States, in which lands are stolen from indigenous peoples for the direct benefit of white settler citizens, profits from and promotes a linkage between rural culture and normative, white, heterosexual reproduction.

### Camping in the Woods: Rick Perry and “Strong”

Whereas Perry’s reliance on rurality in his campaign announcement speech at the outset of his campaign reflected a subtle conflation of rurality with American exceptionalism and heteropatriarchy, by the end of his campaign, this rural mask began to slip. The mask almost completely fell off in “Strong,” a campaign ad he released in Iowa in December 2012, one month before he suspended his campaign due to poor showing in debates, low polling, and a lack of funding. If Perry’s campaign announcement speech is a nuanced conflation of rural culture, military interventionism, Christian faith traditions, and reproductive heterosexuality, “Strong” is a obvious and more-than-somewhat desperate attempt to shore up Perry’s faltering campaign by returning to the rhetorical gestures that generated so much energy during the early days of his campaign.

Both moments, the speech and the video, are examples of *rural drag*—both rely on the supposedly natural relationship between rural culture and heterosexuality to shore up Perry’s claims to heterosexual culture. Yet while the former might be comparable to the drag queen who successfully manages the illusion of feminine “realness,” successfully seducing the straight boys in her audience with her hyper-femininity, the latter is more akin to the deliberately clownish drag of a queen with sloppy, garish makeup, the wig slipping back to reveal the hairline underneath, and the painted shadows on her chest designed to hint at (but not replace) curves that don’t exist.<sup>8</sup> This

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<sup>8</sup> The only difference between this queen and the Perry of “Strong,” though, is the vectors of the camp appeal. While the former is deliberately and garishly camping on gender and sexual norms,

distinction—between the subtle/“natural” and the obvious/“artificial”—will be a recurring theme throughout this dissertation as I trace development of this trend equating rural culture with heteronormativity. In a few cases, this difference might be a case of differing proficiencies: some people or groups are more adept at pulling off the illusion than others. But more often than not, the artificiality – or campiness, if you will – of *rural drag* emerges not because the actor lacks the skill of pulling it off but because the previously “natural” relationship between heterosexuality and rurality has become so strained that the actor must go to increasing(ly comical) lengths to assert the connection.

Another key difference between the *rural drag* performance and the conventional drag performance is the willingness of the performer and the audience to suspend disbelief. With conventional drag, the performer and the audience are “in on the joke,” so to speak, and the performer’s similitude to the gender s/he performs is part of the critique of the inherent campiness of gender. Within *rural drag*, the performer requires not only the audience but also the performer to not just be “not in on the joke” but to ignore the joke entirely. Unfortunately, as we can see below, such an arrangement cannot always be reached, and the performance quickly turns into an exquisite example of unintentional camp.

In “Strong,” Perry appears on a hill in front of a forested background, sporting a beige Carhartt work jacket over a dark blue denim shirt, his hands tucked into jeans held

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encouraging her audience to laugh at the absurdity of her arrangements, it is Perry’s audience, not Perry, who turns a queer gaze upon the unintentional absurdity of his arrangements, revealing and reveling in the campiness of his performance.

up by a silver Western-style belt buckle (Figure 1.1). Slowly walking up the hill, he begins to speak, eventually resting on one leg jauntily positioned uphill:

I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm a Christian, but you don't need to be in the pew every Sunday to know there's something wrong in this country when gays can serve openly in the military but our kids can't openly celebrate Christmas or pray in school. As President, I'll end Obama's war on religion, and I'll fight against liberal attacks on our religious heritage. Faith made America strong. It can make her strong again. I'm Rick Perry, and I approve this message. (Perry, "Strong")

Note the thematic similarities between this video and Perry's announcement speech: both forge connections between patriotic support of the U.S. military with a belief in the superiority of heterosexuality and the value of Christian religion. Yet, while his speech makes these moves subtly, working from the position that the connection is self-evident, "Strong" does so in a considerably less delicate manner, forcibly asking his audience to acknowledge a connection that seems strained, unnatural, and somewhat comical in its excess.

As I demonstrated above, Perry's campaign speech skillfully tied his rural upbringing to his claims to an ideal citizenship, which in his logic is characterized by reproductive heterosexuality, Christian faith, and belief in the legitimacy of U.S. military interventions. The equation worked, in part, because one could easily point to any of these attributes (heterosexuality, Christianity, military, or rurality) and easily imagine an unchallenged connection between them. Perry's main constituency, evangelical

Christians, are largely pro-military and anti-homosexuality. Rural communities, a demographic largely populated by conservative voters with strong religious views, tend to support pro-military policies and are generally reluctant to extend legal recognition to queer and LGBT groups. And the military, up until September 20, 2011, notoriously banned gay and lesbian men and women from serving openly.



**Figure 1.1. Rick Perry's "Strong" political advertisement**

But many of these realities were beginning to shift, if not outright change. By the time his campaign released "Strong," Perry had suffered from a number of public gaffes, poor debate performances, and quickly sliding public polls. "Strong" was the Perry campaign's attempt to shore up Perry's support among conservative evangelical voters prior to the crucial Iowa caucuses, and it did so by attempting to strike the same socially conservative chords that had made him an appealing candidate at the beginning of his campaign.

Unfortunately for Perry, the tightly-woven tapestry of religion, sexuality, military, and rurality had started to unravel somewhat in the four months since he'd announced his candidacy. On September 20<sup>th</sup>, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," the military policy barring soldiers from serving as openly gay or lesbian, was officially repealed, meaning that Perry could no longer use references to military service to telegraph a connection between military might, heterosexual superiority, and rural culture.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Perry was left with his only option: tapping into his constituency's fears about this new shift in the social order and exaggerating the previously subtle connections upon which he was able to draw so readily in the past. The resulting video quickly became an Internet sensation and meme, becoming one of the most "disliked" videos on YouTube (Praetorius).<sup>10</sup>

The ad also spawned numerous parodies and send-ups online. The resulting "Strong" internet meme focused primarily on two aspects of Perry's ad: his "unpopular" opinion about the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and his choice of clothing,

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<sup>9</sup> Perry has long battled unsubstantiated rumors in Texas about his sexuality, culminating in Glen Maxey's 2011 self-published *Head Figure Head: The Search for the Hidden Life of Rick Perry*. While Perry's homophobic remarks in this ad (and throughout his career) may be, in part, a move to assert his heterosexuality in the face of these rumors, I am less concerned with Perry's personal sexual preferences than I am with the discourses of rural life in the United States that this ad attempts to tap into.

<sup>10</sup> The online response to "Strong" perhaps reflects the Perry campaign's lack of facility with what Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss call "rhetorical velocity," "a conscious rhetorical concerns for distance, travel, speed, and time, pertaining specifically to theorizing instances of strategic appropriation by a third party." Ridolfo and DeVoss argue that modern rhetors in a digital age need to begin "composing for strategic recomposition," a stance that anticipates the remixing of original materials to suit an audience's rhetorical needs. In fact, Ridolfo and DeVoss's theory might speak to the deployment of camp sensibilities in general, since, as Sontag points out, "Pure Camp is always naïve" (282), suggesting that camp objects/people do not set out to be camp but are instead adopted and often re-mixed *as* camp by their audiences.



particularly his Carhartt jacket. Interestingly, the focus on these two aspects of the video also highlights the shifting fault lines between rural identification and heteronormativity. Collectively, the parodies also reflect that Perry's video was increasingly being read through a particular "camp" lens that highlights the artifice and exaggeration of the original video. Sontag defines different camp practices, from a "Camp vision" that sees the world "in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization" (277) to "Camp objects, and persons, [that] contain a large element of artifice" (279), further distinguishing between examples of pure camp (which are naïve and serious) and intentional camp (designed to appeal to a camp aesthetic). The internet responses to "Strong" reveal the campiness that was always simmering beneath the surface of Perry's rhetoric, even before the ad was released. In doing so, they also reveal the drag sensibilities inherent in the production of both this video and Perry's rural *ethos* as a presidential candidate.

Perry's remarks about the repealed "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy struck many viewers as a crass indictment of a policy that had become increasingly unpopular in the months and years preceding its repeal. But while viewers may have found his comments distasteful, it was Perry's *non sequitur* leap from "gays [who] can serve openly in the military" to "children [who] can't openly celebrate Christmas or pray in school" that actually served as the impetus for the remixes and parodies of his ad on the internet. In fact, what most of the protest videos seemed to be reacting to was not Perry's specific policies, per se, but his incredibly alienating rhetoric.

For example, in one video, "Voldemort and Rick Perry – STRONG," uploaded to YouTube by the user barelypolitical, the *Harry Potter* villain faces the camera (in a

similar wooded setting to “Strong”) and says, “You know, I’m not ashamed to admit that I’m evil, but you don’t have to be in the pew of the Church of Eternal Suffering during every ritual sacrifice to know that this Rick Perry guy has got a lot of wonderful ideas!” (barelypolitical). In another video, “Rick Perry – Weak, man,” by Andy Cobb from The Second City Network, Cobb appears in similar clothing to that worn by Perry in “Strong” and reverses Perry’s original script. “I’m not ashamed to admit that I’m an atheist,” he begins, “but you know there’s something wrong with this country when politicians think it’s okay to hate on gays and nonbelievers in ads, as if their magic spirit guide, or whatever, blessed them with special a-hole privileges.” He goes on to remind viewers that gay and atheist presidents weren’t responsible for the Iraq war and financial crisis. Instead, “[i]t took some God-fearing vagina penetrators to pull that off” (Cobb).

While videos like these are responding to what they see as harmful political stances, they are not merely engaging in political debate. The significant and widely varied response to this specific video suggests that Perry’s policies are not the only force driving such reactions. Instead, such parodies and satires are instead driven from a reading of Perry’s video as pure camp. “In naïve, or pure, Camp,” writes Sontag, “the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails. Of course, not all seriousness that fails can be redeemed as Camp. Only that which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve” (283). Of all the political campaign ads of the 2012 election cycle, “Strong” had all of these qualities in abundance. Perry’s opinions might have been unpopular, but it was his willingness to

state them with such bravado that transformed his video from a simple political campaign ad into a camp touchstone.

One fine example of this camp reading would be the Tumblr blog “Rick Perry’s Unpopular Opinions” that juxtaposes animated gifs from “Strong” with Rick Perry making unpopular statements, such as “Godfather: Part III was the best one,” “The movies are always better than the books,” “Crocs are stylish,” and “Meryl Streep cannot act” (Kyle and Eric). In a *Newsweek* interview, Kyle, one of the creators of the tumblr, described why he created the site: “Well, I had first saw a transcript of the ad and thought that it was a quasi-quote of what he was trying to imply and then I watched the video and found out that was exactly what he was saying and I was honestly left surprised. That took a lot of guts, in my opinion. It was offensive and he has a lot [of] gall to do it, but it still took a lot of guts to just come right out with it” (Ries). Kyle’s response reflects a specifically camp reading of “Strong.” While what Perry says in the video is offensive and galling, it is also so incredibly earnest as to topple into absurdity. “Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much,’” writes Sontag, and it is the too-muchness of “Strong” that provokes and sustains these camp responses to the video (284).

There is another too-muchness running through Perry’s campaign ad, one that transforms “Strong” from a camp artifact into a campy performance of *rural drag*. Nearly all of the parodies that I have seen of “Strong” pay close attention to Perry’s clothing, in particular his beige Carhartt work jacket with the dark brown contrasting

lapels.<sup>11</sup> Perry's sartorial choices help to convey a specifically working class and rural *ethos* that authorizes Perry to speak on matters of heterosexuality and homosexual threat. But as an icon of rugged heterosexuality Perry's jacket was compromised by another work jacket circulating in popular culture: a beige work jacket with dark brown lapels worn by Ennis Del Mar in the 2005 "gay cowboy" movie *Brokeback Mountain* (Figure 1.2). The coincidence encouraged a new reading of Perry's ad in which Perry embodied not a virile and "strong" heterosexual, but a confused, closeted rural queer.

Soon, Photoshopped screencaps from "Strong" began circulating that showed Rick Perry in his full rural getup surrounded by any number of queer associates ranging from sexy, half-naked "pinup" cowboys to the Village People to Richard Simmons to Tinky Winky, the supposedly "gay Teletubby," according to evangelical preacher Jerry Falwell ("Rick Perry's 'Strong' Ad"). All of them, though, recognize that "Strong" tries "too much" to assert Perry's ability to speak with authority from a position of heterosexual privilege. This recognition allows for a distinctly camp reading of the video, but it also reveals Rick Perry as both a person and a drag persona.

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<sup>11</sup> Carhartt jackets are insulated, heavy-duty outerwear designed to protect the wearer from the dangers associated with manual occupations such as logging, farming, construction, and the like. As such, they often double as both protective wear and a winter jacket in working class and rural communities across the United States. Growing up in rural north Idaho, many of my friends and I wore our (and our fathers') Carhartt jackets to school, and I frequently saw them on area ski slopes, in church, and among the loggers I worked with during summers at the Idaho Department of Lands. They are distinctively working class articles of clothing that, in many rural communities, also function as practical social wear.



**Figure 1.2: Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) from Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)**

As I demonstrate in Chapter Three, *rural drag* functions similarly to “standard” drag in that it responds to what Marjorie Garber calls the “category crises” of modern culture (17). It differs, though, in its political aims. Garber writes that transvestism (under which she includes drag) “*is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just as a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself” (17). Drag, she argues, confounds the establishment of categories, calling into question not only what differentiates male from female but how they are even constructed in the first place. As Judith Butler describes it, “drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (174). José Esteban Muñoz distinguishes between the political projects of commercial or “corporate-sponsored” drag that “presents a sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption” and “a queerer modality of drag that is performed

by queer-identified drag artists in spaces of queer consumption” (99). Butler and Garber ground their descriptions largely in the effects of drag, teasing apart the psychic and social discordances that arise when drag’s shuffling of gender confronts cisgender heterosexuality. Muñoz, on the other hand, focuses on the specific political projects of different categories of drag, both those meant to ease straight and cisgender audiences into acceptance of queer communities and those meant to create “an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric” (100). What all of these examples acknowledge, though, is a crisis of sexuality and gender made evident through the performance of drag.

*Rural drag*, on the other hand, refuses to acknowledge any crisis, insisting instead on the immutability of gender through its deliberate and consistent use of rural symbols and practices as signifiers of cisgendered heterosexuality. Despite this failure to acknowledge crisis, *rural drag* could be fairly defined as a performance of crisis in that its primary purpose is to convince itself that there is no need to worry. But this is a constant battle, and *rural drag* is always one gay cowboy film or queer country musician away from losing its exclusive claim to heteronormative rurality. “Strong” exemplifies this crisis and the consequences of shifting symbols, and Governor Perry, with his vehement disgust of patriotic homosexuality and his *Brokeback* jacket, becomes an embodiment of *rural drag*’s constant crisis of perpetually trying to dress up straight. With only a little teasing, Perry’s drag façade falls apart, revealing a gendered and sexual identity that is as reliant on rural tropes as it is on evangelical Christian belief systems and the primacy of the U.S. military complex.

Additionally, Perry's *rural drag* only works (or attempts to work) through its reliance on histories of settler colonialism. The symbols of rurality with which it surrounds itself are meant to imply a distinctly American relationship to the rural spaces within the United States. This relationship erases the presence and histories of Native nations on these lands and establishes U.S. settlers as the natural inheritors of these spaces. Rural space becomes quintessentially American, which is also quintessentially straight and white. As the linkage between rurality and American normative whiteness and straightness begins to strain, *rural drag* responds as it does in "Strong," by making more explicit and visible the symbols of rurality in an attempt to more effectively remind its audience of the rural's role as the seat of American identity.

In the chapters that follow, I put into practice the theories and observations I have expounded on in this chapter. Though not always as elegantly connected as the two examples Perry provides me in this chapter, these are the types of *rural drag* performances I analyze in this dissertation. Like Perry's campaign speech, some of the performances and artifacts I include in later chapters are much more subtle, requiring a more discerning eye to reveal them. Others, like the "Strong" video, are so obvious they verge on (or topple into) the realm of camp. Both types must be read together to understand the ways in which *rural drag* participates in rhetorical histories entrenched in ideologies of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. From a study of technical and legal writing in central Texas, to a reading of *rural drag* practices in College Station, home to Texas A&M University, to an analysis of country-western music's relationship to rural sexual identities in the U.S., I trace the discourses of settler

colonization and heteronormativity that structure national and local relationships to rural sexuality in the United States.

### **Chapter Descriptions**

In Chapter Two, “‘The Source of a Better Civilization’: White Heteronormativity and the Rhetoric of Empire at Texas A&M University,” I look to legislative and regulatory writing from the days of Texas A&M’s founding. I argue that settler colonial rhetorics embedded in this writing are responsible for the physical and cultural construction of a specific space (College Station, Texas) as an outpost of settler colonial power. This rhetorical history informs the area’s contemporary cultural rhetorical practices, which I explore in the next chapter.

Chapter Three, “*Rural Drag*: Dressing up Straight in College Station,” explores the development of College Station’s specific form of *rural drag*. I trace this rhetoric’s development from early forms of *playing Indian* and blackface minstrelsy, through cross-dressing dances during the school’s supposedly “all-male” days, and up to the current version of hyper-rural heterosexuality. These developments, I argue, were responses to crises of category in Texas A&M/College Station, as the university and community struggled to maintain a cultural identity of straight, white, and male settler privilege when forced to confront the realities of queer, non-white, female, and indigenous presences in the area.

In Chapter Four, “‘She Thinks My Tractor’s Sexy’: *Rural Drag* and Country Music,” I shift my focus from local to national *rural drag* rhetorics. Country music, I argue, is one of the ways in which the rural imaginary is constructed in American



cultural thought. Country musicians employ *rural drag* by tapping into the rural imaginary, a move that can shore up the musician's claims to patriotic Americanness even as it reinforces broader beliefs about what constitutes "the rural" in the United States. In this chapter, I study how different musicians deploy *rural drag*, including straight musicians seeking to associate themselves with a normative American identity; queer country artists leveraging a critique against oppressive American sexual ethics; and Chely Wright, the first major country singer to come out as gay, who uses a *rural drag* rhetoric in her autobiography in order to frame her experiences as both normal and patriotic in order to reclaim the privilege she lost by coming out.

In my final chapter, "Queer Settlers in a One-Room Schoolhouse: A Decolonial Queerscape Pedagogy," I challenge the fields of queer theory and rhetoric to center the struggles and experiences of Native peoples in the United States. I argue that considerations of space and place are key to such a move, since settler colonial rhetorics are inherently concerned with maintaining a settler claim to lands. Additionally, such considerations are important to queer scholarship because queer claims to spaces and places in the United States are fraught, on the one hand, with the very real dangers of homophobic violence in both public and private spaces and, on the other hand, because queer people and communities are also complicit in settler appropriation of Native lands, bodies, histories, and practices. Shifting my focus to the classroom, I propose a decolonial queerscape pedagogy that accounts for the multiplicity of sexual identities and practices within and surrounding the academy while foregrounding an understanding

of these spaces as colonial spaces designed to inculcate and naturalize settler ontologies predicated on the removal of Natives.

## CHAPTER II

### “THE SOURCE OF A BETTER CIVILIZATION”: WHITE HETERONORMATIVITY AND THE RHETORIC OF EMPIRE AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

just so you know  
we –as a university–  
are a family  
we think just  
the same  
so i now speak  
for everyone-  
the faculty & the children  
when i tell you  
we are enthusiastic  
about not  
giving a fuck  
about you.  
– Crystal Boson, “aggieland”

November 1, 1866, was an important day in the history of higher education in Texas. On that day, the eleventh Texas legislature agreed to pass a resolution accepting “the provisions of the act of Congress of the United States, approved July 2d, 1862,

entitled An Act to donate public land to the several States and Territories which may provide Colleges for the benefit of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts” (Gammel 5:1186). This federal act, called the Morrill Act after the bill’s sponsor, Rep. Justin Morrill, provided land grants to each state to fund the development of agricultural and mechanical colleges. In Texas, the funds from this act were instrumental in funding the state’s first public university: the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, later known as Texas A&M University<sup>12</sup>.

A reading of other legal acts passed that day allows us to understand how the legislative maneuvers that led to Texas A&M were inseparable from a discourse of white settler heteropatriarchy. The same day that Texas accepted the terms of the Morrill Act, the state also refused to ratify the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. constitution which made it illegal for a state to “deprive any person of life, liberty or property, without due process of law, nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of its laws”<sup>13</sup> (Gammel 5:1184). In addition to this resolution, the legislature also passed a number of

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<sup>12</sup> The university has had a number of names in its history including: the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas; Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College (Texas AMC); Texas Agricultural and Mechanical University (TAMU); and Texas A&M University, its current official title, dropping “Agricultural and Mechanical.” For simplicity and clarity, I will refer to the college/university as “A&M” or “Texas A&M” in this chapter. Prairie View A&M University has also gone through a number of name changes, including Alta Vista Agricultural College, Alta Vista Agricultural and Mechanical College for Colored Youths, Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College, Prairie View University, Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, and Prairie View A&M University. I will refer to the institution as “Prairie View A&M.”

<sup>13</sup> The amendment also included language allowing the United States to acquire debt in order to suppress insurrection and absolving it of responsibility for any state debts “incurred in aid of insurrection or rebellion against the United States, or any claim for the loss or emancipation of any slave” (5:1185).

laws including an act to “locate and settle” the Tonkawa Indians and an amendment to “An Act to Legalize certain Marriages, and to provide for the celebration of Marriages, and for other purposes” (5:990-92). The marriage act updated an earlier 1837 marriage law to make clear the roles of marriage officiants in the state while leaving intact the earlier law’s prohibition on miscegenation. The Tonkawa legislation, on the other hand, tried to provide lands in Texas for the Tonkawa people who were under constant attack by Delaware, Shawnee, and Caddo nations on an Indian Territory reservation to which they had been resettled from their ancestral lands in central Texas. Despite its passage, though, the act was never actually implemented, meaning the Tonkawa were forced to migrate on their own several times between Texas and present-day Oklahoma (Tonkawa Tribe of Oklahoma v. Richards).<sup>14</sup> Read together, these laws and resolutions (and others like them) reveal a discourse of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy that informed Texan legislative practices in the years following the conclusion of the Civil War.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In 1992, after the Tonkawa petitioned Texas for these lands which had been apportioned to them in 1866, the Tonkawa Nation was told that “the entire public domain of the State of Texas was appropriated to other uses, including the establishment of the Permanent School Fund. All prior grants that were not surveyed and located prior to the exhaustion of the public domain cannot now be honored because there is no longer any public domain from which to award them. The Texas Constitution of 1876 prohibits the granting of any lands belonging to the Permanent School Fund without full compensation being paid.” Thus, “the State of Texas is unable at this late date to honor the commitment made by the Legislature of 1866 because there is no public domain from which to award the league of land provided for in the Act of 1866” (Tonkawa Tribe of Oklahoma v. Richards).

<sup>15</sup> In this chapter, I focus primarily on the colonial rhetorics that singled out African-American and Native communities, but it is important to note that Mexican and Latina/o communities were and continue to be significantly impacted by Texan social, legal, and military actions. Mexican wars with both Texas and the United States, for example, were conflicts between multiple

A close reading of 19th century post-war legal documents and regulatory writing in Texas reveals that settler colonial and white supremacist rhetorics provided much of the structure for the formation of Texas A&M and its surrounding community, College Station. These regulatory and professional writings did not merely reflect the white supremacist and settler ideologies of their authors. Rather, these documents were deliberately crafted to protect white settler privilege in Texas by creating representations of black and indigenous populations that justified their displacement, marginalization, and oppression. They also contained within them the legislative beginnings of Texas A&M, a land grant school and Texas's first public institution of higher education.

Woven within both of these developments is a rhetoric of white colonial heteronormativity, what Morgensen calls "settler sexuality" (23), that constructs norms of sexual practice and family structures operating within the logics of the settler colonial nuclear family and supporting white supremacy. Heteronormativity is a requirement of both settler colonization and white supremacy as sexual norms govern the behaviors of participants in both projects, preventing unwanted cultural incursion by non-white, non-settler subjects. In settler society, the prescriptions of heteronormativity extend beyond gender and sexual practices to racial and ethnic identifications, family structures, and

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competing colonial powers over claims to Native and Mexican lands. At the same time, developing discourses of race and ethnicity as they pertained to Latina/os were and continue to be influenced by both settler colonial and white supremacist ideologies. Because of the constraints of this project, I cannot fully explore Texas's history of legal and cultural constraint of Latina/os and Mexicans. Though these groups were impacted by the legal and regulatory documents I analyze in this chapter, for example, there are additional histories of regulatory writing particular to Texan Latina/o experiences, and extending my analyses of my case studies to speak to Latina/o communities would not tell the whole story. See Pimentel and Balzhiser (2012), Menchaca (2001), Alonzo (1998), and Hinojosa (1983) for an introduction to the breadth and depth of these issues.

community relationships.

In Chapter One, I argued that the discourses of rural culture in the United States perpetuate a stereotype of rural heteronormativity that supports settler colonialism and white supremacy. Building from that, in this chapter I analyze 19th-century Texan regulatory and professional documents relating to the founding of Texas A&M University, looking specifically at rhetorical maneuvers that advanced the interests of white settlers over those of Native Americans and African Americans. These foundational rhetorics helped to establish a discourse in College Station that persists to this day. The community's adherence to a specifically rural performance of heteronormativity that I interrogate in Chapter Three must be understood in relation to the area's history as an outpost of settler colonization built on the invisible labor of black Texans. Thus, this chapter will interrogate the legislative and regulatory construction of space in order to establish a link between regulatory rhetorics of whiteness and colonization in this chapter and the cultural performances of rural heteronormativity in the next chapter.

My analysis begins with the eleventh Texas legislative session in 1866, nearly a decade before Texas A&M began to take shape, during which Texas accepted the terms of the federal Morrill Land-Grant Act, which resulted in the eventual construction of Texas A&M. Yet it was also during this session that Texas passed a series of legislative acts and resolutions that systematically restricted the freedoms of black Texans and perpetuated the white settlement of lands from which Native nations had been

removed.<sup>16</sup> Looked at collectively, the legislative record of Texas's Eleventh Legislature reveals a consistent reliance on the rhetorics of settler colonization and white supremacy. These rhetorics informed the physical and legislative development of Texas A&M. A rhetoric of heteronormativity undergirds these settler colonial and white supremacist rhetorical practices, establishing a space in which the white, settler nuclear family can represent an ideal citizenry.

These are the rhetorics from which Texas A&M was born, rhetorics that continue to shape the cultures of the university and its surrounding community. By employing these rhetorics in the regulatory and legal writing of the time, white settlers in Texas ensured the subjugation of indigenous and black peoples. In 1866, Texas passed the "Black Codes," a set of discriminatory laws passed to restrict the freedoms of black Texans after their emancipation. Miriam Williams argues convincingly in *From Black Codes to Recodification* that the Black Codes were instrumental in instilling a deep distrust of legal and regulatory writing by African Americans in Texas, a feeling shared by many minority groups in the United States forced to navigate obscuring legalese written by people of privilege. The discriminatory intent and elusive legal jargon of laws like these "veiled consistent attacks on the civil rights of African Americans" (2). In addition to the social and physical discrimination manufactured by these laws that were later overturned, in law if not in practice, the Black Codes' legacy continues to discourage minorities from engaging in the legal and regulatory process. "[R]egulations

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<sup>16</sup> My use of phrases such as "black Texans" and "white Texans" reflects 19th-century Texan moves to separate and categorize the population according to phenotypical readings of skin color.



like the Texas Black Codes and post-Reconstruction labor laws,” says Williams, “have so tainted the African American audience’s perception of legal discourse, that regulations are perceived, not simply as the traditional style for this genre, but as a style that evokes distrust” (30).

In addition to fomenting distrust between marginalized and privileged groups, these laws also created material products and institutions whose lifespans extend well beyond the life of the original laws. Texas A&M is one of these institutions, and its relationship to white supremacist and settler colonial regulatory writing in the 1860s has long outlived the laws from which it was created. Texas intended to settle the “frontier” by providing lands to settling families, and its use of state and federal land grants to fund the university situated A&M as a beneficiary of settler beliefs and actions.<sup>17</sup>

Rhetorics of white supremacy and white separatism are prevalent in legislative records from the same time as Texas accepted the provisions of the Morrill Act. The white supremacist rhetorics in the Black Codes, for example, framed black Texans as bodies designed for labor who require the benevolence of state intervention. These rhetorical gestures were again employed when Texas was required to provide an institute of higher education for black Texans in order to receive the Morrill Act’s federal monies, resulting in the creation of the “separate but equal” Alta Vista College (later Prairie View A&M) on the grounds of the former Alta Vista plantation.

Subtle yet emerging heteronormative rhetorics make white supremacy and settler

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<sup>17</sup> I employ scare-quotes around “frontier” to indicate the term’s usage as a settler construct. Use of the term “frontier” in the United States was a rhetorical move that framed Native lands as wild, empty, and ready for colonization by the United States and other colonial powers.

colonialism viable as long-term projects. Though not completely hidden, a rhetoric of heteronormativity is still fairly cloaked in these documents, visible in the logical penumbras of legal dictates and occasionally surfacing in the bureaucratic writing that followed. On the one hand, references to heteropatriarchal practices and systems, such as the nuclear family unit, in Texan legislative writing seem to indicate a belief in the self-evident normality of hetero-forms of sexuality and family formation. Yet, these references often occur in legislative acts designed to formalize such family practices as a means to providing state-recognition to specific settler family units. The rhetorical construction of settler heteropatriarchy as both natural and self-evident helps to mask its constructed nature, making a rhetoric of heteronormativity a solid base on which to ground white settler projects, not only in Texas but across the United States.

### **Race, Sexuality, and Regulatory Writing**

Legal and regulatory writing in postbellum Texas performs a specific kind of “work” in regards to race and sexuality. Bureaucratic documents, such as the Black Codes and land-grant acts, racialize space, rhetorically and physically partitioning it to certain populations according to race and ethnicity. In addition to segregating out non-white populations, through the implementation of “separate but equal” laws or Indian removal acts, such writing also participates in the construction of whiteness as a supposedly stable racial category. Through this process, various European ethnic and religious groups who had settled in Texas, including Catholics and Czech, German, and Polish communities, were lumped together for legal purposes as white, or a broadly-writ

“European.”<sup>18</sup> The designation of certain spaces for racial and ethnic minorities and the reservation of other spaces for whiteness worked to not only racialize space but also spatialize race in Texas. Through this process, whiteness came to be identified both by *what* it is not and *where* it is not. At the same time, settler colonial and white supremacist logics protected (and continue to protect) white settler privilege by couching it within performances of reproductive, nuclear heteropatriarchy.

Recent work on histories of rhetoric, race, and technical communication have shown the influence regulatory writing has on the construction of racialized space. Jennifer Ramirez Johnson, Octavio Pimentel, and Charise Pimentel’s “Writing New Mexico White” (2008) demonstrates the importance of including business and technical documents in our historical analyses of race. Their study of early technical communications designed to draw Anglo immigrants to the New Mexico territory show how these documents reconstructed regional histories and indigenous mythologies, centering whiteness and Euro-centric understandings of history and identity in the retellings. The authors of these writings used whiteness to frame native populations as non-threatening to potential white settlers who come to the area with their natural ingenuity and resourcefulness. These documents, they argue, masked and naturalized whiteness, reproducing “the idea that whites are at the center of U.S. history—that

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<sup>18</sup> Though this category was marked by social stratifications that positioned certain ethnicities as more exemplary of whiteness, legal rhetorics such as these separated European Americans, legally and spatially, from non-Europeans. In *The History of White People*, Nell Irvin Painter argues that, although Anglo Saxon whiteness was most closely associated with “the identity of *the American*” by the end of the 19th century, other European ethnic groups, notably the Irish, could still claim whiteness, though their claims to ideal Americanness were more tenuous (150).

history does not begin until whites' arrival or that history does not count until it is recorded by white historians" (233). The authors conclude that technical communicators cannot reasonably believe that we can separate ourselves from and refrain from contributing to racism or that whites can stop benefiting from the workings of whiteness. To this extent, we also cannot reasonably believe that technical communicators can produce documents outside, and completely free from, the racial logic that informs our everyday lives. But technical communicators can reveal and disrupt many of the deceptively subtle yet powerful manifestations of whiteness. We suggest that technical communicators should be hypersensitive to the various ways whiteness can invariably and inconspicuously be engrained in technical documents. (234)

As Johnson et al. make explicitly clear, technical communication is always embedded within discourses of power and culture, including considerations such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class. Angela Haas agrees, noting that this has long been a weakness in the field of technical communication, which "has a history of ignoring the ways in which our work is saturated with white male culture—which has real effects related to privilege and oppression on the lives and work of designers, writers, editors, and audiences of technical communication" (284). The inability of white male culture to see its own privileges stems from systems of privilege that construct the traits of the dominant group as neutral and normative, while the traits of non-dominant groups are salient and special. As Stephanie M. Wildman puts it, "Whites do not look at the world

through a filter of racial awareness, even though whites are, of course, a race. The power to ignore race, when white is the race, is a privilege, a societal advantage” (577).

Texas’s white settler population perpetuated and protected this “societal advantage” after the Civil War, and this advantage carried through the development of Texas A&M. Wildman centers her assessment about white racial unawareness within contemporary white cultures that refuse to speak about race for fear of reifying racism, or what Alice McIntyre describes as the “culture of niceness” and “an addiction to polite discourse” (40). The technical and regulatory writings I analyze in this chapter are quite clearly not participating in a “culture of niceness” through their systematic marginalization of racial minorities in Texas. When these documents did not mention race, it was not because the authors feared to disrupt polite discourse; it was, instead, to circumvent federal laws and to hide discriminatory intent. But I do see such writing as precursor to contemporary avoidance of race in discourse, in part because of how these writings spatially divided peoples according to race. Removing racial and ethnic difference from view, or placing such difference at a visible distance, makes it much easier for white people to claim not to “see” race.

Critical race theory helps us to make sense of race as constructed but real and understands racism as prevalent and systemic. Charles W. Mills has argued that the social structuring of the modern world is organized according to a “Racial Contract” in which one section of humanity (in this case, whites) categorizes the rest as non-white and establishes juridical, political, and moral rules that privilege members of the white group over members of the non-white group. Though not all whites may support the

Racial Contract, he argues, all whites benefit from it (11). “We live, then, in a world built on the Racial Contract,” Mills writes:

That we do is simultaneously quite obvious if you think about it (the dates and details of colonial conquest, the constitutions of these states and their exclusionary juridical mechanisms, the histories of official racist ideologies, the battles against slavery and colonialism, the formal and informal structures of discrimination, are all within recent historical memory and, of course, massively documented in other disciplines) and nonobvious, since most whites *don't* think about it or don't think about it as the outcome of a history of political oppression but rather as just “the way things are. (30)

The story of settler colonization, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy in Texas is a story of the Racial Contract that has and is being written throughout the United States, and though the details and narrative structure may reflect different locales differently, the logics that protect straight, white, settler privilege are surprisingly consistent.

Sexuality and race developed together as categories of identification, though not simply as categories analogously related to each other. Siobhan Somerville argues in *Queering the Color Line* that “questions of race – in particular the formation of notions of ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ – must be understood as a crucial part of the history and representation of sexual formations, including lesbian and gay identity and compulsory heterosexuality in the United States” (5). “One’s sexual identity,” she writes, “often describe a complex ideological position, into which one is interpellated based partly on

the culture's mapping of bodies and desires and partly on one's response to that interpellation" (6). Somerville demonstrates that cultural discourses about race and sexuality intersected in medical, sexological, psychological, and juridical models, such that the need to define the category of "homosexual" followed many of the same paths as the simultaneous need to articulate solid distinctions of race.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, settler colonization rests on the logics of heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity. As Andrea Smith pointedly writes, "in order to colonize peoples whose societies are not based on social hierarchy, colonizers must first naturalize hierarchy through instituting patriarchy. In turn, patriarchy rests on a gender binary system in which only two genders exist, one dominating the other" (72). The construction of sexual difference can only be conceived in conjunction with the construction of racial and ethnic difference, and colonization of a racial "Other" requires the implementation of compulsory heterosexuality.

In Texas, settler legislative writing not only regulated sexual practices, it also marked out certain spaces as the locations of a state-recognized settler sexuality. These spaces were often delineated along contours of race and colonization, making settler sexual practices the practices of settler whiteness. To simplify settler sexuality by calling it, in modern parlance, "straight" would be to mischaracterize the phenomenon much more narrowly than it is practiced. Settler sexuality is more than an approved set of

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<sup>19</sup> The similar history of the development of discourses and race and sexuality should not be confused with a simple analogous model in which sexuality is "like" race. As Somerville writes, "such analogies implicitly posit whiteness and heterosexuality as the norm. To say that gay people are 'like' black people is to suggest that those same gay people are not black. The underlying assumption is that white homosexuality is like heterosexual blackness" (8).

sexual practices and orientations; it is also a sexual ethics intertwined with projects of white supremacy, settler colonization, and heteropatriarchy. Put another way, settler sexuality both requires and makes possible the systematic implementation of racism, colonization, and sexual/gender oppression.

For example, the 1837 marriage act that was updated in the 1866 legislative session did more than simply formalize marriage rights under Texas law. It actually reorganized existing family and sexual arrangements into state-recognized settler family units. Thus, certain individuals who had previously “resorted to the practice of marrying by bond” in the absence of a state-recognized officiant, were extended formal state recognition because, as the act notes, “public policy and the interests of families require some legislative action on the subject” (Gammel 1:1293). Other cohabitating arrangements were removed from this equation, most notably pairings between persons “of European blood or their descendants” and “Africans, or the descendants of Africans” who were threatened with punishment pursuant to a conviction as a high misdemeanor (1:1294-95). Through such legislative acts, Texas established a model of white settler family practice, rearranging existing family structures to reflect this model and prohibiting the formation of others. As I will discuss in the next section, family recognition by the state was central to the perpetuation of Texan settlement on Native lands.

Morgensen argues that settler sexuality developed as both a response to and denial of indigenous sexualities during the process of colonization, informing the structure of both dominant settler sexuality as well as queer sexuality. He writes, “In the



United States, the sexual colonization of Native peoples produced modern sexuality as “settler sexuality”: a white and national heteronormativity formed by regulating Native sexuality and gender while appearing to supplant them with the sexual modernity of settlers. ... White settlers promulgating colonial heteropatriarchy queered Native peoples and all racialized subject populations for elimination and regulation by the biopolitics of settler colonialism” (31). Native sexuality became “queer” in relation to settler sexuality with settlers establishing their sexual practices as normative in contrast to native sexual practices and formations.<sup>20</sup> Extending Foucault’s discussion of biopower as the range of techniques used by the state to control bodies and populations, Morgensen demonstrates how colonial agents justified the rhetorical and physical project of emptying colonized lands of indigenous cultures and bodies by invoking native sexual deviance.

In doing so, colonial settlers also defined settler gender and sexuality, which had been considerably more porous and malleable prior to colonial encounters with indigenous cultures. This newly calcified standard of sexual conduct and ethics was in turn used to discipline sexually deviant bodies (both non-white and white) to reflect the impossibility of such deviance, making settler sexuality not only “normal” but “natural.” Morgensen argues convincingly that modern sexuality in this context did not emerge from the processes of settler colonialism, but rather, it produced “settler colonialism, and

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<sup>20</sup> The sexual colonization of Native peoples is not limited to the actions of straight settlers. “Queer modernities in a settler society are produced in contextual relationship to the settler colonial conditions of modern sexuality,” Morgensen writes (31). In turn, queer settler subjects have relied on and reversed the queering and elimination of Native bodies to “argue their inclusion in settler society by traversing normative paths to settler citizenship, which incorporate and transcend ties to Native roots to achieve national belonging” (32).

settler subjects, by facilitating ongoing conquest and naturalizing its effects” (42). As a result, settler colonialism and settler sexuality are dependent on their invisibility and forced naturalization that “follows both the seeming material finality of settler society and discourses that frame settlers as ‘those who come after’ rather than as living in relationship to Native peoples in a colonial situation” (42). As a product of modern settler sexuality, settler colonization requires constant vigilance by the inheritors of settler privilege against threats to the invisible inevitability of the white heteronormativity of settler sexuality. To challenge settler sexuality is to challenge the keystone that supports settler society.

### **Texas A&M and the Rhetorics of Empire**

In Texas, publicly accessible higher education has always been tied to the state’s simultaneous project to colonize and “settle” Native lands.<sup>21</sup> Texas’s plans to create public universities go back as far as 1839 when Mirabeau Lamar, President of the Republic of Texas, called on the republic’s congress to establish a university, linking the republic’s interest in education to its interest in the common defense: “Congress is no less bound to the dissemination of knowledge than it is to attend to the physical defense of the country” (qtd in Dethloff 5). The Fourth Congress responded by granting fifty leagues of land “appropriate for the establishment and endowment of two Colleges or Universities” (Gammel 2:135). The “physical defense” to which Lamar referred was largely a defense against Native nations in the “frontier,” which Texas was desperate to

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<sup>21</sup> This movement is not particular only to Texas, as the federal Morrill Act more or less situated the pursuit of higher education at all land-grant schools as part and parcel to the colonization and sale of Native lands.

settle, and the Mexican government from which Texas had claimed independence three years earlier.

In *The Rhetoric of Empire*, David Spurr names a set of distinct rhetorical modes that he argues constitute a “colonial discourse” characterized by “a form of self-inscription onto the lives of a people who are conceived of as an extension of the landscape” (7). One of these tropes, *negation*, is particularly relevant to understanding Texas’s approach to creating the university land grant system. Through *negation*, “Western writing conceives of the Other as absence, emptiness, nothingness, or death” (92). The rhetoric of *negation*, Spurr argues, “acts as a kind of provisional erasure, clearing a space for the expansion of the colonial imagination and for the pursuit of desire” (92-93). Per the terms of the republic’s original legislation, Texas’s land grants were to be distributed from “vacant land in the counties” (Gammel 2:134), though A&M historian Henry Dethloff notes that “[m]any of these lands ... were then occupied by Indian tribes” (6). Texas did not happen to overlook these tribal nations in its quest for vacant plots of land with which to fund a university, it simply defined vacancy in terms of the presence or absence of settler society. Conceiving of the university land grants as vacant or negative spaces allowed Texas to pursue its educational mandate as part of its mission to settle the “frontier” and provide for the “physical defense” of the republic.

Though the state’s wars with Mexico and Native nations proved a financial distraction, Texas continued to pursue the project. After gaining statehood, Texas set up a land grant in 1858 specifying that for every ten sections of land donated by the state for railroad development, one section would be reserved as an endowment for the state

university (Gammel 4:1020-23). Thus, Texas's desire to erect an institution of higher learning once again went hand-in-hand with its settler aims, since railroads were key to the continued expansion of Texan settlements in the west. By yoking the university's funding to the westward expansion of settlers in the state, Texas ensured that its A&M college would be dependent upon the removal and displacement of indigenous populations.<sup>22</sup>

By agreeing to the terms of the federal Morrill Act, Texas synthesized two histories of settler colonialism (Texan and U.S.) in the form of Texas A&M. The Morrill Act was an exercise in nation-building. The act granted to each state federal lands within the borders of the state. In cases where the amount of federal land within said state was insufficient, the act authorized the Secretary of the Interior to issue land scrips to these states from "the unappropriated lands of the United States" that were not already states or territories ("Act of July 2," Sec. 2). These "unappropriated lands" might better be described as "not yet appropriated by white settlers," yet another example of the rhetoric of *negation* at work. The stipulations that they come from neither existing states nor

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<sup>22</sup> The college also indirectly benefitted from the forced removal of the Tonkawa and Tawakoni nations, whose territories included the area now known as College Station. In the 1850s, reservations were set up for the Tonkawa and Tawakoni nations in Texas. Both the Tonkawa and Tawakoni were settled in the Brazos Reservation at the mouth of the Clear Fork River with several other Native nations, including the Delawares, Shawnees, Wichitas, and Caddoes (Newcomb 354). To "protect" the Tonkawa and Tawakoni from hostile settlers, the state removed them from the state, settling them north of the Texas border in Indian Territory (Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, "History"). After a series of attacks by other Native nations, the Tonkawa nation moved back to Texas, serving as scouts for the U.S. Army. In 1884, they were again removed to Indian Territory with the Lipan Apache Indians, a difficult year-long journey the Tonkawa refer to as "the Tonkawa 'Trail of Tears'" (Carlisle, "Tonkawa Indians"; Tonkawa Tribe of Oklahoma, "Tonkawa Tribal History").

territories ensured that the pursuit of higher education in the United States would run hand-in-hand with imperial expansion.

Settlement in Texas was also a distinctly heteropatriarchal affair. Settler colonization is a project sustained by a belief in the superiority of heteropatriarchy and the enforcement of heteronormativity. The perpetuation of the settler state requires heteronormative practices, including a vision of society as constituted by discreet reproductive nuclear family units. “Heteronormativity,” writes Mark Rifkin,

is a key part of the grammar of the settler state. More than regulating social life on the basis of sexual object choice and gender expression, the most prominent legacies of sexology, compulsory heterosexuality can be conceptualized as an ensemble of imperatives that includes family formation, homemaking, private propertyholding, and the allocation of citizenship, a series of potential ‘detachable parts’ fused to each other through discourses of sexuality. (37)

This “ensemble of imperatives” constructs a logic of daily life and citizenship that determines not only the social acceptance of certain sexual and family practices but also the state’s recognition of the same, what Rifkin calls “the bribe of straightness” (23). This bribe extends the rights and responsibilities of citizenship to individuals who reflect what the state recognizes to constitute family and sexual practices and formations. Such recognition can take a number of forms, ranging from voting rights to native sovereignty to labor protections to educational opportunities. In turn, settler logics and practices may also be used to prevent certain groups from adopting the sexual/gender/family practices

approved by the state in order to withhold the benefits of settler state recognition.

One form of recognition in Texas was the granting of land to practitioners of white heteropatriarchy. Texas's settlement laws were organized around the primacy of the nuclear, heteropatriarchal family unit. In 1841, the Republic of Texas stated that "every head of a family who has emigrated to this republic ... with his family, and who is a free white person, shall be entitled to six hundred and forty acres of land" (Gammel 2:554). Single white men over the age of seventeen were offered half that amount. Further, these "premium lands must be selected from the vacant lands within the territorial limits defined by the contract" (2:556). By 1866, the state of Texas was still offering tracts of land to "all white persons, being heads of families, or twenty-one years of age" (5:1121). Settlement laws such as these relied on a specific form of settler heteropatriarchy, codified into law by acts such as the 1837 act discussed above that formed existing family structures into configurations recognized by the state. Settlement in Texas, then, both rewarded and was supported by the practices of white heteropatriarchy.

Texas's settler logics coalesced in the planning and construction of Texas A&M. With its ties to railroads and the shrinking of the Texas "frontier," the appropriation of "unappropriated" federal lands via the Morrill Act, and its physical location on the lands of displaced indigenous nations, A&M directly benefitted from expansionist settler political projects. But as Texas's first institution of higher education, it also stood as a symbol of the settler imperative, as evidenced by the colonial rhetorics employed in communiqués from the new college and contemporary newspaper accounts. As I argued above, Texas legislators relied on an unstated trope of negation in their appropriation of

lands for the university endowments. These lands, in complete disregard for the indigenous cultures living on them, were considered empty and culturally barren, ripe for the picking by a republic and state eager to settle the West and establish a culture at home. The rhetorical and physical effect of these actions was a large, “emptied” section of land on the banks of the Brazos River upon which could be built a university funded by the sale of other “emptied” lands in Texas. It was, first and foremost, a symbol of the success of settler colonization.

Descriptions of the new college and surrounding areas in periodicals and technical documents from the time also relied extensively on imperial rhetorics, defending the college as a symbol of the success of the colonial spirit. Consider the following description of the college, published in an 1874 issue of the *Galveston Daily News*, while the college was still under construction:

A few days since we had the pleasure of visiting ... the elegant and magnificent edifice of the Agricultural and Mechanical College, and beholding the beautiful scenery around it. Three stories of this immense structure is now almost completed, and presents a grand and magnificent appearance. The building is situated about four miles from Bryan, upon a high rolling prairie, commanding an elegant view of the city of Bryan and the country for miles around in every direction. This site is so strikingly picturesque and romantic that we feel confident it will provoke the pencil of every tourist. The twelve hundred acres of land, donated by Brazos county, upon which the college is situated, is of a rich sandy loam, and,

with a fair season, will produce forty bushels of corn or a bale of cotton per acre. (“Brazos County,” 2)

This brief description contains several of Spurr’s imperial tropes. For example, a rhetoric of *aestheticization* emerges in the descriptions of the countryside as “picturesque and romantic,” provoking “the pencil of every tourist.” In this trope, the colonized land and culture is held at a distance as an aesthetic experience, not a material reality, a move which dehistoricizes the land and erases its cultural context (Spurr 48). But more than that it has an air of *insubstantialization*, a fleeting beauty that, while great fodder for tourists with pencils, must be tamed by the “magnificent edifice of the Agricultural and Mechanical College.” Further, the description of the college’s edifice that commands “an elegant view ... for miles around in every direction” relies heavily on the trope of *surveillance*. Spurr writes that “the commanding view is an originating gesture of colonization itself, making possible the exploration and mapping of territory which serves as the preliminary to the colonial order” (16). Mary Louise Pratt similarly argues that “empires create in the imperial center of power an obsessive need to present and represent its peripheries and its others continually to itself” (4). Indeed, the commanding view of the college’s edifice is enough to translate this picturesque and romantic beauty into a mapped and categorized “twelve hundred acres of land” with the capacity to “produce forty bushels of corn or a bale of cotton per acre.” Within one paragraph, the ethereally insubstantial beauty of the Texas prairie is converted into measurable and



productive farmland, all thanks to the commanding view of A&M.<sup>23</sup>

If settler colonial rhetorics pervade the legal foundation of the college and the popular writings of the time, it should be expected that they would emerge in A&M's day-to-day professional writing, too. In his first biennial report to Governor R. B. Hubbard in 1878, A&M's first president, Thomas Gathright, made an extended appeal to the state for more funding while defending the expenses the college had accrued in its first two years. Politicians and news agencies had been attacking the college for taking too long to establish itself and for failing to fulfill what they saw as an agricultural and mechanical educational mandate (Dethloff 47). In his report, Gathright claims that the college has taken to planting orchards and requests funding for a permanent farm. He also downplays the required military training, arguing that "The college is not strictly military; in other words the primary object is not to make soldiers, but good and useful citizens" (8).

Gathright is quite clear, though, that the college's mission does not stop with the students. Any objections to the pacing of the college's development, he argues, must be tempered by a long view of the college's true goal: to improve and stabilize settler civilization in Texas. Concluding his report, he writes:

If the Legislature will give the college funds to procure proper

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<sup>23</sup> *Negation* needs no formal introduction in this passage because Texas's rhetorical history of negating un-colonized lands has already made room for a new settler reading of the land. Without the assumption of the land's almost virgin-like emptiness, the praise and adoration from this piece would make little to no sense. The imposingly "magnificent edifice" of the settler college can only make sense in front of the culturally-empty "high rolling prairie," which while "picturesque and romantic," has yet to succumb to the Western cultivation.

appointments its past success gives to the people an earnest that it will step to the front rank in every department of science, and young men, not only from Texas, but from the contiguous and neighboring states, will seek higher instruction here, and the college will be an honor to the country and a blessing to the people. It will be a point around which State pride can crystalize, and at the same time be the source of a better intelligence and a better civilization. It will be to new Texas, in point of pride, what the Alamo and Goliad and San Jacinto are to old Texas, but of a different sentimentality—it will be a victory of peace, lasting and beneficent. (10)

Here, A&M's charter as an outpost of settler colonial ideology becomes strikingly obvious. Gathright's language suggests that A&M has the power to firm up a Texan settler society, and he makes three distinct settler moves: First, he establishes A&M as the seat of culture and "civilization" in Texas. Writing from what the *Galveston Daily News* had described as the "magnificent edifice" in the middle of the rolling Texas prairies, Gathright maps the college's mission on top of Texas's much older mission to settle the Texas "frontier." The college will become "the source of a better intelligence and a better civilization." If Texas's rail system was instrumental in stabilizing settler communities while simultaneously funding the establishment of the college, A&M plays a similar role, rallying settler-citizens around the state's new flagship for settler civilization.

Next, he portrays the college as helping to solidify Texas's relationship with the

federal government. The college, he avows, will draw students not only from Texas but also from “the contiguous and neighboring states.” As I mentioned earlier and will demonstrate below, Texas’s relationship with the U.S. government during Reconstruction was decidedly tense, yet it was during this period that Texas accepted federal assistance via the Morrill Act. Just as the college benefitted from Texas’s railroad land grants, it also benefitted from federal grants of land. And just as A&M returned the favor to Texas by helping to “crystalize” state pride, Gathright frames the college as “an honor to the country and a blessing to the people.”

Finally, federal and state settler projects converge in the rhetoric of warfare. In “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy,” Andrea Smith argues that white supremacy in the United States is supported by three logical “pillars”: “Genocide/Colonialism,” “Slavery/Capitalism,” and “Orientalism/War.” The first pillar, Genocide/Capitalism “holds that indigenous peoples must disappear” in order for non-Native people to “become the rightful inheritors of all that was indigenous—land, resources, indigenous spirituality, or culture” (68). This is the logic that I have been discussing in this section, and it is the logic that facilitated the removal of the Tonkawa and Tawakoni, framed U.S. settlers as the rightful inheritors of Indian lands, and allowed the letter writers in the *Galveston Daily News* to describe the land surrounding A&M as picturesque, romantic, and waiting to be cultivated. The second pillar, “Slavery/Capitalism,” I will address in the following section, but put briefly, it is the logic that “renders Black people as inherently slaveable—as nothing more than property” (67).

The third pillar, “Orientalism/War,” frames “certain peoples or nations as inferior and as posing a constant threat to the well-being of empire. These peoples are still seen as ‘civilizations’— they are not property or ‘disappeared’—however, they will always be imaged as permanent foreign threats to empire. ... [O]rientalism serves as the anchor for war, because it allows the United States to justify being in a constant state of war to protect itself from its enemies” (68). It is this pillar that props up Gathright’s conclusion to his annual report. He raises the specter of Texas’s war with Mexico, comparing the new college to the Alamo, Goliad, and San Jacinto, cultural rallying points for Texan independence. In doing so, Gathright justifies any misgivings about A&M’s military practices as a necessary defense against the constant threat that Mexico poses, both physically and ideologically. The country is at war, he suggests, but not with a material enemy with physical armies but with a vaguely-defined foreign culture that threatens to undermine the superiority of settler culture and society in Texas.<sup>24</sup> An institution of “better intelligence and a better civilization” is the only way, according to Gathright, to ensure “a victory of peace, lasting and beneficent.”

### **The Texas Black Codes and the Creation of a Non-Black College**

During Reconstruction, following the Civil War, Texas passed a series of legislative acts commonly known as the Black Codes. With slavery formally abolished,

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<sup>24</sup> Gathright’s rhetoric, in shifting the battlefield to the hearts and minds of people in Texas, may also have an impact on the treatment of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in Texas. If the old battles were between the two warring nations, then the new battles might be between those individuals who represent the new nation (white settler citizens in Texas) and those who represent the old (Mexicans and Mexican-Americans). In fact, though Texas A&M did admit Latino students, the university did require both black and Latino workers to carry identification cards with them proving their permission to be on campus (Cushing, *¡Siempre!*).

Texas used these laws to recreate, as much as possible, the system of forced labor and racial inequality under which black Texans had toiled prior to emancipation. The state employed the illusion of race-neutral vocabulary in order to avoid federal scrutiny, but in practice, the Black Codes created and perpetuated inequality and hardship for recently freed black Texans. Texan “separate but equal” laws allowed the race-neutral rhetorics of the Black Codes to apply, in practice, mostly to black Texans, since the separation of black Texans from white Texans in public areas, workplaces, and family units meant that the Codes’ regulation of laborers, apprentices, and vagrants could apply almost exclusively to black individuals (Crouch 265).

In her discourse analysis of the Texas Black Codes, Williams argues that the rhetoric of the Black Codes is “overwhelmingly skewed toward language that would likely promote distrust in an African American audience” (25). The disconnect between the race-neutral tone of the Codes and their decidedly not neutral application has long-lasting implications for race relations in Texas, especially when they contribute to a long history of disenfranchisement of black Texans through the use of deceptive legal rhetorics. Barry Crouch notes that the Codes were a deliberately underhanded response to President Andrew Johnson’s request to “make all Laws, involving Civil rights, as Complete as possible, so as to extend equal and exact justice to all persons without regard to color” (263-64). Ironically, in requesting that states extend justice “without regard to color,” President Johnson inadvertently opened a door for the protection of white privilege in Texas.

The Black Codes engaged in a rhetorical duplicity that purported to provide

protection while actually enacting greater restrictions. Passed with the ostensible purpose of regulating labor in Texas, these laws had an inordinate impact on black Texans who constituted the majority of the state's labor force and were thus subject to the state's regulatory conditions. One example of this duplicitous rhetoric is "Chapter LXIII," titled "An Act establishing a General Apprentice Law, and defining the obligations of Master and Mistress and Apprentice." This law made it "lawful for any minor to be bound as an apprentice, by his or her father, mother, or guardian, with their consent, entered of record in the office of the Clerk of the county of which the minor is a resident, or without such consent, if the minor, being fourteen years of age, agree in open Court to be so apprenticed; Provided, There be no opposition thereto by the father or mother of said minor" (Gammel 5:979). The law also allowed for "indigent" and "vagrant" minors and orphans to be indentured by local courts. Crouch quotes a Freedmen's Bureau agent, Gregory Barrett, who objected to the law as "a very unjust one ... as it only requires a notification in the papers of the intention to indenture, and as very few of the freedpeople can read, those interested immediately have no knowledge of the apprenticeship until after its consummation by the Court" (Crouch 273). As Crouch notes, the Codes were written to be race-neutral on the surface but applied only to freed black Texans in practice. For example, vagrancy laws allowed white Texans to force unemployed black Texans into service, while laws preventing black marriage and miscegenation made it easier to categorize black children as "orphans," opening the door to bound apprenticeships (Crouch 265).

The Black Codes relied on what Smith terms the logic of slavery, which frames

black bodies “as nothing more than property. That is, in this logic of white supremacy, Blackness becomes equated with slaveability. The forms of slavery may change—whether it is through the formal system of slavery, sharecropping, or through the current prison-industrial complex—but the logic itself has remained consistent” (67). In the writing of the Black Codes, we can see the Texas legislature employing the logic of slavery to protect the structure of racial hierarchy that had been threatened by the conclusion of the Civil War. By singling out black Texans for increased regulatory scrutiny, the legislature guaranteed that black Texans’ primary function in the eyes of the state was as laborers in service to white landowners, a role not altogether different from the one occupied by black slaves prior to emancipation. Indeed, many of the post-bellum laws governing laborers were remarkably similar to antebellum laws regulating slaves in Texas.

Rhetorically, these laws framed black Texans as individuals whose worth was located in their ability to labor for the benefit of white residents. This can be seen, in part, by Texas’s attempt to transpose pre-emancipation laws governing slaves onto emancipated black Texans. In constructing the Black Codes, Texas blatantly borrowed from its own pre-emancipation slave laws. Comparing the language in the Black Codes with the language of regulatory writing pertaining to slaves prior to 1865 reveals the state’s desire to reinstate and perpetuate the system of forced servitude of black peoples who had recently been freed by the federal government. An 1866 post-emancipation law providing “for the punishment of persons tampering with, persuading or enticing away, harboring, feeding or secreting laborers or apprentices, or for employing laborers or

apprentices under contract of service to other persons” (Gammel 5:998), for example, is nearly indistinguishable from an 1839 act setting the punishment for “any person ... found guilty of harboring or clandestinely supporting any runaway negro slave, or negroes indentured for a term of years, or in aiding and assisting in so doing” (2:47). Similarly, the 1866 legislature, in “An Act Regulating Contracts for Labor,” provided that “[e]very laborer shall have full and perfect liberty to choose his or her employer, but when once chosen, they shall not be allowed to leave their place of employment ... unless by consent of their employer, ... and if they do so leave without cause or permission, they shall forfeit all wages earned to the time of abandonment” (5:995-96). This 1866 act bears a sinister similarity to an 1858 law making it lawful “for any free person of African descent, now in this State, or who may hereafter be within its limits, being over the age of fourteen years, to choose his or her Master, and become a slave” (4:947).

The Black Codes relied on a number of vaguely worded provisions with which Texas legislators, judges, and local law enforcement could force individuals into indentured servitude. Several acts, for example, listed “vagrancy” as a condition upon which local and state governments could force someone into an apprenticeship or indentured servitude. On November 8th, 1866, the state clarified the definition of “vagrancy” with a definition so broad that nearly any black Texan could find him or herself rounded up under its guidelines:

a vagrant is hereby declared to be an idle person, living without any means or support, and making no exertion to obtain a livelihood, by any



honest employment. All persons who stroll about to tell fortunes, or to exhibit tricks or cheats in public, not licensed by law, common prostitutes or professional gamblers, or persons who keep houses for prostitutes, or for gamblers; persons who go about to beg alms, (and who are not afflicted or disabled by a physical malady or misfortune); and habitual drunkards, who abandon, neglect or refuse to aid in the support of their families, and who may be complained of by their families; or persons who stroll idly about the streets of towns or cities, having no local habitation, and no honest business or employment, each and all of the above and aforesaid classes by, and they are hereby declared vagrants, coming with the meaning of this Act. (5:1021)

According to Texas law, a charge of vagrancy might include anyone from “an idle person” to a prostitute, fortune teller, gambler, drunkard, or even someone strolling “idly” down a street where they had “no honest business” being. By vaguely including those who might stroll “idly” down the wrong street, the law was also an effective deterrent against black social incursion into white neighborhoods, preventing “the freedpeople from congregating in cities or towns” (Crouch 275).

The vagrancy law was, essentially, a catch-all for any loopholes that might have existed in the other Black Codes. The punishment for vagrancy varied depending on the age of the convicted, and minors could be bound to apprenticeships until they reached the age of majority. Adults were fined ten dollars. If they were unable to pay the fine, they could be compelled work at the discretion of their local courts. Refusal to work

might result in indefinite detention in “close confinement, on bread and water,” until they consented (Gammel 5:1021-22).

Because these laws made no explicit mention of race, Texas lawmakers were able to rely on the laws’ supposed “neutrality” to mask white privilege. The Codes protected white privilege by not only disenfranchising black Texans but doing so in a manner that marked as lazy and deficient black Texans who failed to contribute to a labor force that benefitted white patriarchy. The law situated vagrancy within any number of qualities of social undesirability, qualities that were inordinately applied to black Texans. Both Williams and Crouch have shown how these vagrancy laws were enforced along color lines. Crouch notes that vagrancy laws were more often enforced “after the crops had been gathered and before the next seasonal cycle began,” allowing state and local courts to force furloughed black Texans into free labor. Williams argues that Texans accused of vagrancy had the right to appeal the charge, but appeals proceedings favored white Texans. “Recently freed slaves,” she writes, “though not referenced by position or race, would be required to interact with courts that did not acknowledge their testimony or concerns” (116). Even though the Black Codes were not masked by a veneer of politeness like contemporary colorblind logics, the Codes (and similar laws across the United States) made it possible for Texans to protect white privilege by refusing to acknowledge the importance of race in the construction of privilege.

One method for masking white privilege is by fixing recognition by the settler state to the forced adherence to white sexual norms. The compulsory heterosexuality of

settler culture enacts stringent qualifications for citizenship and cultural acceptance. As Cathy Cohen makes clear, queer scholarship and activism that focus exclusively on non-heterosexual groups and identities misses out on a chance for shared activism with self-identified heterosexuals who are also subjected to greater regulation for failing to embody standards of heteronormativity (46). Cohen distinguishes between heterosexuality, as an identity or practice, and heteronormativity as a system or ideology. Heteronormativity, she argues, is central to the promotion of racist programs that police the bodies and practices of heterosexual individuals whose lives and sexual practices nevertheless threaten “the privilege, power, and normative status invested in heterosexuality” (30). Historically, the institutional structures of heteronormative life – marriage, inheritance, the nuclear family – have been deliberately withheld from many non-white subjects who have been labeled as nonnormative in order to justify increased state regulation of their private lives and excuse systemic oppression and violence against them. Cohen writes, “An understanding of the ways in which heteronormativity works to support and reinforce institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation must therefore be a part of how we problematize current constructions of heterosexuality” (39-40). Within settler colonialism, heteronormative imperatives are disseminated through the institution of heteropatriarchy. The state constructs and depicts the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family as an ideal of citizenship, extending rights and privileges to individuals and communities best able to reflect this arrangement.

In post-war Texas, and continuing into today, the state’s recognition of certain types of families was decidedly heteronormative, granting rights and benefits to those

families in the form of land settlements, labor protections, and other legal benefits. In addition to recognizing certain family arrangements, Texas also prevented certain populations from forming state-sanctioned family arrangements. For black Texans, individual and family rights were dependent on disenfranchising legal rhetorics that framed black subjects primarily as laboring bodies incapable of forming stable family units, necessitating the intervention of the state.

This racialized heteronormativity appears frequently in the Black Codes. In Chapter LXIII, the general apprenticeship law, the bill states that “all indigent or vagrant minors ... and, also, all minors whose parent or parents have not the means, or refuse to support said minors” may be forced into apprenticeships by county courts who may direct the terms of the apprenticeship, “having particular care to the interest of said minor” (Gammel 5:979). Crouch notes that the focus on “indigent,” “vagrant,” and orphaned minors disproportionately and purposefully affected black youth, many of whom had been separated from and/or did not know their parents prior to emancipation (268). Nor, in most cases, did reconciliation solve these issues. As Crouch argues, the systematic separation of children from their parents during slavery meant that “the whereabouts of parents was often lost to memory. Certainly, a massive hunt for separated children began in the aftermath of war, but black parents had little information to guide them. If they did locate their offspring, they usually learned that they had been bound out because they had been legally classified as orphans” (269). Texas relied on slavery’s systematic displacement of black children from their families to continue providing cheap labor to white landowners in the state. By combining obfuscating

language with a reliance on discriminatory implementation by local officials, Texas could hide its true intentions – to reconstruct, as closely as possible, the unequal system of black labor that had been displaced by emancipation and the Civil War.

The same session in which Texas passed the Black Codes and accepted the Morrill Act, it also refused to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which provided equal protection under the law to all citizens of the United States. Despite Texas's refusal to ratify the amendment, it passed in 1868, forcing Texas to more directly deal with the rights of African Americans who were granted full citizenship under the Fourteenth Amendment. One area in particular that it needed to reconcile was higher education. Similar to several other states, Texas defined "equal protection" in terms of "separate but equal," and in 1876, the state included a stipulation in its new constitution that "Separate schools shall be provided for the white and colored children, and impartial provision shall be made for both" (Gammel 8:811). This allowed Texas to create a separate branch of the A&M college for black students, which eventually became Prairie View A&M.

In the same way that settler colonialism essentially provided the lands of A&M, a history of white supremacy opened up a physical space for the construction of Prairie View A&M. The state decided to locate the school on the grounds of the Alta Vista plantation, a move that allowed Texas to provide educational opportunities for its black residents at the same time as it provided a financial bail-out for white plantation owners (Woolfolk). Additionally, the creation of a college for black Texans did not mean that Texas A&M lacked a black presence on campus. The logic of slavery that made possible

the Black Codes also brought black Texans to the A&M campus as day laborers, custodians, and groundskeepers (Cushing, “Texas A&M Workers”). Thus, blackness was visible at Texas A&M but only as it referred to a laboring body.

Though logics of slavery were at play in the construction and identity of both Texas A&M and Prairie View A&M, it must be noted that black Texans took tactical advantage of Reconstruction-era policies and laws, such as the Fourteenth Amendment, and a Republican majority in the Twelfth Legislative session to advance legislative projects to improve the social, labor, and educational conditions for Texas’s black citizens. With the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, black Texan legislators and their allies pushed for significant educational reforms, expanding primary and second school opportunities for black students, and passing legislation formalizing the construction of Texas A&M and Prairie View A&M. Though the legislative projects passed by the Republican majority of the Twelfth Legislature were severely undermined and underfunded when Democrats regained control, the resulting development of Prairie View A&M can be attributed to these efforts (Moneyhon 28-29). Thus, black Texans took advantage of the settler colonial projects that had made headway for Texas A&M to advance their own interests and work against white supremacist interests in the state.

Just as the rhetorics of settler colonialism shone through in Gathright’s first annual report, so do the rhetorics of white supremacy and the logic of slavery emerge in his first report on Prairie View A&M (then called Alta Vista College). Whereas his report on A&M spanned over ten pages, Gathright’s 1878 report on the Prairie View campus took barely two pages, most of it concerned with the quality of the physical

grounds of the school. When Gathright does talk about the students and the mission of the school, he encourages the state to reconsider their decision to fund this project. Attendance at the school, he writes, has been difficult to maintain, due largely to the “impecuniosity of the negro,” who is forced to prioritize earning money over an education:

Since October last the class is smaller than in the spring. The demand for cotton pickers, and the large amount to be realized in picking cotton, carried away the young men to that employment; and while we have assurances of attendance after Christmas, I cannot withhold the suggestion that, unless the Legislature shall make an appropriation for establishing a manual labor school, after the plan of the Hampton Roads Institution, in Virginia, to continue the present arrangement ... cannot be justified by any sound policy....

The truth is there is no demand for higher education among the blacks. Common local schools near home will meet every present educational demands of the negro, unless it be a state normal school for the education of teachers. The school at Alta Vista will meet that demand if it be organized on the plan suggested. (13)

He concludes his report with the admonishment that “some action may be taken looking to the establishment of a manual labor school for the colored people. I repeat that they do not need a college, but they do need a good normal school” (13). Notice the rhetorical difference between Gathright’s report of A&M and his report on Prairie View A&M.

Whereas Gathright saw A&M, despite having similar problems with enrollment, as a beacon of pride for the state and the nation, he can only see an embarrassing waste of funds at Prairie View A&M.

If Gathright's report on A&M illustrated the rhetorics of empire (per Spurr), his report from Prairie View A&M is run through with the logic of slavery (per Smith), in which "Blackness becomes equated with slaveability" (Smith 67). There is no room, in Gathright's logic, for the black Texan student to overcome his dependence on the white capitalist market; the student must work and, by working, miss school. Smith argues the logic of slavery anchors the capitalist system since capitalism requires the commodification of all workers who never see the profits of their work. "To keep this capitalist system in place ... the logic of slavery applies a racial hierarchy to this system," she writes. "This racial hierarchy tells people that as long as you are not Black, you have the opportunity to escape the commodification of capitalism. This helps people who are not Black to accept their lot in life, because they can feel that at least they are not at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy—at least they are not property; at least they are not slaveable" (67). This is also what Gathright is telling himself and his white legislators: Black Texans are slaveable. They cannot escape the commodification of capitalism. But we can. At least we are not property. At least we are not slaveable. At least we are not Prairie View A&M.

### **Lessons for Scholars of Regulatory and Technical Writing**

Regulatory and bureaucratic writings from the inception of Texas A&M reveal the school's foundational rhetorics to be steeped in settler colonialism and white



supremacy. Supporting these rhetorics is a state-sponsored promotion of heteropatriarchy that frames settler citizenship within the structures of the nuclear family and heteronormative sexual practices. In Chapter Three, I will show how this heteropatriarchy emerges as a sort of palimpsest from behind the screens of white settler identity. As I argue in that chapter, performances of heteronormative identity are also the performances of a specific form of rural settler whiteness, and as supposedly stable categories of race, gender, and sexuality begin to strain, the relationship between heteropatriarchy, settler colonization, and white supremacy become more evident. The regulatory writings I have analyzed in this chapter operate as a rhetorical foundation upon which the Texas A&M community constructs and practices its rural identity. This identity cannot be understood without taking into account mutually informing rhetorical traditions of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy.

The rhetorical traditions of Texas A&M (an institution well-known for its adherence to tradition) are not just the traditions practiced by white Texans but traditions that made possible the identity of a community of white Texans. Though these traditions are vociferously practiced today, decades after the formal integration of the university, they are still the traditions of a community of white settlers who built a college on the ancestral lands of the Tonkawa and Tawakoni, paid for that land with the sale of lands stolen from other Native nations in Texas, and consciously populated the college with white students by building a separate, but decidedly unequal, institution for black students.

The developing identity of Texas A&M and College Station is also the process of

a developing concept of whiteness in Texas. It is, in a sense, an identity defined not as the opposite of, but in opposition to, black Texans and Native Americans. In order to understand the cultural and rhetorical heritage of A&M and College Station, one must account for the present absence of the Tonkawa and Tawakoni nations who were removed to make room for the physical location of the university. As I will show in the next chapter, this supposed absence provided a crucial rhetoric on which to construct a discourse of white settler privilege at Texas A&M through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, most notably through the practice of *playing Indian* and forging a naturalized claim to land. And one must account for the absent presence of black Texans for whom a separate college had to be constructed in order for A&M to maintain its identity as an outpost for white cultural supremacy in Texas. As I will show in the next chapter, Aggies relied on active erasure of black bodies and histories from the Texas A&M and College Station landscape to enact their own portrayals of blackness, depictions that continued to frame black subjects as laboring bodies in the service of white subjects. Settler colonial and white supremacist fantasies converge in the rhetorical performance of *rural drag*, as settler citizens assert their claims to heteropatriarchal privilege through performances of white settler rurality.

Though my analysis helps us to make sense of the rhetorical histories at Texas A&M University and prepares us for my analysis of contemporary rhetorical performances in Chapter Three, it also speaks to the importance of rhetoric and technical communication in constructing spaces for privilege and oppression. Michel de Certeau defines space as “a practiced place,” meaning that concrete and specific locations are

transformed into interactive and dynamic spaces by the practices of people within them (117). Regulatory writing plays a key role in this process, in that it can define the parameters of the places that people convert into spaces through their practices. But regulatory writing can also itself be a practice that converts place into space, since the rhetorical practices of the authors delineate the construction of these spaces *and* the people who inhabit them. Rhetorical practices not only reflect the spaces in which they are practiced; they also shape these spaces to fit the rhetorics practiced within them. One means by which this occurs is through regulatory and technical writing, a *techne* whose reputation as “objective” and “neutral” can mask remarkably destructive rhetorics. These rhetorics often outlive their authors and may inform our understanding of the spaces in which we live and the people with whom we share them.

### CHAPTER III

#### *RURAL DRAG: DRESSING UP STRAIGHT IN COLLEGE STATION*

we all know the meaning of thirst here  
touched by a sun straight through to the meat  
this hovel is much closer than home  
but you don't cotton to my kind  
so you learned me one eye i can't see through  
that your spit tastes so damn good in my beer  
i taught you the flavour of teeth  
– Crystal Boson, “dixie chicken”

As an analysis of the legislative and regulatory documents involved in the creation of Texas A&M University makes clear, College Station, Texas, and Texas A&M were founded as projects of white settler heteropatriarchy, and the community's cultural identity is informed by histories of indigenous displacement, white supremacy, black erasure, and heteronormative practices. Despite advances by African Americans, women, Native Americans, and queer communities in the 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-centuries to force inclusion in and make visible their contributions to the community, College Station's primary cultural alignment (and the administrative alignment of the university) continues to be with white, settler heteropatriarchy.

Yet, these advances, as well as shifts in national cultural discourses, introduced a number of identity crises to College Station. The formal recognition and admittance of African Americans, women, and queer students to the university (often legally forced), for example, meant that many of the cultural traditions of the community and university, traditions that had been designed by and for heterosexual white males, were now being practiced by, and sometimes expanded to fit, an increasingly non-white, non-male, and non-heterosexual population. It is from within this collection of crises that a cultural rhetoric of *rural drag* emerged. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Four, the rhetoric of *rural drag* is not confined to College Station and is actually employed quite broadly throughout the United States, but College Station makes a particularly interesting and useful case study of the practice because of the unique constellation of identity crises from which the community's specific form of *rural drag* was shaped.

Before I continue my discussion of these cultural crises and their role in forming the contours of *rural drag* in College Station, I want to provide the definition of *rural drag* from which I draw my analysis. I define *rural drag* as the appropriation, arrangement, and deployment of rural objects, practices, and aesthetics in order to assert membership in and support for white, settler heteropatriarchy. The deployment of *rural drag* does not require that one must identify as a rural subject, and in fact, many of the most skilled *rural drag* practitioners live in urban and metropolitan areas. Instead, *rural drag* works through a triangulated metonymic relationship of rural objects/practices/aesthetics with the body in settler culture, in which a rural object (say, a cowboy boot) becomes a metonym for white settler heteropatriarchy, and the wearer of

the boot metonymically becomes a member of said culture through their adjacency to the object. This is not to say, though, that merely wearing cowboy boots means that one is practicing a rhetoric of *rural drag*. Rather, *rural drag* emerges through the forced adjacency of heteropatriarchal practices and symbols to rural objects/practices/aesthetics. Thus, wearing cowboy boots might not necessarily involve the rhetoric of *rural drag*, but a “Boots and Bikinis” contest at a college dance hall designed to mimic the appearance of an “Old West” saloon would.

So, why “drag”? Unlike the common view of drag, in which individuals “cross” genders to mimic another gender, *rural drag* most often involves shoring up and asserting heteronormative gender roles. Yet, I call this practice “rural drag” because of its relationship to the crises introduced and reflected by conventional drag and gender crossing and because of the way that it uses many of the same strategies used in conventional drag practices.

Marjorie Garber has theorized that the cultural figure of the transvestite plays a significant role in articulating crises of cultural categories in the West. In *Vested Interests*, Garber analyzes the cultural preoccupation and fascination with the figure of the transvestite. Garber’s analysis follows popular/cultural depictions and portrayals of transvestism, drawing connections between films, plays, performances, literature, and cultural moments, such as *Tootsie*, *Peter Pan*, *Yentl*, *M. Butterfly*, *Liberace*, Elvis, and Shakespeare, as well as discourses of transvestism in medical, journalistic, and religious writing.

She argues that cross-dressing figures and instances of cross-dressing introduce a break into binaristic thinking that sees gender as divided into two forms: male and female. This break is often figured and written about, she notes, in terms of “a third,” such as a “third sex,” or a “third term.” The *thirdness* of the figure of the cross-dresser means that the cross-dresser does not merely offer a critique or reveal tropes of the other two genders. Instead, it occupies its own space, not merely a reflection of the others’.

Garber writes:

The “third” is that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis – a crisis which is symptomatized by *both* the overestimation *and* the underestimation of cross-dressing. But what is crucial here – and I can hardly underscore this strongly enough – is that the ‘third term’ is *not* a *term*. Much less is it a *sex*, certainly not an instantiated ‘blurred sex,’ as signified by a term like ‘androgynous’ or ‘hermaphrodite,’ although these words have culturally specific significance at certain historical moments. The ‘third’ is a mode of articulating, a way of describing a space of possibility. Three puts in question the idea of one: of identity, self-sufficiency, self-knowledge. (11)

Garber cautions against the appropriation of gender-crossing for the purposes of bolstering the claims of either cisgender men or women within a gender binary. The cultural emergence of the cross-dressing figure, she claims, must be read on and as its own, not reflecting something deeper about men and/or women but as describing (not

opening) “a space of possibility” and a “mode of articulation” that “challenges the possibility of harmonious and stable binary symmetry” (12).

Garber argues that the cultural emergence of the transvestite figure marks what she calls a “‘category crisis’ ... a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, master/servant, master/slave” (16). In “disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances .... [transvestism has] an extraordinary power ... to disrupt, expose, and challenge, putting in question the very notion of the ‘original’ and of stable identity” (16). Concurrent with the appearance of the cross-dressed figure, Garber argues, are the crises of cultural categories. Transvestism both reflects these crises and perpetuates them, enacting a troubling of boundaries that reverberates within and beyond each category.

Transvestism and cross-dressing do not mark only cultural crises of gender. In fact, Garber notes that the cross-dressing figure often reflects a category crisis located elsewhere. “Category crises can and do mark displacements from the axis of *class* as well as from *race* onto the axis of gender” (17). Or, as she puts it more pointedly, “*transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category a crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself” (17). Transvestism, gender-bending, drag, and cross-dressing provide a potent challenge to cultural categories often based within binaristic thinking, challenges that are often mapped onto gender identity and expression.



It is from these category crises that *rural drag* emerges, as well, though rather than confounding and disrupting binaristic categories, it aims to naturalize and stabilize them. If the spectral figures of cross-dressing and transvestism often mark the displacement of class and race anxieties, as examples, onto gender as Garber claims, *rural drag* follows a similar trajectory. Yet, *rural drag* aims to solve the crises highlighted by transvestism by displacing not the crises, but the solution, onto gender. *Rural drag* is a response to the category crises inherent in many of settler society's previously taken-for-granted binaries: man/woman, black/white, rich/poor, urban/rural, and colonizer/colonized.

*Rural drag* is a rhetoric that is heavily visual. To articulate *rural drag* as rhetorical, I draw on Sonja Foss's argument that visual rhetorics contain three characteristics that transform a visual object into a visual rhetoric capable of making and transmitting meaning. To be considered a visual rhetoric, Foss argues, a visual object "must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating with that audience" (144). *Rural drag* fulfills all three of these precepts, as it involves humans and communities transforming artifacts and practices of rural culture into symbols of settler heteropatriarchy. As a communicative act, *rural drag* articulates both a naturalized relationship between heteronormativity and rural space as well as the *rural drag* rhetor's participation in this relationship.

Roland Barthes has theorized the rhetorics of images, largely working from advertising images, though his theory speaks to the viscosity of *rural drag*, as well. According to Barthes, an image expresses meaning through the unique constellation of

connotators, or symbols, embedded within the image that signify ideas, words, feelings, or moments. Collectively, “the set of connotators,” he argues, becomes “a *rhetoric*, rhetoric thus appearing as the signifying aspect of ideology” (49). This rhetoric makes sense only insofar as it the individual connotators are arranged to denote ideology. “[C]onnotation is only system, can only be defined in paradigmatic terms,” Barthes writes:

iconic denotation is only syntagm, associates elements without any system: the discontinuous connotators are connected, actualized, ‘spoken’ through the syntagm of the denotation, the discontinuous world of symbols plunges into the story of the denoted scene as though into a lustral bath of innocence. (51)

Ideology and culture cohere the “discontinuous world of symbols” so that the image/visual speaks a language and within that language offers a message. Within the rhetoric of *rural drag*, the ideologies of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy transform *rural drag* from a collection of rural symbols and practices into a coherent and robust denotative system of signifiers.

At the same time, these signifiers are always on the verge of breaking down or shifting the vectors of signification. As I explained above, *rural drag* responds to the crises of category in settler culture, and as such, its rhetorical power is intricately tied to the shifts in signification of supposedly stable symbols. Barthes writes that “in every society various techniques are developed intended to *fix* the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs” (39). *Rural drag* is one such

technique, emerging only when the supposedly natural relationship between rurality and whiteness/settleness/straightness begins to fray.

### ***Playing Indian, Playing Rural***

*Rural drag*, as it is now practiced at Texas A&M and College Station, would not be possible without another settler colonial rhetorical practice: *playing Indian*. *Playing Indian*, the practice of dressing up as or pretending to be Native American, has long been a tradition of settler citizens in the United States, a “game” whose practitioners include children, scouting groups, men’s fraternal organizations, sporting mascots, political dissidents, and more. From the Boston Tea Party to the International Order of Red Men to the Washington Redskins to claiming your great-grandmother was a “Cherokee princess,” many Americans have played Indian in order to earn membership in what Rayna Green has called “the tribe called Wannabee” (30). As a practice, it is more than a form of imaginative play; instead, as Philip Deloria points out, *playing Indian* provides “impetus and precondition for the creative assembling of an ultimately unassemblable American identity” (*Playing Indian*, 5). *Playing Indian* offers settlers a number of benefits in different historical contexts, including the authentication of an American identity that is in a constant developmental flux. Imagining indigeneity and constructing “Indian” cultural practices to accompany this imagined identity has been used to construct a sense of cultural rootedness and tradition by white settlers in the United States, a move that has been used to supplant and supersede British royal authority, as Deloria argues (25), and as I will argue, to supplant various threats to white cultural autonomy at Texas A&M. At A&M, imagining indigeneity and *playing Indian* helped

the school establish a new rhetoric of cultural authenticity based on “tradition” and rurality, a rhetoric that later developed into the region’s specific form of *rural drag*.

As I argued in Chapter Two, Texas A&M was created as a project of white settler colonialism in Texas, and its legislative and regulatory history is reflected in the cultural practices that continue through the present. Settler colonial rhetorics were used to frame the school as a settler colonial outpost. From its very beginning, A&M has taken seriously President Gathright’s colonizing claim that it would be “the source of a better intelligence and a better civilization ... a victory of peace, lasting and beneficent” (10). In order to cement its claim to producing true Texan and U.S. citizens, the campus frequently played Indian as a way of simultaneously authenticating the American identity of the school and naturalizing its myriad cultural practices as age-old “traditions.”

Deloria explains that *playing Indian* relies on a tenuous “distinction between Indian Others imagined to be interior—inside the nation or the society—and those who are to be excluded as exterior” (*Playing Indian*, 21). The presence of Indians (both interior and exterior) helped Americans establish a unique identity separate from the Old World of British rule, meaning that early Americans “were unable to take either a rhetorical or physical stand, leaving the exterior savage and the interior American locked in a perpetually unresolved state” (37). *Playing Indian* involves a perpetually shifting sense of self; Indians might help to establish a claim to “authentic” Americanness, on the one hand, while at the same time they threaten the cohesion of American culture through their “savage” Otherness. Rayna Green argues this bifurcation relies on the displacement

of real Native peoples so that a “cultural identity crisis” does not emerge from the comparison of the performance with the real thing:

the living performance of ‘playing Indian’ by non-Indian peoples depends on the physical and psychological removal, even the death, of real Indians. In that sense, the performance, purportedly often done out of a stated and implicit love for Indians, is really the obverse of another well-known cultural phenomenon, ‘Indian hating,’ as most often expressed in another, deadly performance genre called ‘genocide.’ (31)

A&M’s cultural identity also relied on the genocidal imperative embedded within the act of *playing Indian*. As I discussed in the previous chapter, A&M was made possible through the systematic displacement of Native communities both within the region (such as the Tonkawa and Tawakoni nations) as well as in the U.S. territories at large (through the funding structure provided by the Morrill Act). From the beginning, A&M prided itself on the role many of its dignitaries played in the Texas-Indian wars. The college’s seventh president, Lawrence Sullivan “Sul” Ross, is revered on campus for his efforts to saving the school from financial collapse during his tenure from 1891-1898. Ross, a former Confederate general and governor of Texas, also achieved renown throughout the state as a legendary Indian fighter who had supposedly defeated and killed the Comanche chief, Peta Nocona, at the Battle of Pease River. Ross had also earned fame through his discovery and “rescue” of white women captured by the Comanches: a young girl who Ross discovered during the Wichita Village fight in 1858, whom Ross named Lizzie and raised as his daughter; and Cynthia Ann Parker, who had

been captured in 1836 by the Comanches and was living as Nocona's wife before Ross re-captured her after the Battle of Pease River and forced her to rejoin white society.

The college used Ross's reputation as an Indian fighter to build its own ethos of settler superiority and endurance. The college's first yearbook, *Olio*<sup>25</sup>, includes a two-page account of Ross's exploits, praising his leadership, bravery, and chivalry. The whole account is framed in terms of Ross's proximity to and mastery over hostile savages:

Gen. Lawrence Sullivan Ross was born September 27th, 1838. When about six months old his father moved to Waco—then a mere Indian village. Surrounded in early boyhood by the hostile and fearless Comanches, young Ross grew up inured to the privations and hardships, as well as the dangers of frontier and Indian life. He gave early evidence of a bravery and devotion to the State, which has since characterized his whole life.—When nineteen years old at home on a summer vacation from college, he won his spurs and the sobriquet of “the boy captain” in a desperate encounter with Comanches, killing 95 of their number, capturing 350 head of horses, and recovering a little white girl, whose parents could never be traced, but whom Ross brought up and educated. On recovery, he returned to college and graduated with distinction. (13)

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<sup>25</sup> Only the first yearbook was titled *Olio*. Later editions were called *The Long Horn* before it was eventually changed to *Aggieland* in 1949.

Through the canonization of Ross, A&M established itself within a history in which Natives were not only vanquished or killed but were also erased through the direct actions of A&M and its members.<sup>26</sup> Early students earned a reputation as matching the college's "raw and rugged" nature, including George Baylor, a cadet from the school's first year, whose goals for an education were to "go west and kill Indians and buffalo" (Dethloff 40).

Also of note in this account is the importance placed on Ross's childhood in "a mere Indian village" surrounded by "hostile and fearless" Comanches. As the story notes, this environment helped to inure Ross to the realities of both "frontier and Indian life." Ross's history, in which he spent his youth among Indians, only to later become an Indian fighter and rescuer of white childhood femininity, seems to have offered a tempting parallel for Aggies to develop their own mythology. After establishing an identity as Indian vanquishers, Aggies were free to turn to these supposedly absent Indians as a rhetorical repository for the community they were trying to build. Deloria has shown how scouting and boys' organizations in the early twentieth century relied on Indian tropes as a way of both appealing to the supposed "savage" nature of children and teaching them the conventions of capitalist modernity, including respect for authority, valuation of labor, and the worth of competition. The question of how to best prepare young boys for modernity was fraught with notions of what these boys were and how to

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<sup>26</sup> To this day, Ross's figure looms large in the pantheon of A&M's legendary ancestors. A statue of Ross was erected in the center of campus 1919, with an inscription describing him as a "Soldier, Statesmen, Knightly Gentleman." Seen as an emblem of good luck, students leave pennies on the statue and rub his boot before exams.

respond to their supposed savagery. Deloria traces three distinct, though overlapping, approaches to this “problem,” which, in the United States, eventually coalesced with the formation of the Boy Scouts. One approach, promoted by Ernest Thompson Seton, wanted children to play Indian as an “authentic” counter to the inauthenticity of modernity, while another, pioneered by Daniel Carter Beard, thought young boys could best shed the taint of “an effeminate, postfrontier urbanism” by emulating the experiences of the United States’ own frontier heroes. Elements of both of these approaches were eventually incorporated into the scouting movement, led by Englishman Lord Robert Baden-Powell, who “imagined boys as young army officers” and promoted the strategies and drills of military training as a social educational tool (Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 109).

These three approaches to solving the savagery of juvenile masculinity – through *playing Indian*, learning pioneer skills, or emulating military life – are reflected in the cultural identity of A&M at this time. Students were positioned as the new colonizers of Texas/frontier culture, per Gathright, at the same time as they lived under a strict military regiment and training. Throughout all of this, they were naturalizing and dehistoricizing their school and community by *playing Indian*. Included in the 1905 yearbook, for example, is a legend about the creation of A&M that situates the college as an ahistorical community whose roots extend well beyond its formal opening in 1876. The tale, titled “Omar and His Warriors,” describes a mythical group of warriors led by Omar, who divides the group into four tribes, each with its own chief. The tale offers a mythology upon which the college could base the division of class-levels (freshman,



sophomore, junior, and senior) at the university. The tale begins with an unnamed warrior leading his people “into the land of Tehos” where they thrive in “the fertile valley of the Braso,” living off the land and establishing a reputation as “warriors and hunters (of bugs)” (1905 *Long Horn*, 122). From within this “tribe” emerges another warrior, named Omar “because he was King of the Wise” (122). With numbered verses resembling the Bible, “Omar and His Warriors” then recounts how Omar created the different classes at A&M:

8. Now the land waxed rich and many strangers did come to dwell therein.

9. And Omar called Taurus, his captain, and said unto him: gather my warriors together into winter quarters. Thou shalt separate them into four tribes and the members of each tribe shall not be determined by their valor nor by their wisdom but by their stature shalt thou separate them.

10. Now he put his mark on each tribe and over each he placed a chieftan and unto them he gave subs.

11. And he sayeth unto the chieftan, thou and thy subs shall require that every warrior keep my covenant and should he walk not in my ways thou shalt surely ram him.

12. Again he caused them to be divided into groups according to their understanding; by their perception he divided them. (122)

The rest of the story goes on to mythologize the daily routines and traditions of early Texas A&M, including reveille, uniforms, roll call, etc. “Omar and His Warriors”

transforms Texas A&M and the surrounding community into “Aggieland,” a space of a-historical and mythological origins.



Figure 3.1. “Welcome to Aggieland” water tower at Texas A&M

Jennifer Kaitlyn Campbell, in an undergraduate essay on the figure of the Indian at A&M, has argued that creation myths such as “Omar and His Warriors” helped Aggies form their community as “a brotherhood, similar to how the Boy Scouts treat Indian culture with the Order of the Arrow” (12). Indeed, *playing Indian* provided cadets with an avenue through which to form homosocial bonds that were rhetorically framed as something both patriotic (these young men were now “warriors”) and natural (the origin myth provides an ahistoricism through which cadets can imagine their relationships as part of a long tradition, rather than as part of an institution that has only

existed for less than thirty years). Through originary tales like this and other forms of *playing Indian*, we can see the actual creation of a mythical overlay on the land, also known to this day as Aggieland (Figure 3.1).

This imagined tribalism, as discussed above, relied on the interiorization of the Indian Other who lives inside the society. One way in which A&M was able to visualize and manifest this interiorization at the turn of the twentieth century was through the athletic recruitment of several Native football players, most notably Victor “Choc” Kelley, a Choctaw student from the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. Kelley’s athletic prowess and that of a couple other Native cadets, known as “Chief” and “Big Jim,” allowed non-Native cadets to organize under an imagined tribal relationship to these Native students. This imagined tribalism is reflected in one of the school’s now abandoned chants:

Comanche, Ranche.

Ree! Rah! Rah!

Apache, Rache!

Big Choctaw.

Big Chief, Papoose,

Indian Squaw,

Texas A. and M.

Rah! Rah! Rah! (1908 *Long Horn*, 191)

As Choc’ and the other Carlisle recruits emerged as the new internal Others, their presence threatened to undermine the fabricated Indianness that had woven itself through

A&M cultural discourse. It is not surprising, then, that Aggies would force their own rhetoric of Indianness onto their Native classmates. Choc's popularity on campus and his integration (not to be confused with assimilation) into A&M's settler culture provided the impetus for A&M's Indian-playing members to celebrate not just his athletic prowess but also his Indian Otherness, in order that the rest of the non-Indians might authorize their faux-tribalism through his presence. Thus, Kelley and his Native teammates became the icons of a chant filled with other rhetorical symbols of Indianness in the settler imagination. Choc' is folded into a litany of Indian names and identities that progress from Native national affiliations ("Comanche," "Apache") to personal nicknames ("Big Choctaw," "Big Chief") to Indian archetypes and stereotypes ("Papoose," "Indian Squaw"), all gathering under the umbrella identity which can hold them together through school spirit and Texan pride: Texas A&M (Rah? Rah? Rah?)

Choc' and his Native teammates, referenced in the chant as "Big Choctaw" and "Big Chief," are forced to play stock Indians in a cheer that both idolizes and contains them. "It is precisely this contradiction," writes Green, "which both hates and loves Indians, and enjoys them in their primitive role, that plants the notion that it is the role, not the real, which is to be enjoyed, and thus perhaps it is better for non-Indians to play it" (33-34). Deloria writes that "Indian athletes fit neatly into the nostalgic, antimodern image often attached to professional and collegiate sports. In the early twentieth century's tête-à-tête with cultural primitivism, Indians could be objects, not simply of racial repulsion, but also—as they reflected nostalgia for community, spirituality, and nature—of racial desire" (*Indians*, 120).

In associating Indians with the past, non-Indian settlers at A&M were able to lay claim to indigeneity in order to naturalize their claims to land and “true” Americanness. Yet, while *playing Indian* provided settlers rhetorical cover in making claims for a communal and “traditional” belonging to place, Indianness, as conceived in the settler imaginary, was also a double-edged sword. In addition to providing an air of “authenticity” with which settlers could imagine themselves as partaking in a long history of relationship with Native lands, it also was tainted by rhetorics of wildness and savagery.

This double-bind emerged in descriptions of the often misbehaving cadets during A&M’s first years. In an essay published in the 1905 yearbook, A&M president Henry Hill Harrington described a group of troublemaking students by comparing them to nearly “extinct” Natives. “The Red Man in America is not yet dead,” he wrote, “nor is the tribe of those in our college whose intercourse with the members of the Faculty is based largely upon the contact they have with them when they attend, by special invitation, the sessions of the Discipline Committee” (1905 *Long Horn*, 8). If children were thought to be developmental savages, the message here was clear: A&M intended to exterminate the savagery of its cadets, just as the United States intended to exterminate the “not yet dead” Red Man in America. Indianness was useful in so far as it allowed settlers to imagine an authentically “American” relationship to the land and establish a history of traditions that predated their creation, but the savagery which this

Americanness was intended to replace had to be, at best, destroyed and, at least, repressed.<sup>27</sup>

Indianness was useful insofar as it provided cultural cohesion for cadets to form community and tie themselves to a long view of history, but the savagery that came with playing the “noble savage” had to be contained. At A&M, the solution to this came, at least in part, in the form of public rurality. Indianness was fine for privately organizing and justifying the margins of cultural inclusion and exclusion, but publically, the rural was slowly substituted as the new rhetoric of tradition, history, and authentic Americanness/Texanness. One reason for this development was the popular conception of Native peoples as connected to land in a way that early-twentieth century modern urban culture was not. “Whereas moderns lived a high-density, mass-mediated, urban life,” points out Deloria, “Indians were rural and face to face” (*Playing Indian*, 106). Seeing Indianness and *playing Indian* as a way to connect with an authentic American past and identity was also a way to refigure the rural/urban dualism along the same terms. Through this, Indians become “authentically” rural to the point where the rural itself could become authentic in opposition to the artifice/constructed inauthenticity of the city.

Not coincidentally, this development occurred at the same time as a trend towards making organized white supremacy publically anonymous in Texas and A&M.

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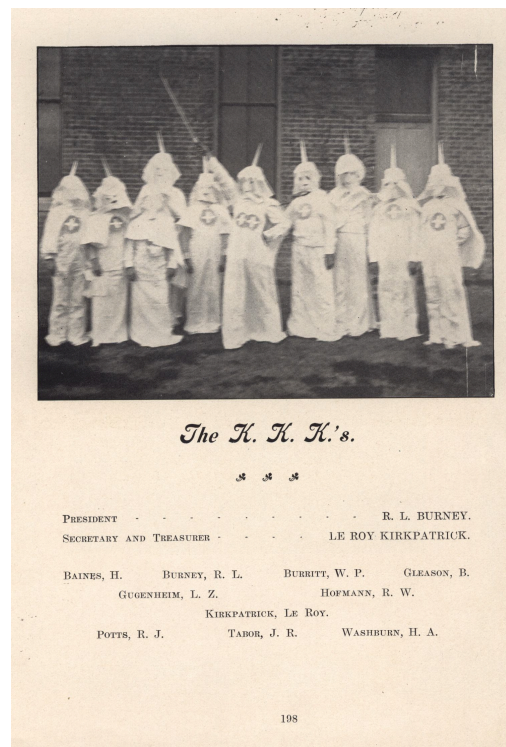
<sup>27</sup> This approach to the trope of “the Indian” in the settler United States is supported by mantras such as “The only good Indian is a dead Indian,” a quote commonly attributed to General Philip Henry Sheridan who was instrumental in forcing Plains Indians onto reservations during the Indian Wars following the U.S. Civil War (Morris 328).

As the rural began to take the place of Indianness in representing authenticity in American and Texan identity, white supremacy began to code itself publically as rural, while privately, white supremacist organizations on campus still arranged themselves around tropes of Indianness. This public/private distinction allowed white supremacy to naturalize itself publically as “merely” rural, while privately, *playing Indian* provided more organized groups the historical and traditional rhetorical structure of tribalism without the taint of uncivilized savagery a public focus might bring.

We can trace this rhetorical shift at A&M in the organization and nomenclature of campus clubs. Yearbooks from the turn of the twentieth century reveal several student groups that were either overtly white supremacist or employed common rhetorics and symbols of white supremacy, particularly those associated with the Ku Klux Klan and other Southern white supremacy groups. These groups appear to be loosely divided into two broad categories: 1) outright white supremacy and white pride, and 2) social/dancing organizations. Outright white supremacist groups included the “K.K.K.’s” (Figure 3.2) and other similarly-robed groups, such as O.D.I. and S.T.B. Dressed in white, pointed robes, these groups gathered for photos to be published, often along with the names of their members, in the *Long Horn*.

The existence of multiple hooded student groups reflects the state of organized white supremacy in the South prior to 1915. Klan activity in Texas and nationwide had, prior to this point, been somewhat dormant, and a national organization had yet to emerge. The Klan had yet to monopolize its characteristic white vestments; numerous para-Klan groups existed, many times to accommodate memberships of different

socioeconomic class strata. While the Klan of the mid- to late-1800s was largely working class, groups such as the Knights of the White Camelia, whose territory ranged across southern Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, existed to provide a space for wealthy white landowners to shore up their specific privileges. Around 1915, the Ku Klux Klan re-organized into a national organization, and many of the similar organizations that had either lain dormant or had lax participation were incorporated into the national umbrella of the Ku Klux Klan.



**Figure 3.2. The K.K.K.'s group page in the 1906 *Long Horn***

The emergence and quick disappearance of several seemingly white supremacist student groups can be explained partially by this national cohesion of organized white



supremacy, but it also reflects the growing reliance on rhetorics of secrecy and anonymity such groups relied on in order to more efficiently terrorize the population and enact their vigilante justice. Publishing group photos and membership rosters in college yearbooks might have allowed students to proudly declare their white superiority, but it also undermined the core values of secrecy and anonymity these elite white clubs were organized under.

Luckily for white supremacist cadets, the school also offered a number of “social” organizations that appeared to be loose covers for more overt white supremacist clubs. Two in particular, which would eventually go underground as secret societies, were the Kala Kinasis German Dancing Club,<sup>28</sup> also known as the K.K.s, and the Swastikas Dancing Club, first appearing in yearbooks in 1906 and 1908, respectively. Both clubs shared heavily with the memberships of early white supremacist clubs. R. L. Burney, for example, served as president in 1906 of both the K.K.s and the K.K.K.s.

Yet even these more socially appropriate clubs seemed destined to disappear from the public eye, though they long outlasted their hooded counterparts. By 1910 both groups no longer appeared in the yearbooks, though they still seemed to be active as secret societies who sought to influence student elections and administrative decisions, tactics that were not dissimilar to the controversial influence the Ku Klux Klan was leveraging against local, state, and national politics well into the 1960s and beyond.

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<sup>28</sup> The Kala Kinasis was not a club for individuals of German descent who happened to be interested in dancing. Rather, as Betty Casey explains in *Dance across Texas*, the *german* was a French dance and many dancing parties were referred to as *germans*. “Although the set formations of the old dance known as the german lost favor and it was dropped in favor of simpler dances,” she notes, “many clubs retained the name of German Club” (10).

Rumors and reports of secret societies continued to swirl throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and the open secret of such groups was mentioned in the school paper with some regularity. In 1923, for example, *The Battalion*, A&M's student newspaper, referenced students who joined such groups as "those who have withdrawn into the Invisible Empire of secret fraternities" (qtd. in Adams 126).

Through this description of an "Invisible Empire," we can see how rhetorics of organized white supremacy were merging with settler rhetorics of authenticity that *playing Indian* afforded. More than another in a long string of settler rhetorical devices, "Invisible Empire" was actually a phrase which the Ku Klux Klan used to describe its organization and goal of restoring the rule of law and white Protestant morality to the United States. Numerous Klan documents, brochures, and speeches made reference to the goals of the "Invisible Empire," and it was often employed in recruitment materials. For example, when individuals wanted to join the Klan, instead of filling out a membership application, they submitted an "application for citizenship in the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan" ("Application"). The "Invisible Empire" represented the Klan's vision of an ideal America rooted in the Anxlo-Saxon achievements that "wrested America from the wilderness and the savage; won its freedom and built up its civilization," as the Great Titan of the Realm of Georgia put it in 1923 during his address to the national membership (15). Embedded in this fantasy of wresting America from the savage is a belief that doing so will transform white Protestants into "native" Americans. Writes the Great Titan:

For when all Klansmen of the Invisible Empire are co-ordinated and work in unison and harmony to see that this Nation is the best educated Nation on the globe—when all Klansmen see that the ideals on which this Government was founded by our forefathers are not undermined and discredited through the influence of foreigners immigrating to these shores—when the laws of the land are respected first by all Klansmen of the Nation and by and through their active, patriotic endeavors are enforced throughout the land—then may it be said that the Wizard has answered the poet and that in truth and for a fact there does not in all America live a man who never hath proudly said, “this is my own, my native land.” (14)

Native-ness, following this logic, is something that can be, and must be, earned, through diligent observance of the laws and cultural customs of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. The Invisible Empire, in other words, is only invisible until it isn't. The “empire” will be repopulated by white natives, just as soon as the savage natives are removed.

In addition to the more-than-coincidence of the phrase “Invisible Empire” used to describe both the Ku Klux Klan and A&M's secret societies, there are a string of alliances and overlaps which connect these societies to the Klan. In the 1950s, two societies came to light: the Stikers (who had evolved from the earlier Swastikas Dancing Club) and the TTs (who traced their origins back to the other dancing club, the KKs, or Kala Kinasis) (“Kala Kinasis”). As I discussed above, the KKs shared a significant part of their membership, including their president, with the hooded photo of the K.K.K.s in

1906. It seems that the path of such groups followed the trajectory of outright, unabashed white supremacy to politely “social” white-identified socialization to hidden and underground secret societies.

It also seems that, particularly for the TTs, rhetorics of indigeneity were key to recreating and restoring an imagined white empire at Texas A&M, as well as, one would assume, across the state and nation. The name “TT” was an acronym that stood, simultaneously, for both “Tonkawa Tribe” and “True Texans” (“Telling All”). Readers will remember from the second chapter that Texas A&M and College Station were actually built on the ancestral lands of the Tonkawa Nation and that the state and university directly benefitted from the removal of the Tonkawa and Tawakoni peoples. The TTs tapped into this history in choosing their name. It seems clear that, for the TTs, *playing Indian* provided the necessary justification for their organization’s existence and its mission of gathering elite students together to exert control over the community. Privately, indigeneity provided the symbolic and historic authenticity around which these settler citizens could build their identity as ideal and ordained citizens. Further, these rhetorics not only provided the rationale for claiming a settler belonging, they also justified the ideology of white supremacy with which the group was affiliated. The “Tonkawa Tribe,” in other words, is the “True Texans.” By claiming this identity, these white male cadets could not only ground their identity but set the terms for all other

potential citizens who, according to these logics, must subscribe to a distinctly white and heteropatriarchal settler ideology.<sup>29</sup>

Secretly and privately, it is clear that adopting an Indian identity and history was important for grounding the aims and ideologies of settler white supremacy at Texas A&M. Publically, though, *playing Indian* was being replaced by another less “Indian” form of tradition and “authentic” Texan Americanness: rural culture. The last official mention of groups like Kala Kinasis or the Swastikas in the A&M yearbook was 1910, though we know that they stayed privately active and shifted into the TTs and Stickers. In 1921, though, a new student group appeared in the *Long Horn*: the Kream and Kow Klub. The Kream and Kow Klub was organized as a group for students interested in dairy science and production, yet the unique spelling of their name revealed some form of Klan affiliation. Photos and descriptions of the group’s activities in the yearbooks and newspapers, though, suggested that the group was actually and simply interested in pursuing and promoting dairy science.

I contend that this might have been the point. By not publically (or even consciously, considering many later members might not have been involved in the group’s creation) associating with the actions of the Ku Klux Klan, which had been increasingly active in the state, and particularly Brazos County, through the 1960s, a

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<sup>29</sup> Also of interest to the appropriation of Indianness in pursuit of white settler supremacy is the fact that “Choc” Kelley was also a member of the Kala Kinasis club. I do not know, nor can I speculate, the reasons Kelley chose to join, but his membership may have also lent authenticity to a group that could already have been organizing rhetorics of Indianness to stake their claims as “True Texans.” It is also not unlikely that many members of this group may have had no idea of the group’s ideologies beyond dancing and that the club was a shelter for select members to pursue other interests.

subtle equation could be made in the minds of participants and those who observed them: the “Invisible Empire” was nothing more than the natural pursuit of agronomy and rural culture/industry. Such an equation allows rural cultural practices to be seen as not only “naturally” white but also, through the simultaneous private adoption of Indianness and the “Tonkawa Tribe/True Texans,” naturally Texan and American. Put another way, true Americanness is white, settler, and rural.

The Kream and Kow Klub lasted nearly forty years at A&M, their “innocent” pursuit of dairy sciences subtly connecting rurality with Klan interests. The Klan practice of using “K” in substitution for hard “c” sounds was a commonly known practice, and most Texans would have been aware of the “Klub’s” alliterative similarity to the Ku Klux Klan. And, indeed, by 1956, after thirty-five years of letting this connection go unspoken, the group publically admitted to the relationship. In that year’s yearbook, clubs and organizations were allowed to include brief boiler-plate descriptions of their purpose and activities, and the Kream and Kow Klub’s blurb was as follows:

The Kream and Kow Klub was founded in 1922 as a club for dairy students who all have a common point of interest. The name Kream and Kow Klub was given the organization because it tied together well both the production and manufacturing phases of the department, and it is spelled with K’s as it was founded in the days of the Ku Klux Klan.

*(Aggieland, 428)*

The next year, the group repeated this description verbatim, with the notable exception of the line about the Ku Klux Klan. By 1959, the group had renamed itself as the Dairy Science Club, dropping the “K. K. K.” acronym.

### **Internalizing the Other**

*Playing Indian* allowed Aggies to naturalize their claims to place and transition a heritage of settler colonial white supremacy into a “tradition” of rurality. At the same time, it relied on the creation of a distinction between internal and external Indian Others through which Aggies were able to control representations of indigeneity within Aggieland against the savage representations of undesirable Indianness on the outside. Because Texas A&M had been designed as a civilian military school for the agricultural and mechanical education of white Texan men, the school was largely written and spoken about as a bastion of young, white maleness. Not surprisingly, the school developed a white male ethos to accompany this, despite the fact that the campus and community were neither all-male nor all-white. In fact, women had been allowed to take certain classes at the school since at least 1895, and despite the state’s creation of a separate school for black Texans at Prairie View, Aggieland was still home to a number of non-white people largely employed as custodians and manual laborers. Just as A&M drew on the rhetorical conventions of *playing Indian* to define an internal versus external Indian Otherness, Aggies also used blackface minstrelsy and drag to make distinctions between internal and external Others as they pertained to black Texans and women.

In order to promote its image as an all-white, all-male society, A&M needed to diminish and contain the reality of non-white, non-male people on campus. One way of

doing this was by constructing and perpetuating a discourse of what “proper” blackness and womanhood at A&M might look like. Aggies relied on mocking portrayals of race and gender incursion in order to maintain the hierarchies of gender and race within the community while simultaneously highlighting and creating ideals of exterior Others.

As has been discussed, white supremacist ideologies and practices were quite common on campus, particularly during the first decades of A&M. In order to establish the superiority of whiteness, however, Aggies simultaneously had to establish the inferiority of blackness. One way in which this was accomplished was through performances of blackface minstrelsy. Robert C. Nowatzki has argued that blackface minstrelsy, as an American tradition, has often been used to articulate and resolve anxieties about American nationalism and American masculinity. “Early minstrel characters,” he writes, “performed the anti-European nationalism and rough proletarian masculinity of their white audiences, enacted their anxieties about black male physical and sexual power, and dramatized their pro-slavery and anti-slavery proclivities” (362). As the performance of highly stylized stereotypes and tropes of African-American life, blackface minstrelsy allowed Americans to champion a unique and “authentic” American culture. As Nowatzki points out, minstrelsy straddled a line between the European heritage of white Americans and the African heritage of black Americans by letting white Americans dress up and portray their own form of black American culture. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison’s exploration of the centrality of blackness and African-American experiences to American literature, Morrison argues that white American identity requires the absent



presence of African-Americans in order to define itself: “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny” (52). White American identity<sup>30</sup>, Morrison argues, is constructed against the supposed null-identity of undesirable blackness. At Texas A&M, white Aggies constructed an image of civilized and privileged whiteness against their portrayed images of either primitive or subservient blackness.

Minstrel shows were a popular diversion on campus and in the community through at least the first half of the twentieth century, though informally they have continued through present day through events such as a blackface “ghetto party” hosted on Martin Luther King, Jr. day in 2003 (Mujtaba) or a video posted online of a white student in blackface imitating a slave in 2007 (Walter). On campus, early twentieth century students frequently put on blackface and performed for the rest of the campus, events that were praised and documented in several yearbooks. Just as blackface minstrelsy in general allowed Americans to shore up white American pride by laughing at the antics of “black” characters, many of whom were portrayed as failing to mimic the cultural practices of whiteness, at A&M blackface minstrelsy was used to establish a proud Aggie culture as blackface characters and caricatures attempted to behave like Aggies. The 1912 yearbook, for instance, reprints the program from one of the year’s

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<sup>30</sup> To say “white American,” Morrison would point out, is already a redundancy since “American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen” (47).

minstrel shows, complete with photos of students in full blackface costume. The finale of the show involved a “fancy military drill” performed by “Captain J. J. Waters and Picked Company of Trained Zouaves” (374). To an audience trained in military maneuvering, the comedy of a bunch of “trained Zouaves” helped to establish pride in the uniquely white military academy being established in central Texas just as it sent the message that these recruits were singularly suited for inclusion by virtue of their race.

If minstrelsy helped to naturalize white roles on campus (just as *playing Indian* helped to naturalize a white settler presence), Aggies still needed to contend with the presence of actual black Texans on campus. Black servanthood was praised and idolized, sending a message that the proper place for blackness at A&M was in the service of whiteness. The 1906 yearbook include an ode to “Uncle Dan,” an African-American laborer who was loved by the cadets for his supposedly selfless service to the campus:

Perhaps you can remember,/You Alumnus, old and gray,/How you came  
here when a Freshman/In the fall of yesterday./Time has wrought her  
many changes,/Recollection has made dim,/But there’s one man you  
remember:/Uncle Dan, of A. and M.

There’s a man for admiration—/Uncle Dan, of A. and M.—/Does the  
work of ten young niggers;/Business is the word for him./Hauls up trunks  
and cleans out barracks;/Does a dozen other things;/And we’ll all  
remember Daniel/With the memory college brings.

Now, when I’m an old, old graduate,/With both feet slipping in the  
grave;/When I slide clean into heaven/(If I happen my soul to save)/When

I sail across the river/In old Charon's trusty barge,/I expect to find old  
Dan there/Hauling trunks up free of charge. (174)

The poem praises Uncle Dan for emulating the qualities of desirable blackness ("does the work of ten young niggers," "hauling trunks up free of charge"). Uncle Dan is beloved precisely because he is such a physically adept worker who presumably serves the white student body out of nothing more than the goodness of his spirit. But notice, also, how the figure of Uncle Dan is used to establish and historical permanence to A&M, such that the addressed audience is "You Alumnus old and gray," a strange description considering the school at this point is merely thirty years old. Suddenly, the school becomes an ancient institution, infused with the pleasant memories of countless generations, and through it all quietly resides Uncle Dan, who in "the memory college brings," continues to haul students' luggage up and down the stairs.<sup>31</sup> A&M becomes timeless and eternal and so does the selfless devotion of black physical labor.

Just as Aggies used blackface and caricature to police appropriate racial behaviors and sociality, they also used drag to police the boundaries of what constituted proper masculine and feminine behavior. Though A&M is frequently referred to as a traditionally all-male school that was not made co-educational until 1963, the truth is that women were enrolled as students at least as early as 1895 (when Ethel Hutson also took the initiative to edit the college's first yearbook). At various points, women were allowed to enroll in classes, though often these classes were limited to summer sessions

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<sup>31</sup> The title "Uncle Dan" participates in a long racist history in the United States in which African-American men are called "Uncle" to reinforce their subservience to white culture (e.g. "Uncle Tom," "Uncle Remus," and "Uncle Ben's Wild Rice").

and qualification for enrollment depended on the prospective student being the daughter of a faculty member. In fact, according to Dethloff, an official policy barring women from full admission did not exist until 1915 when the college's board of directors reacted to the proposal to endow a chair of "domestic science" (411-412). The board's assumption was that, because domestic science was the purview of women (and, indeed, had been proposed by Clara B. Dismukes Vander Las, herself a woman), such an endowment "would make the college coeducational" (412). Thus, even though women continued to participate in classes, edit yearbooks, and contribute to social life, the school nevertheless considered itself "all-male" until 1963.

This masculinist construction meant that A&M had to work to make "Aggie" synonymous with "male." To do so, Aggies unsurprisingly relied on the same rhetorical strategies they used to delineate between internal and external Others as they related to Native Americans and black Texans. In this case, desirable and appropriate femininity was located external to Texas A&M, and internal femininity was something to be policed, often, oddly, by dressing men up as women.

In 1901, the state legislated the creation of the Texas Industrial Institute and College for the Education of White Girls of the State of Texas in the Arts and Sciences to be located in Denton, Texas (Dethloff 182). Though President Ross proposed annexing the proposed women's college to the A&M system, just as Alta Vista/Prairie View had been annexed a few years prior, the school (whose name was later shortened to Texas Woman's University) was given its own board of regents, making it independent of both Texas A&M and the University of Texas. Though Ross failed in his

attempt at incorporating Texas Woman's University into the A&M system, it was nonetheless unofficially adopted by A&M as a "sister" school, providing Aggies with a collection of ideal women from which the various clubs, organizations, and student body could draw their "sweethearts" (182).

Prior to, and somewhat following, the official coeducation of A&M, sweethearts from TWU played a vital role on the College Station campus. Because A&M was ostensibly all-male, sweethearts gave the male cadets a domesticating anchor with which they could, if not contain, at least temper their wild and rugged masculinity. More importantly, though, I contend that these sweethearts were also used to subtly challenge and police the existence of women at Texas A&M.

Sweethearts were always picked from outside Texas Woman's University. As an industrial school training "White Girls of the State of Texas in the Arts and Sciences," TWU was clearly not just a foil for the "Agricultural and Mechanical" education of white men at A&M, it was also seen as a proving ground for proper white femininity in Texas. Proper women would not attend Texas A&M, since proper women had no need for training in the masculine and military knowledges male cadets received. Indeed, the few women who were allowed to enroll in courses at A&M not only had to be daughters of faculty, but they also had to prove that it was unfeasible to attend a comparable women's school, such as Texas Women's University.

A&M thus located an ideal and pure womanhood as existing external to College Station, drawing from TWU for both its ritualized heteronormative pairings (in the form of sweethearts) as well for many of the cadets' personal relationships. Femininity, as the

logic went, was pure and desirable so long as it could be contained outside of Texas A&M. Women, in other words, were definitely an Other, but so long as they remained an external Other, they could retain their desirable and pure feminine characteristics. Yet, how were the cadets and community supposed to reconcile the very real presence of women who lived near them and sat with them in classes?



**Figure 3.3. Male cadets in drag, ca. 1930 (*Dances and Balls*)**

Internal Otherness was a very different matter and Aggies responded by essentially erasing the presence of actual women on campus, replacing it with their own version. Though Aggies drew from TWU for their sweethearts, often pulling from their

sister school for dates to dances and balls, there were also times when Aggies would host dances at which they did not bring dates from the outside. Rather than drawing from the pool of locally available women living on or near campus, though, they chose instead to pull dates from their own ranks. Fish, the term given to first-year cadets, were frequently required to attend these events as dates of the upperclassmen, a practice that involved dressing in drag, complete with dresses, makeup, and women's shoes (see Figure 3.3)

Though this practice was no doubt intended to be an exercise in seniority and humiliation, it also served to send a clear message about femininity at A&M: namely, there was none. It seems counter-intuitive to claim that a cross-dressed male might be intended to convey a message about a lack of femininity. But if Garber is correct in arguing that the cultural appearance of the cross-dressed figure often signals a crisis of category elsewhere, the appearance of the cross-dressed Aggie might signify a crisis of the category of "Aggie," itself. Indeed, the category of Aggie as constituting a privileged white maleness was in crisis since the foundation of the school, and most of the cultural practices and traditions Aggies used to define themselves were done by defining themselves as *not* something else. "We take the opportunity to assure our readers that this is not a mixed school," the editorial<sup>32</sup> to the first yearbook assured readers, establishing from the outset that A&M was white, insofar as it was not black, and, to sell this point, relying on a caricature of a band member forced into blackface because he was "blowing his instrument while our cartoonist was trying to study" (*Olio* 11).

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<sup>32</sup> It is worth mentioning that the author of this editorial might very well have been Ethel Hutson, the first yearbook editor.

Likewise, the school was not Indian, though they took great pleasure in pretending to be. And, as social and legal challenges to the college's masculinity grew, the school and its cadets went to great lengths to establish both the school as decidedly not female.

Cross-dressing was present at many of those crises. For instance, a photo in the 1903 *Long Horn* of the klan-like student group, S.T.B., shows a group of white-robed men standing in a field (Figures 3.4 and 3.5). On closer inspection, though, we can see that these “robes” are actually women’s white dresses, complete with slits up the thigh and lace sleeves. Perhaps this was simply a case of “making-do” with what they had, but the presence of male bodies in women’s dresses as a protest against black cultural incursion certainly signifies a heightened anxiety about not only threats to white supremacy but also what it even meant to be an Aggie.

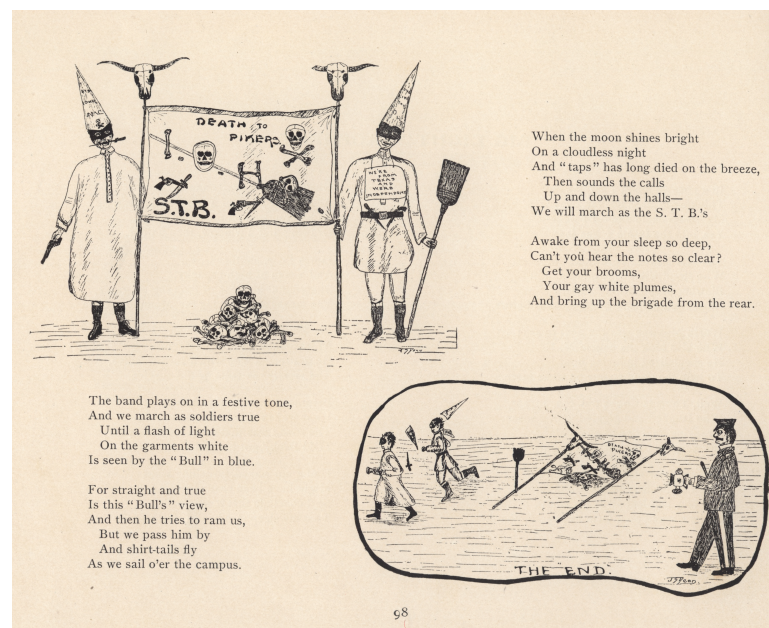


Figure 3.4. Logo and poem in the S.T.B. yearbook spread





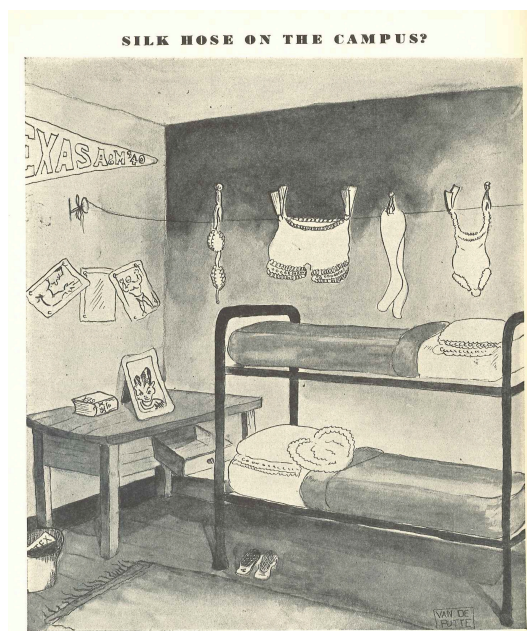
**Figure 3.5. Photo of S.T.B. members**

As the thought of women officially joining A&M continued to rear its head throughout the first half of the twentieth century, cross-dressed male figures continued to emerge in response. A cartoon in the 1934 *Long Horn*, called “Silk Hose on the Campus?” depicted a cadet’s dorm room festooned with frilly women’s underwear, ruffled pillows on the beds, and photos of pin-up girls which have been replaced with posters of nearly-nude muscle men (Figure 3.6). Under the photo an editorial asks:

Shall silk hose, chemise, and other unmentionables of feminine attire take their place beside the sweat shirts, shorts and the other goatly garments of the male clan on the clothesline of A&M College? We, the masculine element of A&M, say NO! Shall the click of high heels blend its echo with the clash and clatter of boots and spurs in the corridors of our heretofore worthy institution? We again say NO! ...

Coeducation at A&M is, for the present, a thing of the past. Another decade will perhaps bring another attempt, but for the present the Aggies are men among men. God rest your souls, little lassies, and some day you may grow up to be Aggies—but not today. Girls, we cannot live without you, but we'll be damned if we'll agree to live with you! (282)

Notice here how the author locates the threat of coeducation with the objects associated with feminine culture. Through the rhetorical device of metonymy, women become “hose, chemise, and other unmentionables,” while men become the clattering boots and spurs of the distinct Aggie cadet uniform. It almost seems that what is threatening is not women, themselves, but the way the juxtaposition of their symbols with the symbols of Aggie masculinity might threaten to dilute the potency of the Aggie symbolic order. Aggie maleness, in other words, can only survive when a feminine Other is held at bay.

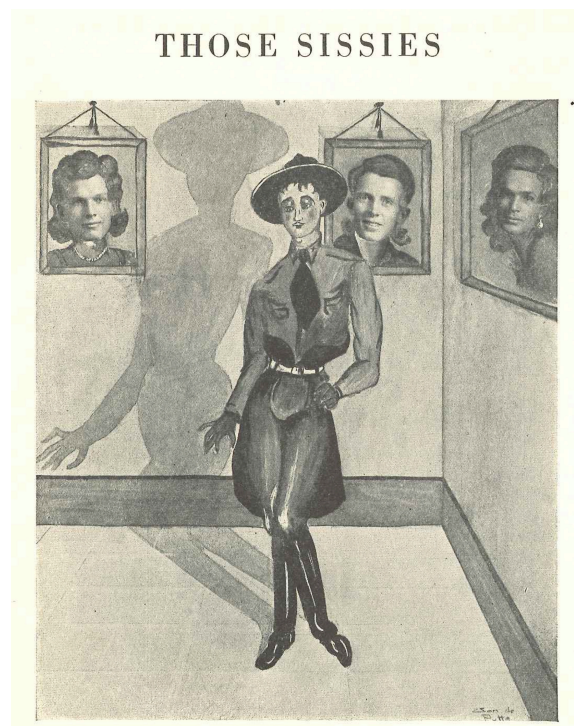


**Figure 3.6. “Silk Hose on the Campus”**

That the crisis is located in the material artifacts of Aggie masculinity can be seen in another depiction of male drag. The drag balls I mentioned earlier sent a subtle message that an external feminine Other was desirable and that an internal feminine Other simply did not exist, at least as was meaningful to Aggie culture as a whole. As coeducational threats became more frequent and salient, though, Aggies began to worry about what an internal feminine Other might look like. “Those Sissies,” another cartoon from the 1934 yearbook, depicts an androgynous figure standing in a feminine pose while wearing a version of the Aggie cadet uniform with high-waisted, “drop-front” pants, and one hand coquettishly propped on the hips just below a wasp-thin waist. Behind the figure hang framed portraits of male faces superimposed on female silhouettes, with pearls and curled hair-dos (Figure 3.7). The caption below the image explains the tableaux:

Among the many changes on our campus this year, and one that we hope to see eliminated by next year, was the appearance of “drop-front” breeches on a group of our radical seniors. These effeminate young men were tired of the old style and endeavored to present something new to the student body. It is noted by the authorities that this fad started just as co-education was introduced on the campus, and since co-education failed, we also expect to see no more of these pants. It also seems strange that the boys (?) wore these pants and not the girls. (283)

Coeducation will introduce a new set of symbols and practices, which, in turn, will threaten to undermine an Aggie masculinity which can only exist in the absence of femininity. The presence of women, in other words, turns young men into effeminate “boys (?)” simply by its proximity. Aggie masculinity, according to this logic, must be tremendously fragile.



**Figure 3.7. “Those Sissies”**

A&M, of course, did eventually become coeducational and racially integrated. By 1963, A&M had officially opened its doors to all women, in part as a response to declining enrollment at the all-male school (Dethloff 415). Following the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954, A&M also quietly and

without much fanfare opened its doors to African Americans. Interestingly, at the same time as it allowed women to fully matriculate, the school also changed its policy of mandatory military service, reserving the Corps of Cadets for male students. Eventually, women were permitted to join the corps, first as a separate outfit in 1974, eventually gaining full participation in 1985, following a lengthy and bitter lawsuit by cadet Melanie Zentgraf, who described a culture of hostility, discrimination, and sexism within the corps (Adams 254-57).

Texas A&M's response to the integration of non-male and non-white peoples seemed to be a tightening of ranks and the withholding of certain elements of Aggie white heteropatriarchy from individuals who did not represent this. From the creation of Prairie View A&M and Texas Women's University as a way of solving the problem of equal education to the reserving of Corps service for men upon the advent of coeducation, A&M has tended to locate an "authentic" Agginess in an increasingly shrinking center as threats from the outside continue to move inward. Though the college and Corps is now fully integrated and coeducational, one of the last remaining bastions of Aggie heteropatriarchy is a group of five individuals known as the "yell leaders," and it is the problem of the yell leaders that will transition me to a discussion of *rural drag* in College Station.

### ***Rural Drag and the Protection of White Settler Heteropatriarchy***

A&M lore has it that yell leaders were first introduced in 1907 during a football game to which a number of women from Texas Women's University had been invited. As the Yell Leader organization recounts:

during one football game the Aggies were being out-scored so badly that the ladies were threatening to leave the game from boredom. Therefore, the upperclassmen ordered the freshmen, or “fish,” to find a way to entertain the bored ladies. The freshmen raided a janitor’s closet and changed into the white coveralls they found there, and began leading the crowd in yells from the track in front of the stands. The freshmen got so much attention from the ladies that it was decided that only upperclassmen would be allowed to participate in the entertainment in the future. (“About the Yell Leaders”)

A&M takes great pride in this tradition, often noting that it is one of the few schools without a cheerleading squad. The white janitorial jumpsuits have remained a mainstay of the practice, and yell leaders are easily identified by these outfits as well as the denim overalls they wear, covered in A&M colors and brands (Figure 3.8).

At A&M, yell leaders represent the school through their supposed hypermasculinity and hyper-heterosexuality, an interesting development considering they originated when a group of upperclassmen tried to humiliate some freshmen by forcing them to fill in as cheerleaders, a role traditionally reserved for women. In the same way that rural culture was able to publically substitute for Indianness as a marker of authentic Texan-Americanness, the Aggies uniforms—clothing of both a working class and rural identity—simultaneously mark the yell leaders as “true” Aggies. Not surprisingly, the yell leaders have remained remarkably insulated from the social and cultural changes the rest of the campus underwent. To date, there have only been two

African-American yell leaders, Ronnie McDonald, elected in 1993, and Arouna “Boo Boo” Davies, elected in 2001 under some controversy when it was discovered that he didn’t meet academic eligibility requirements (“Yell Leader’s Election”). No woman has ever been elected yell leader.



**Figure 3.8. Yell leader in denim overalls with the “Farmers Fight” slogan  
(Yell Leaders and Yell Practice)**

Yell leaders occupy an interesting rhetorical position. On the one hand, their uniforms and highly stylized yell routines are meant to signify their campus pride, school spirit, and Aggie authenticity. On the other hand, they, themselves, are symbols for the rest of the university. In other words, *rural drag* is being practiced twice: once by the individual and again by the community.

In fact, this is the mechanism by which *rural drag* operates. Individuals adorn themselves with the symbols of rural culture, with the assumption that their community

or audience will correctly interpret this to see the individual as a member of a normatively white and heterosexual group of settler citizens. *Rural drag*, in fact, is most evident when this contract is breached, as can be seen by a 2009 controversy surrounding the actions of a group of yell leaders on a trip to an away game at Kansas State University.

In the fall of 2009, a video was posted online of four uniformed yell leaders in a car lip synching and dancing to a song by Günther, a Swedish pop singer, called “The Ding Dong Song” (Fred Fred). The lyrics, which include the refrain “Oh, you touch my tralala/Mmm, my ding ding dong” and “Come near me, don’t fear me/I just can’t get enough of you, boy.” The video was, all things considered, pretty gay, and it quickly went viral, with many of A&M’s rivals mocking the yell leaders for confirming what many people had thought for a long time: the yell leaders, with their immaculate outfits, choreographed routines, and all-American good looks were perhaps trying too hard (Knight).

The video was a large embarrassment to the university and campus community, and the official response to the video was rather remarkable considering the yell leaders had not broken any laws or regulations. Administrators responded by temporarily suspending Rusty Thompson, the yell leader advisor and Associate Director of Student Activities, who also appeared in the video, for allowing the recording to take place. Thompson and the yell leaders also issued apologies for their behavior (McPhail). The message sent was loud and clear: there was no room for queerness at Texas A&M, and



by queering a symbol of Aggie masculinity, the yell leaders had embarrassed themselves, their fellow students, and the entire university.

Just as they did with discourses of Indianness, blackness, and womanness, Aggies have constructed dualisms of internal and external Otherness in relation to queerness. Queer desire and queer identities are almost always depicted with rhetorics of external Otherness, and this externality is frequently located in urban areas. When internal queerness emerges in College Station, it is seen as an intrusion, a reflection of the cosmopolitan taint of nearby urban areas such as Austin, Dallas, or Houston. In a sense, College Station relies on the queerness of these areas in order to maintain its identity as a ‘traditional’ and authentically Texan enclave. In response to Austin’s ubiquitous slogan “Keep Austin Weird,” for example, College Station offers t-shirts declaring “Keep College Station Normal” (Figure 3.9). Considering this is a school where “normal” at one time meant dressing in women’s clothing and dancing with other men, the claim seems rather forced.



**Figure 3.9. “Keep College Station Normal” shirts for sale at Texas A&M (personal photo)**

But that was also the point. The cadets' drag balls, infused as they may have been with homoerotic desire, were also permissible precisely because queerness was submerged beneath a veil of tradition and authenticity. It is no coincidence that, as the traditions of A&M were threatened by non-white and non-male identities, Aggies figured these threats in decidedly queer ways (see, for example, "Those Sissies" in Figure 3.7).

Look at the way queerness is mapped in the following editorial published in *The Battalion* in 2009. That year, a "glory hole" had been discovered in a men's room in the Academic Building.<sup>33</sup> To the queer community, the discovery wasn't exactly news; the administration had been patching the hole for years only to have it re-drilled soon after. When the general study body found out, though, the reaction was one of both revilement and shocked disbelief. Richard Creecy, a student writer for *The Battalion*, engaged in a bit of investigative journalism to get to the bottom of this shocking hidden tradition and published an article wherein he wrote:

Most Aggies pride themselves on the aesthetic appeal of campus. Both antiquated and modernly designed buildings are surrounded by large open cobblestone walkways and courtyards dotted with old growth trees, at least for now. But this lovely campus has a dark side some will find hard to swallow. Often as most students go about their business, illicit and

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<sup>33</sup> A "glory hole" is a hole cut in a wall or partition which allows for anonymous oral sex, frequently between two men.

anonymous sex occurs publicly in the very buildings we call home.

(Creecy)

Creecy goes on to explain that “as early as the eighties” anonymous public sex has been happening on campus. Of course, for Creecy, “anonymous public sex” only means homosexual sex. He relays the stories of a “mortified” professor who happened to stumble upon a group of men engaged in sexual activity in a public restroom. He even goes so far as to interview the poster of an anonymous ad seeking sex on Craigslist, an online classified board. Creecy concludes that this phenomenon is the result of the college’s “open door policy” as a public institution and that A&M was perfectly located at the mid-point between “Dallas, Austin, and Houston.” “There seems to be,” he warns, “a larger number of homosexuals in the area than the general public realizes.”

Queerness, as Creecy sees it, comes from outside of Aggieland; it would be inconceivable for queerness to emerge fully formed from within. Additionally, queerness, which is also illicit and covert, originates from very specific places outside of College Station, specifically “Dallas, Austin, and Houston,” and it is A&M’s misfortune to be so conveniently located in between these three cities. Further, queerness is new, it is modern, and it is antithetical to the authentic historicism of Texas A&M. Hidden in the shadows of the “old growth” oak trees, a sinisterly modern and urban sexual identity is starting to infiltrate not only our campus but our “home.” Creecy’s hyperbole reflects a general consensus about not only College Station but rural culture at large. The rural, if left alone, would always be intrinsically straight. The presence of queerness can only signify an invasion from the queer urban periphery.

Rurality, then, is threatened as a symbol of potent heterosexuality, just as it had been diluted as a symbol of pure white patriarchy. If a yell leader can sing about his tralala, if a woman can serve as a cadet, and if we can't tell if there's a homosexual under our very noses, then clearly our rhetorical practices must adapt. *Rural drag* responds to this rhetorical crisis by taking rurality, which used to be able to signify white settler heteropatriarchy on its own, and rehabilitates it by affixing to it more overt markers of virile heteronormativity.

Whereas before, *rural drag* was able to rely on a simple one-to-one equivalency between rural artifacts and white heteronormativity (which often coded as white hypermasculinity), now this equivalency is more tenuous. Driving a truck, for example, which, as our jokes still attest to, used to at least replace, if not outright represent, the phallic potency of the driver, is no longer necessarily such an easy sell. Women drive trucks (and, indeed, have always driven trucks), which does not necessarily decrease the phallic potency of the truck but instead, and inappropriately, transfers this phallic potency to the woman, reversing the hierarchies of settler heteropatriarchy that rural culture had long assumed. The *rural drag* solution? Slap some testicles to the truck hitch (Figure 3.10).

Truck Nutz, fabricated and molded testicles that can be attached to the truck hitch under the bumper, are more than an uncomfortable distraction to those stuck driving behind the truck. They are also a way of reforging the link between rurality and heteronormativity. In hanging these "nutz" from the bumper, the audience is reminded that trucks are indubitably masculine and, considering the size of the "nutz," assumedly

virile. Too, as you can see from the photo below, Truck Nutz come in a number of colors and patterns, and the repeating American flag pattern plastered on this specimen hints that the rural masculinity of the truck's driver is also, and undoubtedly, an American masculinity. In dangling a pair of patriotic testicles from the chrome bumper of a Ford, a rhetoric of *rural drag* attempts to put back into alignment the constellation of "traditional" Americanism, rurality, and masculinity.



**Figure 3.10. American flag-themed “Truck Nutz” (personal photo)**

In College Station, *rural drag* must work overtime to keep the category crises that buffet American rhetorics rurality at bay. With a non-student population of over 97,000 (which can grow by over 40,000 during the school year), a research-I university employing an incredibly diverse and cosmopolitan workforce, and a significant international student and researcher population, College Station should hardly be able to

claim an ethos based on rurality. Yet, because its traditions and identity are so engrained in a supposedly agrarian past, the town has clung to its association with rural culture. The Northgate district, a strip of bars, restaurants, and shops on the northern edge of campus, is a pastiche of rural and western tropes and modern club aesthetics, as “Old West Saloon” storefront façades give way to absinthe “apothecaries” and hookah bars.

One of the largest bars in the Northgate district is “Daisy Dukes,” a country-western dance club with an “Old West” wooden façade that looks like something from the television show *Gunsmoke*. Yet, even the name reveals the rhetoric of *rural drag* at work. Rurality and authenticity can be found in the denim short-shorts worn by Catherine Bach in the *Dukes of Hazzard*. Just as the truck can reflect the masculinity of the driver, the (minimal) clothes of rural culture can reflect the femininity of the wearer. Indeed, the bar hits this point home when it hosts its regular “Boots and Bikinis” contest (Figure 3.11).



**Figure 3.11. “Boots and Bikinis Contest” advertised at Daisy Dukes in College Station (personal photo)**

*Rural drag* thus affixes a collection of sexualized body parts to the artifacts of rural culture in an attempt to reconnect rurality with its supposedly heteronormative roots. Whether through a pair of fabricated testicles chained to the bumper of a truck or the contours of the sexualized (and judged) female body standing in a pair of boots (or “Dukes”), *rural drag* aims to remind us that rural bodies are and always have been straight. Of course, the very existence of *rural drag* belies its own claims, since it only appears when rural bodies suddenly might be queer. And, indeed, *rural drag* is really only a pink pair of Truck Nutz away from having to start all over again.

### **Speaking Back to Rural Drag: From a Queer Woman of Color Perspective**

At one level, the elements of rural drag I have examined to this point – the boots and bikini contests, the yell leaders, and the truck nutz – may seem like artifacts in a treatise on elements of popular culture, an attempt to find some historical and cultural coherence in a plane of objects and practices, à la Foucault and *The Order of Things*. My goal, to this point, has been to reveal a certain coherence to, a sort of unconscious intent behind, a set of cultural rhetorical practices that are simultaneously tied to a sense of place, even as the location of this place is perpetually deferred. In the next chapter, I interrogate some of the mechanisms behind this displacement through an analysis of the national/local discourses that permeate country-western music. In this chapter and the previous one, I have focused very specifically on one place, College Station, particularly Texas A&M, because in order to understand *rural drag* as a rhetorical practice, it is essential to understand how it simultaneously responds to local and national discourses of the rural in the United States.

While I have discussed at length the histories of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and settler colonization that inform these practices and led to such groups as the Kream and Kow Klub, I want to be very clear that these histories are not simply past activities that only give us an interesting vantage point from which to see the rhetorical deployment of rural drag. These histories of violence, marginalization, privilege, and oppression are not located solely in the past but are, instead, recreated and actualized through *rural drag*'s conventions and locations. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the supposed invisibility of heteropatriarchy makes for an ideal base for settler projects. Likewise, *rural drag*'s seemingly natural relationship to heteronormativity and rural white identity gives it an aura of the mundane that belies its role in perpetuating violence on queer, non-white, non-settler bodies. To conclude this chapter, I want to explore the ways in which the very identities that *rural drag* denies might find ways to speak back to this reality.

American poet Crystal Boson reveals the hidden reality of racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence upon which the performance of *rural drag* is built in *The Queer Texas Prayerbook*, her collection of poems about the discursive interplay between violent rhetorics of religion, white supremacy, and homophobia in central Texas. In *The Queer Texas Prayerbook*, Boson, who was a graduate student in English at Texas A&M and taught at the university for several years, offers a series of rural vignettes, many of them set in iconic locations in or around College Station, Texas. As a collection, *Prayerbook* looks for meaning in the violence of the rural mundane, and Boson's



interrogation of this violent mundaneness is also an interrogation of the racialized and sexualized violence that *rural drag* perpetuates on rural bodies and minds.

Through her poetry, Boson engages a rhetorical resistance, what Brad Peters calls a “*counter-rhetoric*,” to the violence upon which the rhetoric of *rural drag* is built (111). Instead of merely writing against the racist and heterosexist ideologies so often associated with rural culture, Boson engages the rhetoric of *rural drag* in her poems, articulating a queer Texan experience that is as informed by the realities of racism and settler colonialism as it is by homophobia. To do so, Boson invokes *memoria*, what Victor Villanueva calls “the mother of the muses, the most important of the rhetorical offices” (*Memoria*, 16). Boson calls forth from the rural Texan landscape the memories of queer folk, of women, and of people of color, forcing her readers to remember the histories of colonization, racism, and heteropatriarchy infused within the land itself.

The collection is bookended by two poems about the droughts that are all too common to this region of Texas: “how the gays pray for rain” and “how the breeders get rain.” Both poems explore queer and non-queer reactions to Texas’s recurring droughts, while at the same time exposing the failure of settler colonial heteropatriarchy to make good on the utopic futures it promised. In “how the gays pray for rain,” the poem that opens *The Queer Texas Prayerbook*, Boson writes:

we know the meaning of august, Lord  
‘cause our tongues are dead birds  
dried in our fathers’ dug wells

and our hands the last of green grass

give us pardon (1)

The landscape of “how the gays pray for rain” appears nearly post-apocalyptic, the barren lands devoid of moisture and vegetation. Yet Boson, in setting it within “the meaning of august,” reveals that there is nothing “post” about this apocalypse; the drought is and always will recur. The drought persists despite the promises of “our fathers,” and our wells are still dry and the grass is still dying. The real tragedy, as revealed in the poem, lies not in the dead grass, or the empty wells, or the parched tongues, per se, but in the commonplace and mundane, in the fact that, despite every promise to the contrary, the world still dries up all around us. The prayer that “the gays” pray is not a prayer of petition, or thanksgiving, or even adoration. Rather, it is one of expiation, a plea for pardon, and a potential recognition of one’s complicity in perpetuating the cycle.

The contrast between the recognition of complicity and the deferral of responsibility is a common thread in *The Queer Texas Prayerbook*. Contrast the expiatory stance of self-denial in “how the gays pray for rain” with a distinctively more familiar stance in “how the breeders get rain,” Boson’s final poem of the *Prayerbook*:

they reckon it’s for too long been dry

‘cause the dust now welcomes chaw

men will gather in their trucks

bidding come to wives and dogs

tongues juicy from red meat, beer

felt hated kin bring woodsigns  
just sayin' God hates fags  
retchin' all necks upwards  
they call Him by His first name (21)

There are two major differences between the “how the breeders get rain” and “how the gays pray for rain.” The first is the stance of the protagonists (“the breeders” and “the gays”) in their relationship to God, reflected in the titles to both poems, in which “the gays pray for rain” and “the breeders get rain.” In first poem, “the gays” come to God with an awareness of their place in a historical progression, or cycle, of droughts and the acts of their ancestors. They recognize their complicity and seek forgiveness. In “breeders,” “the breeders” lack an awareness of the historical long game; the drought is a phenomenon of the present and a problem that must be dealt with in the present. Nor is there any instance of expiation; instead, “the breeders” gather together to demand an end to the draught, calling “Him by His first name.”<sup>34</sup>

The other difference between these two poems is the role that the material artifacts of rural life play in each. In “the gays,” rural queer life is reflected in the parched landscape, the empty wells, and the tongues like “dead birds.” Queer rurality, in this sense, is intimately aware of the physical contours of place. In “the breeders,” on the

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<sup>34</sup> Boson deals with this scene elsewhere in “God responds to rick perry and his national day of prayer in a language he can understand,” the poem included in the epigraph of the first chapter of this dissertation. Originally written for *The Queer Texas Prayerbook*, “God responds” was published instead in *When We Become Weavers: Queer Female Poets on the Midwestern Experience*. The poem is a response to Governor Perry’s declaration that April 22-24, 2011 would officially be “Days of Prayer for Rain in the State of Texas,” in light of a protracted drought that sent wildfires ravaging across the state. As of February 2013, significant portions of the state are still under drought conditions.

other hand, rural life is a collection of material objects and practices, the landscape extending as far as the beer or wooden sign in the hand of the “breeder.” The drought, and by extension, an awareness of the land, only becomes evident when the materiality of rural life is forced into alignment with meteorological changes. Tellingly, the response is not one of critical engagement with the assumptions and practices of rural culture, but rather a protracted entrenchment into the materiality of rural life – men run to their trucks, wives and dogs in tow; food and beer are passed; and rural homophobia gets hefted up by the “hated kin” of the Westboro Baptist Church. In a sense, the automatic response to any threat to the materiality of rural culture in this poem is to simply cling even tighter to that materiality.

The distinctions between these two poems helps to illustrate a central component of the logic of rural drag: the greater the threat to its existence, the more overt and explicit its response, and Boson uses *The Queer Texas Prayerbook* to unpack this dynamic, forcing the reader to recognize the materiality of rural life as always implicated in the settler histories of racism, sexism, and homophobia upon which it was founded. *Rural drag* cannot be taken for granted as merely a blind and desperate reaction to a perceived loss of privilege. Or, rather, it should not be dismissed because of this desperation. Indeed, privilege is at its most dangerous, its most invidious, its most aggressive when it feels that it might be in danger. At the same time, the lie that privilege tells itself is that it always *is* in danger and therefore must be defended.

As Boson’s poetry tells us, and the histories of rurality in College Station remind us, American rurality is a practice very much tied to and supported by the ongoing

histories of racialized oppression, heterosexism, and genocidal settler colonialism in the United States. It is also not something “out there” that doesn’t exist in all of our communities, even communities that might not identify as rural. As I discuss in the next chapter, discourses of rurality are central to our construction of an American *ethos*, implicating all of us. The ways in which we talk about and respond to “the rural,” even from an urban environment, can and does have repercussions on discourses of rights, recognition, and citizenship in the United States.

## CHAPTER IV

### “SHE THINKS MY TRACTOR’S SEXY”: *RURAL DRAG* AND COUNTRY MUSIC

in the month of march we give thanks  
to our good Ford F-350  
who much like that fella Jesus  
is so tired of our shit  
but still kinda loves us and works  
despite our good intentions ‘cause  
it’s his fuckin’ job  
– Crystal Boson, “truck month”

In 2010, country music singer and star Chely Wright sat down with NBC’s Natalie Morales to discuss her new autobiography, *Like Me: Confessions of a Heartland Singer*. The autobiography received a significant amount of attention due to the fact that it marked what reviewer Jack Feerick and others said was the first time “a major Nashville country star would come out of the closet” (Feerick). Though Wright was not the first queer or LGBT artist in the country music industry, her coming out did mark a significant moment in the industry’s history of promoting a distinctly heteronormative *ethos*. In her interview with Morales, Wright tried to explain why the process of coming out was so difficult, even in an era of increased visibility and activism for LGBT and queer peoples in the United States. “Country music has been described as being about

God and family and country,” Wright said, “and for some reason people think that you can’t be gay and have those beliefs. That’s why I have to do this. I have to be one step forward” (Morales).

In this observation, Wright manages to identify a key rhetorical convention through which the country music industry constructs a “country” *ethos*. Though identifying a country *ethos* built around “God and family and country” would hardly be considered revelatory to even the most casual observer of country-western music, I contend in this chapter that it is this interplay of rhetorics of religion, citizenship, and heteropatriarchy that undergird a more pervasive rhetorical performance of *rural drag* in country music, a performance that also helps to support and promote national discourses about the role of rurality in the United States.

In Chapter Three, I examined *rural drag* as a local rhetorical practice shaped by the specific histories and identities embedded in a certain space (College Station, Texas). In this chapter, I examine *rural drag* as it constitutes part of a national discourse of rurality and American life. Just as the *rural drag* of College Station requires a certain settler construction of the space of College Station, a national *rural drag* rhetoric makes reference to rural space, but instead of locating a specific space, it constructs what I call a “rural imaginary” that acts as a symbolic construction of American rurality through to which anyone can make reference in claiming an authentic American identity. Country-western music is one vehicle by which this rural imaginary is both constructed and delivered to a mass audience.

This chapter unpacks the white supremacist and settler fantasies of heteropatriarchy that inform the rhetoric of *rural drag* in contemporary country music. As I discussed in Chapter Three, *rural drag* is an attempt to stabilize binaristic categories in crisis. It is through this process that country music actually develops its reputation as a normatively white, straight, and settler genre—there is nothing inherently straight, white, or settler about country music, but its designation as an “American” art form has meant that disruptions of white settler heteropatriarchy within the genre are responded to by “dressing up straight” in the artifacts of an imagined stable rural culture. Thus, country music’s straight and white patriarchal identity is actually framed by the non-exclusive emergence of queer, non-white, and feminist identities and practices within the genre.

Country music has what Bill Malone and Jocelyn Neal describe as a “long-standing tradition of trying to reinvent its present without disowning any of its past” (467). This tradition means that the past continually intrudes into country music’s present, sometimes as critique, often as homage, and always as a self-conscious attempt to establish roots within a decidedly rural and American sense of history. As such, in this chapter I do not intend to “trace” an historical development of *rural drag* in country music because the genre, much like *rural drag*, is constantly reinventing itself while appearing to remain stable. Instead, I am exploring the ways a discourse of rurality clothed in the rhetoric of *rural drag* continues to appear in and shape country music.

Country music, as a musical genre, relies heavily on a set of tropes that, collectively, help to define the genre. Country living, truck driving, poverty, and farm



life, for example, are some of the lenses through which country music focuses and transmits its messages about life. Kenneth Burke has argued that, through the use of tropes, language users are able to come to a sense of truth about the world and the “characters” that populate it.<sup>35</sup> Through the use of tropes (which Burke divides into the “four master tropes” of *metaphor*, *metonymy*, *synecdoche*, and *irony*), characters are juxtaposed, arranged, and qualified in relation to each other in order to come to a “discovery and description of ‘the truth’” (421). For Burke, “truth” is constructed socially, through linguistic ordering and representation.

Because country music contributes much to the U.S. national discourse of rurality, an analysis of tropes in the genre is crucial to understanding how we, as a nation, construct a “truth” about rurality, and by extension, “America.” As Villanueva notes, “our assumptions about how the world works are influenced by—might even be created by—the language we receive and use. Large things. World views. Now, if that’s the case, then we’re also affected by the language we don’t use” (“Rhetorics of the New Racism”). Villanueva’s point, that “truth” is more than a matter of the linguistic tools we use—it is also constrained by the linguistic tools we *cannot* use—speaks to the discursive formations of rurality present and represented in country music. The construction of rurality through its relationship to whiteness, heterosexuality, and settler identity means that alternatives to this “truth” are linguistically forestalled. And because “the rural” acts an imaginative repository for what is quintessentially “American,” then

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<sup>35</sup> Burke uses “‘character’ as a general term for whatever can be thought of as distinct (any thing, pattern, situation, structure, nature, person, object, act, rôle, process, event, etc.)” (422).

what we leave out and what we include in discourses of rurality have implications for who and what we include in “America.”

The rhetoric of *rural drag* as it operates in country music is almost tautological in its structure. On the one hand, country-western musicians and songwriters frequently employ *rural drag* to help naturalize their claims to an authentically pure American *ethos* built on white settler heteropatriarchy. On the other hand, country music itself could be identified as a key ingredient in many *rural drag* performances, such that listening to or performing country music becomes a distinctively rural American tradition (even, and especially, outside of rural-identified spaces). Because of this, we can frequently see country western artists referring to country music and other country music icons in their own songs as a way of establishing a country credibility as both a performer and an American. Not surprisingly, because *rural drag* is a performance that supports and is supported by systems of heteropatriarchy, and because country music is both informed by and a key element of *rural drag*, when country artists employ country music’s self-referential *rural drag* strategies, they often do so by situating themselves as the cultural inheritors of an imagined line of country-western progenitors. Settler fantasies based on cultural inheritance and naturalized claims to land swirl throughout much of the genre, allowing a discourse of rurality to emerge that is distinctly white, straight, and settler.

Country music’s development in the United States has been shaped by the nation’s settler colonial trajectory. Malone and Neal have traced the genre’s origins in *Country Music, U.S.A.*, which Malone originally published in 1968 and which has had

an outsized impact on academic treatments of country and folk musical history. Country music, Malone and Neal argue, emerged from a rural Southern agrarian tradition of folk music. This rural folk musical form was a *mélange* of several musical traditions, including the songs brought to the Americas by European settlers from across the British Isles, songs which were modified both in content and form to reflect the culture and daily experiences of rural white settlers in the Americas. At the same time, this rural settler musical form was also influenced by non-white and non-British musical traditions, most notably African instrumental and lyrical traditions, such as banjos, spirituals, jazz, and the like.

In fact, folk/country's evolution closely mirrors the implementation of settler projects in the United States. As Malone and Neal note:

The folk music of the South was a blending of cultural strains, British at its core, but overlain and intermingled with the musical contributions of other ethnic and racial groups who inhabited the vast southern region. As they inched their way across the Southern frontier, British migrants came in contact with other peoples, whom they often fought, traded, and worked with, made love to, and sang and danced with: the Germans of the Great Valley of Virginia; the Indians of the back country; Spanish, French, and mixed-breed elements in the Mississippi Valley; the Mexicans of South Texas; and, of course, blacks everywhere. Southern folk music was touched and energized by the contributions of all of these people, and country music still bears the marks of these influences. (4)

Folk and country music's development maps closely the imposition of settler colonization and white supremacy in the Americas. As settlers pushed westward, appropriating the lands and cultural practices of the people they encountered and displaced, so too did folk music. And just as the settler colonial project was funded by the labor of black slaves, folk music also made extensive use of the musical and cultural work produced by slaves and African Americans in the United States. As such, country music continues to be informed by the settler and white supremacist histories upon which it was founded, even as many country musicians and artists find ways to use the musical form to speak back to and challenge these histories.

### **So Proud to Play Indian: Settler Fantasies in Country Music**

As a genre, country music often acts out the settler fantasies of its audience. Indeed, the history of the musical form's development follows the settler path of cultural appropriation, especially the rhetorical practice of *playing Indian* discussed in the previous chapter. Country music is traditionally seen as an "authentic" American musical form, though this authenticity and Americanness is specifically framed as the authentic Americanness of white performers and audiences. This focus on white American authenticity has been used to defend conservative views of race, gender, sexuality, and patriotism promoted in the genre, as if, much like rural communities, there is something core to the country-western form in which white American identity is not only located but also protected.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> As an example, in 2003, Natalie Maines, lead singer of the Dixie Chicks, told a London audience that she was "ashamed" that then-President George W. Bush was from Texas. The

Yet the genre's very roots contradict this idea. Many of the musical forms, instruments, and arrangements of country music can be traced, not to the romantic practices of lone cowboys plucking guitars on a moonlit prairie night or the banjo-picking Appalachian sitting on his front porch, but to the musical traditions and techniques of African slaves and Native Americans in the settler United States as well as the British folk songs brought to the land by settlers from the United Kingdom. While this prototypically "American" musical form reaches back to the earliest days of settlement and settler expansion in the United States, it does not necessarily look like the romanticized and Anglicized form we are so often presented with today.

Much in the same way that other communities and individuals have staked claims to American authenticity by donning the fabricated identities and practices associated with Native Americans, it should not come as a surprise when country musicians "play Indian" in an attempt to situate themselves as "true country" and, in turn, true Americans. One way that country artists assert their membership in a genre that constantly frets over authenticity is by claiming or playing at being Indian. Because the country *ethos* is built so predominantly upon the historicity of the genre, rhetorical tropes such as *playing Indian* and *rural drag* continue to emerge, either as country-western artists reimagine the songs of earlier musicians, imagine themselves as living in a present but distant past, or lament a rural and rugged history that has been displaced by a superficial urbanity (that often pays these musicians' bills). Singing with at least one

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comment sparked a backlash against the Dixie Chicks, and their music was banned by many country music radio stations, with some even organizing bonfires and smashings to destroy Dixie Chick CDs ("Dixies Dropped").

eye on the past is a large part of what distinguishes the genre thematically from other musical forms, a move which can be molded to fit both romanticizing songs (such as Toby Keith's "I Should've Been a Cowboy") and more critical ones (such as Reba McEntire's "Fancy" and its critique of gendered rural poverty). As I argued in the last chapter, rurality and *rural drag* began to displace *playing Indian* as a way of imagining an "authentic" American that resolves the savage Otherness that threatened to surface in the pretend Indian. In country music, partly because the genre is used as an element of *rural drag* and has to constantly justify its rurality even as it justifies its Americanness, *playing Indian* and *rural drag* often occur side-by-side.

Indian themes have long been a staple of country music, allowing artists to romanticize the vanished Native, prop up Indians in opposition to cowboys, and/or pretend to be Indian for the length of a song. Otis Dewey "Slim" Whitman's song, "Indian Love Call" (1954), for example, places a love-lorn romance between two lovers under an umbrella of Indianness.<sup>37</sup> Were it not for the title, the song might not be read as anything other than a simple ditty about pining love. As "Indian Love Song," though, Whitman's Appalachian yodeling transforms the song into a faux-exotic (or just exotic) cultural practice between two Indian lovers.

In addition to naturalizing country artists' claims to authenticity, *playing Indian* also allows settler romances to adopt an air of timeless inevitability. "Indian Love Call" not only gave Whitman a chance to tap into a mid-century fascination with the myth of

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<sup>37</sup> Whitman did not originate "Indian Love Call." It first appeared in the musical *Rose-Marie* as a supposed Indian legend of Indian men singing down a mountain at their lovers. Chet Atkins had recorded and released an instrumental version of the song the year before Whitman.

the vanished Indian, it also made the romance at the center of the song feel timeless to a settler audience who, in turn, could imagine themselves as this Indian couple. At the same time as Whitman was *playing Indian*, so was his audience.

Since *playing Indian*, as Rayna Green reminds us, requires that actual Indians are removed and/or killed, country music's constant deployment of this rhetoric highlights how the genre is often used to bolster the United States' continual projects of settlement, displacement, and genocide. One of the most egregious examples of this is Tim McGraw's "Indian Outlaw" (1994). In "Indian Outlaw," McGraw adopts the persona of a mixed-blood, bad-boy Indian, "half Cherokee and Choctaw," constantly getting in trouble for chasing after other Native women who "gather 'round my teepee/late at night, trying to catch a peek at me/in nothing but my buffalo briefs." The song is a mélange of de-contextualized Indian tropes with which McGraw surrounds his protagonist as a way of tying his virility and heteromascularity to the relationship of Natives to land. McGraw's "outlaw" passes around a pipe (to "smoke you some"), beats on a tom-tom in his wigwam, is chased off by a medicine man for pursuing a woman, and offers to let another Native woman "ride my pony double." As a country song, "Indian Outlaw" also speaks to McGraw's country authenticity in describing his "paw-paw" as the village chieftan who takes his orders from his "maw-maw." As McGraw sings, "she makes him walk the line," clearly a reference to Johnny Cash and his wife June Carter, who penned Cash's mega-hit, "Walk the Line."

By the end of the song, though, it becomes clear that McGraw's Indian play, and his subsequent claims to country authenticity and cultural inheritance are actually made

possible by the earlier rhetorical death of Indians. “Indian Outlaw,” a song of ribald heteropassions and troublemaking, ends by sampling the chorus of John D. Loudermilk’s 1963 “Lament of the Cherokee Reservation Indian,” a song made popular in 1971 by Paul Revere and the Raiders:

Cherokee people!

Cherokee tribe!

So proud to live!

So proud to die!

Loudermilk’s song is a first-person plural lament of the forced removal and then subsequent assimilation of the Cherokee people by the U. S. government, mourning the cultural loss that was facilitated by the replacement of teepees with houses and the outsourcing of beads to Japan. Though the juxtaposition of McGraw’s sexually charged Indian play with Loudermilk’s lament of lost Cherokee culture might seem incongruous, it actually makes perfect settler sense: Cherokee “culture,” if not Cherokee people, had to be rhetorically erased by Loudermilk in order for McGraw to reclaim these signifiers for his own settler sex shenanigans. Indian-ness was now a “country” signifier, with country music and its rural relationship replacing Indian-ness as the prototypically “American” identity.

### **Rednecks, Okies, and Tractors: Country Music and *Rural Drag***

Just as *rural drag* became a more culturally expedient way of locating an American authenticity than *playing Indian* did in College Station, in country music, a discourse of rurality emerged that artists and audiences have used to establish an *ethos* of



normative rural Americanism. Though the rhetoric of *rural drag* is manifested in a myriad of ways throughout the history of the genre, I focus in this section on three songs in particular that help us to understand *rural drag*'s specific emergence as a sexual rhetoric twined with the ideologies of the settler United States: Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee" (1969), Kenny Chesney's "She Thinks My Tractor's Sexy" (1999), and Gretchen Wilson's "Redneck Woman" (2009). I read these songs as participating in a larger cultural discourse about the role of the rural in the United States and the coterminous development of a "rural imaginary," which all individuals reference to make sense of their relationship to American life.

Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee," written as protests over the Vietnam War were reaching a fever pitch in the United States, describes a small Oklahoma town that takes pride in its normality and spurns the draft card-burning, LSD-dropping, bead-wearing hippies of liberal urban enclaves like San Francisco.<sup>38</sup> In "Okie," rurality is not just "American," it's self-evidently American, as the song's first-person plural narrative voice makes clear: "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee/We don't take our trips on LSD/We don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street/We like livin' right and bein' free." Lyrics such as these enact two specific rhetorical effects, the first being the implicit assumption (later made explicit in a reference to San Francisco hippies) that the

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<sup>38</sup> Haggard actually wrote "Okie from Muskogee" as a satire on rural conformity, but the song's success was tied to its reception as an anthem of patriotic sensibilities and pro-war support, leading to Haggard winning "Entertainer of the Year" honors from the Country Music Association and a public endorsement by President Nixon. Haggard capitalized on this reception, gearing later songs towards "the 'silent majority's' fear and disgust for hippies, peaceniks, and radicals" (Malone and Neal, 319).

vices that *aren't* being pursued in Muskogee *are* being pursued elsewhere, and though the song is ostensibly set in Muskogee, Oklahoma, Haggard's deployment of common small town images such as Main Street and the courthouse encourages listeners to picture any small American town. Thus, a binary is evoked between urban and rural, such that the effluence and vice of the city is not just foreign but downright un-American to the rural citizen.

The second rhetorical effect is one that is at the core of *rural drag* rhetorics: the American patriotism of rural life is made possible by the normality of rurality. To be patriotic—to be American—is to be normal. “I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,” Haggard sings, “A place where even squares can have a ball/We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse/And white lightning’s still the biggest thrill of all.” The song actually works as a litany of juxtapositions that reinforce the normality of Muskogee (and rural America) in relation to the hippies supposedly over-running American cities (see table 4.1 for a comparison).

In “Okie from Muskogee,” we can read a prescription for normality in which gender lines are firmly drawn, as firmly as the geographical boundaries between the city and the country. Yet, just as display of beads and long hair on a man threatens to reveal just how tenuous these supposedly firm divisions really are, so too do we realize how blurred are the distinctions between rural and urban, especially with the development boom of suburbs in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Thus, a song like “Okie from Muskogee” fulfills a need to stabilize threatened binaries (rural/urban,

male/female, American/un-American) by draping itself in the rhetorical garments of *rural drag*.

What “we” don’t do in Muskogee	What “we” do in Muskogee
Drugs (particularly marijuana and LSD)	Like “living right and being free”
Dodge the draft	Display the American flag at the courthouse
Throw free-love parties	Like “holding hands and pitching woo”
Grow our hair “long and shaggy”	Dress our men in leather boots
Wear “beads and Roman sandals”	

**Table 4.1. What “we” do and don’t do in Muskogee**

Kenny Chesney’s “She Thinks My Tractor’s Sexy,” which hit airways at the turn of the twentieth century, taps into this rhetorical practice, allowing the rural tropes that constitute *rural drag* to synecdochically represent the virility of male heterosexuality and desire. The song’s loose narrative arc basically involves Chesney’s narrator riding a tractor when his sweetheart comes out to the field with “a basket full of chicken and a big cold jug of sweet tea” and gets on the tractor with the narrator who can tell that the woman is aroused by the experience. As he sings in the chorus, “She thinks my tractor’s sexy/It really turns her on/She’s always staring at me/While I’m chugging along/She likes the way it’s pulling while we’re tilling up the land/She’s even kind of crazy ‘bout

my farmer's tan/She's the only one who really understands what gets me/She thinks my tractor's sexy."

In "She Thinks My Tractor's Sexy," rural artifacts (tractors, farmer's tans, baskets of chicken) become both a symbol of male desirability and the desired object itself. The synecdochic linking of male virility with the vehicles of male work is a rather common rhetorical device (think of the role that horses, motorcycles, and pickup trucks have played in discourses of male sexual potency), but what makes Chesney's song different from these other devices is its specific application of rural work objects to male virility and hetero love-making. "Well, she ain't into cars or pickup trucks/But if it runs like a Deere, man her eyes light up," he sings, making it clear that there is something uniquely desirable about the tractor, something that cars and trucks cannot supply. As I proposed in the last chapter, the weakening link between essentialized masculinity and trucks led to the introduction of Truck Nutz. I put forth that "She Thinks My Tractor's Sexy" functions as the Truck Nutz of country music, though instead of affixing an image of male genitalia to the truck, it instead shifts the focus to a trope (the tractor) whose discursive relationship to hetero-masculinity has yet to be diluted in popular discourse.

The song also establishes this rhetorical relationship as key to the promotion of heteropatriarchy. Though the woman's fixation on Chesney's tractor at first seems only sexual, after the riding is over, she reveals that she longs for "a little farm and a yard full of kids and one more teeny weeny ride before I take her home." Chesney's *rural drag* not only sparks heteronormative sexual desire, it also fulfills the precepts of settler

heteropatriarchy, playing to settler narratives of homesteads and inheritance. Through the tractor, the land is both tamed and populated.

In “Redneck Woman,” Gretchen Wilson manages to engage both the urban/rural binary of American patriotism central to Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee” and the hetero-hypersexuality of *rural drag* in Chesney’s “She Thinks My Tractor’s Sexy.” “Redneck Woman” emerged from a growing “redneck” trend in the first decade of the twenty-first century to celebrate the gritty and low-class rural traditions and realities of many of the singers and their audiences (Malone and Neal 481). Wilson’s contribution to this trend is a rocking party anthem that both dismisses the elitism of city life and firmly establishes redneck femininity as ultimately more desirable than respectable “high class broads.”

Similar to Haggard, Wilson dispenses with a list of comparisons between her redneck life and city life: she chugs beer rather than sipping champagne; she buys her lingerie “half-price” at Walmart rather than forking out her cash for the items offered at Victoria’s Secret; and she proudly stands “barefooted in my own front yard with a baby on my hip.” Also similar to “Okie from Muskogee,” Wilson positions herself as an everywoman, singing “Redneck Woman” as a call-and-response that asks for a “big ‘hell yeah!’ from the redneck girls like me.” “Redneck Woman” becomes a celebration of rural Otherness, one that asks its female audience to identify with rural poverty and low-class aesthetics as a rebuke to the pretension and superficiality of both the urbane and the urban.

Wilson turns this rural identification into a marker of all-American heteronormative desirability. Asserting that she can look “just as sexy as those models on TV” in her discount lingerie, Wilson challenges her critics to recognize that she is desirable *because* of her redneck-ness, not in spite of it. “You might think I’m trashy, a little too hardcore,” she sings, “but in my neck of the woods, I’m just the girl next door.” Wilson’s “redneck” sexuality might not fit cosmopolitan standards of beauty, she argues, but her everywoman aesthetic and identity asserts an authenticity that the champagne-sipping, Victoria’s Secret-wearing, high-class broads who look down on her could never hope to attain.

Rural authenticity and sexual authenticity converge in “Redneck Woman,” locating the rural as the space of heteronormative desire, as it did with Chesney, as well as the cultural authenticity identified by Haggard. Through the rhetoric of *rural drag*, songs such as “Redneck Woman,” “Okie from Muskogee,” and “She Thinks My Tractor’s Sexy” not only establish a rural imaginary constructed as a space of heteronormative desire and American authenticity, they also contribute to a discourse in which country music becomes the mouthpiece for such rural identifications. As I will discuss in the next section, such a discourse not only helps artists such as Haggard, Chesney, and Wilson articulate their relationship to rural America, it also sets the terms for queer country artists who may wish to respond to and/or critique country music’s perceived “All-American” rural heteronormativity.

### **How to Be Like Me: Queer and LGBT Responses to *Rural Drag***

While a pervasive and prevalent rhetoric in country-western music, *rural drag* is not uniformly accepted and promoted equally by all artists. The rhetoric's reliance on white supremacy, settler colonization, sexism, and heteronormativity has led many singers and songwriters to engage *rural drag* in order to, if not challenge, at least expose these logics.<sup>39</sup> The deployment of rurality to shore up a white, settler heteronormativity in country music has also brought the critiques of queer and LGBT country artists, who engage the rhetoric of *rural drag* either to critique it or to carve out a space of acceptance for LGBT artists in the industry. One example of queer critique is Lavender Country's eponymous 1973 album. A country/folk/bluegrass band, Lavender Country was fronted by Patrick Haggerty. The album was produced by the Gay Community Social Services of Seattle collective, who raised funds for the album's production in order "to establish a viable Gay Movement," according to the album's liner notes. As a country album, *Lavender Country* is both a refutation of the homophobic resonances of

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<sup>39</sup> Feminist country artists like Loretta Lynn, Reba McEntire, and Willie Nelson, for example, have frequently critiqued the sexist logics that undergird the genre's fascination with the rural. Lynn's "The Pill" (1975) evokes the image of a woman's body as a henhouse to illustrate how sexual pleasure can also be a constant nightmare without birth control, while Reba McEntire's "Fancy" (1990) shows how romanticizing rural working-class life masks the imbalanced effect that poverty places on rural women. Even Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings's tongue-in-cheek "Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow up to Be Cowboys" (1978) pleaded with mothers to steer their sons to lives as "doctors and lawyers and such" since cowboy life, while at times romantic, was also lonely, bolstered by a cult of masculinity that separates the cowboy from relationships. "Don't let 'em pick guitars and drive them old trucks," they warn, else their boys grow into cowboys who "never stay home" and are "always alone, even with someone they love." Such songs leverage a subtle critique against the romanticization of rurality as uncritically propping up gender norms even as, particularly in the case of Nelson and Jennings, the solution proffered is a turn to less rural, but nonetheless gendered, roles of "doctors and lawyers and such."

traditional country music and the imaginative construction of an alternative “country” of queer sensibilities:

We’d like to tell you about Lavender Country. For many, it means a land of fear, confusion and loneliness [sic]: for the rest of us it means a life of struggling towards liberation and an affirmation of Gayness. The Arts have always held a power in their ability to communicate the most intimate of thoughts and feelings. We have all been bombarded with the values and musical expressions of the straight culture. Lavender Country’s music seeks to confront the oppression Gay peoples experience daily and affirm the joys of liberation. (Liner notes)

The album reflects this tension between “struggling towards liberation” and “an affirmation of Gayness,” as it switches between a critique of heterosexist culture and a call to create a new “Lavender Country” in which sexual self-expression and exploration are praised and accepted.

In *Lavender Country*, homophobia is understood as part and parcel with patriarchy and white supremacy, and the album calls for alliances between groups fighting against these systems of power. The song “Straight White Patterns” laments an unrequited romance between two men snuffed by the social conventions of white heteronormativity. “And we don’t believe men ought to cry for men,” Haggerty sings, “Because we’re trapped in Straight White Patterns/And they’re coming down again/So pay the price for Straight White Patterns/And don’t think of what might have been.” In this song, the “bribe of straightness,” as Mark Rifkin would call it, is identified as also



being the bribe of whiteness. To be white, “Straight White Patterns” recognizes, is to be straight.

Of course, this also seems to suggest that Lavender Country is ignoring the experiences of queer people of color, and this does seem to be the case. Though the band makes frequent calls for alliance between marginalized groups, it ignores the reality of intersectional identities, assuming that those who experience racism, sexism, and homophobia are distinct groups. The song “Back in the Closet Again” situates the struggle for gay rights within the histories of other civil rights movements, painting a portrait in which members from multiple groups banded together to fight for each other, only to then turn on gay activists who had supported these efforts because “You fags ain’t got no human rights/We think you guys are sick/’Cause all you want’s a prick.” While homophobia within other activist movements is and has been a stark reality, the song’s conclusion that “First they’ll get the Blacks/Then they’re after Gay folks next/So I’m Back in The Closet Again” reveals the underlying assumption that “the Blacks” and the “Gay folks” (not to mention “the women” and “the workers” who are mentioned elsewhere in the song) do not overlap in any meaningful way.

While Lavender Country identifies heterosexism and homophobia as part and parcel with systems of oppression such as racism and sexism, the band’s vision of a utopic future fails to account for, and even manages to support, the ideologies of settler colonialism and manifest destiny. Though the band’s name suggests a “queering” of the country-western genre, it also, as discussed above, refers to both the realities of queer experience in the United States and the utopic possibilities that queer communities can

write onto that landscape. Lavender Country outlines this utopic future in a song by the same name: “Lavender Country.” Written as a siren song for closeted queer folk longing for a better life, “Lavender Country” beckons its audience to “come out, come out, my dears/To Lavender Country/You all come out and make yourselves to home/It don’t matter here/Who you love or what you wear/’Cause we don’t care who’s got what chromosomes.”

The “Country” of “Lavender Country” is here transformed from the more bucolic associations one might have with a phrase such as “out in the country” to the more nationalistic associations of “home, hearth, and country” with its civic pride and patriotic duties. If country-western music has frequently worked to establish a connection between “the country” and “the Country,” so to does “Lavender Country” exploit this relationship, which is, at its core, a settler colonial relationship. As Morgensen argues, “[w]hite settler heteropatriarchy creates queers who resolve their exile through land-based relationships to disappeared Native people” by staking imaginary claims to indigenous cultural and sexual practices (6). Though Lavender Country makes no explicit reference to indigenous cultural/sexual practices, their promotion of a new “country” overlaid on the existing one does benefit from the systems of Native cultural and physical displacement perpetuated by settler colonialism.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The Lavender “Country/country” dyad also seems to reflect the “back-to-the-land” movements popularized in the United States during the 1960s and ‘70s, a movement that Morgenson has argued “produce[s] queer subjects by creatively deploying rurality and mobility in the context of settlement” (129). This rhetorical framing of a “Lavender Country” evokes images of what Gordon Brent Ingram has described as a “queerscape,” or “cultural construct that provides a territorial basis for considering opportunities for and persistent disparities in access to public

Not surprisingly, self-identified queer and gay country acts like Lavender Country are rare in the country-western industry. In 2010, singer Chely Wright attempted to thwart stereotypes about the genre by coming out in a coordinated national publicity campaign that included televised interviews, a filmed documentary, and the publication of her self-penned autobiography, *Like Me: Confessions of a Heartland Country Singer*. News media were quick to name Wright, the singer of several hit songs, including the 1999 chart-topper “Single White Female,” the first openly gay country star.<sup>41</sup> In *Like Me*, Wright attempts to reconcile her sexuality with some of the basic tropes of country-western music and the country-western music industry, what she identified as “God and country and family” in her interview with Natalie Morales. Wright employs the rhetorical conventions of two different memoir narratives—the country-western autobiography and the coming-out narrative—and fuses them together to articulate a gay American identity that is not at odds with but instead central to the “authenticity” at the heart of country music.

Autobiography has played a significant role in the history of country-western music, providing artists an outlet through which to address possible concerns about the artifice inherent in show business. Richard Peterson notes that country music is often rhetorically aligned on a dialectic between what he identifies as “hard-core” and “soft-

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space and various respective services and amenities, as well as options for personal and collective expression” (41). As I will discuss in Chapter Five, queerscapes are often constructed upon the existing supports of settler colonial structures.

<sup>41</sup> Though there were and are other LGBT and queer country artists, Wright was the first openly gay country “star” still producing country music. k.d. lang, who achieved national popularity as a country singer, did not come out publicly until she had left the country-western genre.

shell” country music. The difference between these two poles, Peterson argues, reflects the performer’s gravitation towards artifice and sleek presentation, in the case of soft-shell music, or the “rough” edges and humble roots of the “hard-core” country musician. As Peterson points out, “[t]he basic promotional claim made for hard-core country music is that it’s authentic—made by and for those who remain faithful to the ‘roots’ of country” as opposed to the more manufactured popularity of soft-shell country (237).<sup>42</sup> Central to this authenticity, according to Peterson, is a focus on autobiography and the emergence of biographical elements in the artist’s music and personal life.

Pamela Fox has extended Peterson’s dialectic to show how female country artists have used written autobiographies to establish their country roots and reconcile their stage personas with their pasts.<sup>43</sup> One of the key tropes that she identifies in such autobiographies is also one of the central tropes of country music: Loss and Desire. The tension between Loss and Desire manifests in these autobiographies through a narrative arrangement in which Loss is figured as the past (simple roots, family, and a “country authenticity”) and Desire is figured as the present (success, fame, and money). “In telling their full life story,” Fox argues, “they are forced to reckon with, and

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<sup>42</sup> Peterson’s focus on what seems to be a rather arbitrary distinction between the “formal packaged” veneer of soft-shell and the more “personally revealing” and informal presentation of hard-core fails to take into account how both hard-core might be just as performative as soft-shell and might also be determined by cultural gender conventions. In fact, Peterson notes that “men have generally been dominant among hard-core artists, with women often doing better when soft-shell is more popular,” an observation that might lead one to conclude that the whole dialectic and its concerns with “authenticity” might also be tied to beliefs about femininity and artifice (254).

<sup>43</sup> Fox includes in her analysis autobiographies by Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, Tammy Wynette, Naomi Judd, Minnie Pearl, and Reba McEntire.

subsequently lament, the competing narrative of Desire which marks their stardom” (243). Fox notes several rhetorical strategies by which these singers navigate this tension, including photo albums with first-person captions chronicling the singer’s development as an artist (many autobiographies are ghost-written). The intended net effect of these autobiographies is a message to the artist’s readers that the singer knows she’s made it big, so to speak, but still remembers and cherishes a simpler rural past.

In many ways, the trajectories of the country autobiography parallel a common format of U.S. coming-out narratives. In “Get Thee to a Big City,” Kath Weston argues that rural/urban oppositional binary has become a “symbolic contrast ... central to the organization of many coming-out stories” (255). The appearance of this oppositional binary, she notes, often begins with the narrator’s belief that they are “the only one in the world” (256). This belief is eventually challenged by their discovery of a national “gay imaginary” constructed through popular and media representations of queer identity, a discovery that leads to the realization that “there must be not only *someone* like me, but also someone out there *somewhere*. ‘Like’ others become spatially located at the very point a person enters the gay imaginary” (261).

Because of popular discourses about sexuality, the “*somewhere*” is most often located in urban areas, imagined as a respite from the suffocating conformity and hostility of rurality. Narratives of queer urban flight, Weston shows, are often peppered with moments in which the rural transplant’s naïveté and simplicity are thrown into sharp contrast with the libertine freedoms available in the city. But as the shine wears off this new experience, Weston notes that many narratives include a sense of

disillusionment as the subject begins to understand that the city can feel just as restrictive and isolated as their rural homes. Many of these narratives culminate, she argues, in an anti-identification with urban queerness and the realization that “gay people weren’t like me much at all” (289).

In *Like Me*, Wright blends the tropes and narratives of both country autobiography and the rural coming-out narrative, creating a story in which her rural and religious childhood is central to both her struggles and identity as a closeted country superstar. As do many of the female singers Fox analyzes, Wright navigates between the competing discourses of Loss and Desire, taking great pains to paint herself as simply a poor, rural girl who happened to strike it big as a country singer. Like many of the other autobiographies, Wright peppers her memoir with photos of her family, childhood and small town, juxtaposed with glamour shots and portraits of her with famous friends and colleagues. Also similar to these other women, Wright maps this dynamic of Loss and Desire geographically—Nashville becomes her home and the site of opportunity, though it also drives a wedge between those she “left behind” in Wellsville, Kansas, her childhood home.

Yet what distinguishes Wright’s autobiography from those of Parton, McEntire, Wynette, and Lynn is another dynamic of Loss and Desire—specifically, the struggle between losing her heritage, family, and career at the expense of sexual desire. Wright’s identity as a country singer is central to her sense of self, and it is this identity and its attendant connections to patriotism, religion, and family that are at the heart of her conflict over her sexuality. “My folks declared that our family identity was Country,”

she writes, “just as some people identify themselves as Democrats or Republicans” (20). Because, through *rural drag*, rurality (or “Country”) has become a trope for ideal American citizenship founded in settler heteropatriarchy, *Like Me* can be read as Wright’s attempt to either overcome or accommodate the rhetorical tensions between her competing subjectivities as both gay and “Country.” Wright’s solution to this tension is to reframe gayness as being just as “Country,” and therefore just as patriotic and religiously acceptable, as straightness.<sup>44</sup>

Knowing that country music is constituted by “God and country and family,” Wright makes a point to couch every discussion of her struggles with sexuality between stories that highlight the importance of religion, patriotism, and family in her own life. *Like Me* is broken up into sixty chapters, with each chapter tightly focused on a singular event. Though mostly chronological, the book periodically flashes back to childhood memories or earlier events, often to highlight a point Wright wants to make in the following chapter. Broadly, *Like Me* traces Wright’s life and career as it develops from singing and growing up poor in rural Kansas to her rough start trying to make a living in Nashville through the eventual glare that fame casts on her life when she finally does make it big. Throughout all of this, Wright reflects on the internal turmoil related her long attempts to suppress her sexuality and the accompanying doubts this raised about her faith, her family, and role as an American.

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<sup>44</sup> Wright is very conscious of only using terms like “gay,” “lesbian,” or “LGBT” to describe non-heteronormative identities and practices, and she never once uses “queer” in her autobiography. There is no queering of “Country” happening in *Like Me*, like there clearly is in *Lavender Country*.

Rhetorically, Wright structures *Like Me* so that her readers initially see her sexual identity as separate from her role as a daughter, sister, Christian, Kansan, American, and country singer. Though Wright frequently drops lists of her multiple identities—"I'm a proud Kansan, a loving daughter, sister, and friend, a child of God, and a lesbian," she writes on the first page—structurally, the book keeps these identities mostly separate, allowing Wright to fully explore each one before weaving them together in the latter half of the book into a more cohesive whole (3). In the first half of *Like Me*, Wright intersperses overt discussions about her sexuality in between episodes of family life, religion, music, and patriotism. For example, one early chapter explores when Wright first began to recognize her sexual attraction to women as a child. She then follows this chapter with a vignette in which she sang her first solo performance at age six to "House of the Rising Sun." In other moments, she spends a couple contemplative pages pondering a closeted relationship she has with a married woman only to sharply transition to "All American Girl" a chapter on her work performing for American troops stationed overseas.

As the book progresses, Wright begins to incorporate discussions of her sexuality within discussions of these other areas of her life. Initially, this comes about through more lists of her identities. "I'm not a tough girl. I have manners, I am ladylike, and I am gay," she writes in a discussion of sexual mores and boundaries within the music industry. "I'm known as a good American. I hear it so often, but I wonder what it means" (95). As quickly becomes clear, Wright does know what it means, and she begins to make her sexuality more and more central to issues of Americanism, faith, and



family. By the end of *Like Me*, Wright has reconciled being gay with her sense of family, faith in God, and duty as an American: most of her family accepts her and she builds new family networks with her musical colleagues and her new gay community; she defends her faith to an atheist girlfriend as something that “was part of me” (216); and in addition to advocating for the extension of marriage rights and military service to LGBT citizens, she begins to view her coming-out as a sort of civic duty “to comfort young people as they come to realize and deal with the fact that they are gay” (275).

In reconciling her sexuality with her vision of faith-based Americanness, though, she also establishes an “appropriate” gay identity, one that is not too pushy, makes room for faith in God (though not necessarily religion), and supports the projects of American interventionism, even as it may disagree with them. Several times, for example, Wright writes about her own discomfort with public displays of sexuality, framing it not in terms of discomfort with queer identification but sexual displays in general. “I don’t lead with sex, hetero or homo,” she writes of her public (and private) persona:

I don’t swear in public, seldom in front of men. I don’t tell off-color jokes in mixed company, and if an off-color joke is being told in my presence, I try to slip away. I guess I let people know in the first couple of years of my career who I was and how I wanted to be treated. I wanted to be treated with respect, and I wanted to be treated like a lady. I have seen many females in my business try to take a shortcut to fit it or to become successful, either by becoming a sex object or by taking on the role of

‘one of the boys’ only to later feel frustration that they weren’t being shown respect as women. (94-95)

This passage, included in the chapter “All-American Girl,” strikes at the tension that structures *Like Me*. Wright identifies a specific performance of Christian faith and gendered propriety as central American identity, and throughout the book, she works to make the argument that her sexuality does not prevent her from fulfilling the expectations of Christian femininity at the heart of American citizenship.

One means by which she asserts her Americanness is by making frequent comparisons to her authorship of this book as participating in a long history of civil rights struggles in the United States. *Like Me* begins with an epigraph from Martin Luther King, Jr.: “History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.” Wright understands her autobiography as her own resistance to this “appalling silence,” later making comparisons between her own resistance to coming-out and how she imagines she could have responded to Rosa Parks’s famous sit-in:

Had I been around when Rosa Parks was taking her stand, I might have been harsh and frustrated with her too. ... Why cause a stir, Rosa? Why do you have to draw attention to yourself, Rosa? You’re making things difficult for everyone, Rosa. Stop pushing the situation to a boiling point. So those gays who couldn’t hide or wouldn’t hide were essentially holding a mirror up to my face and reminding me that because I could hide and I did, I was a coward. And I was. (263)

In the face of all “those gays who couldn’t hide or wouldn’t hide,” Wright recognizes her own failure to take a stand for a movement she sees as parallel to the civil rights battles of the twentieth and twenty-first century United States, and *Like Me* becomes Wright’s own version of a bus sit-in.

Interestingly, while Wright feels chastised by her fear of coming out, *Like Me* is also a subtle rebuke to an activist queer movement that she feels alienates and excludes an “All-American Girl” like herself. By the end of the book, officially out to her friends and family and on the cusp of making a national declaration of her sexuality, Wright attends the Gay Pride parade in New York City:

As I watched the parade, I searched and searched for the group where I’d fit in, but I never saw my group. I fast-forwarded to next year’s Gay Pride event and tried to imagine myself marching in the parade. What would my float say? GAY COUNTRY SINGERS?

I had this notion that if I attended this Gay Pride event I’d feel at home, like I finally belonged. But I didn’t. Perhaps once I’ve come out, I will find my place. (271)

Wright cannot see a place for herself in a community that she identifies with parade floats titled “butch lesbians” and “drag queens of Detroit.” “I was astonished that all of these people had somehow found one another and decided to make a float,” she muses, a realization that leads her to conclude that the urban-centric gay rights movement she associates with the parade (and with New York) is somehow antithetical to her own rural, patriotic, Christian identity as a white lesbian (269).

Wright's discomfort with the gay community she encounters in New York aligns with the disillusionment that Weston identifies in many rural-to-urban coming out narratives, and Wright's struggle to see herself as a part of this community and its tightly delineated sub-groups can be seen as an, if not regular at least unsurprising, aspect of such narratives. But the book's rhetorical parallels to women's country autobiographies and the personal and narrative tension between Loss and Desire gives her an outlet to resolve this tension. "Looking back at my school days in Kansas, I can't help but wonder how much worse I would have been treated had my tormentors known I was a lesbian," she writes at the end of the book (272). Her reflections on a past of rural hardship—here coded as both impoverished and homophobic—becomes a pivot on which she can find establish authenticity as both a rural "Country" girl *and* a lesbian role model, turning the tropes and rhetorics of the country autobiography into an act of support and relationality with queer youth. "A compelling motivation for me to come forward is to comfort young people as they come to realize and deal with the fact that they are gay," she writes. "If that's you, hear my story. I want you to know that you are not sick and you are not alone" (275).

*Like Me* engages with the *rural drag* expectations of the country-western genre in some expected and unexpected ways. At certain moments, Wright draws on and uncritically promotes the settler expectations of American performances of gender and patriotism, employing rural tropes to assert her membership in settler society. At other moments, though, one realizes that Wright is also finding ways to make use of country-western rhetorics that have been used to forge communities characterized by their

exclusionary focus on whiteness, heteropatriarchy, and settler patriotism. In these moments, Wright finds a way to open up the country family to those who have often struggled (if they even desired) to see a space for themselves. Unfortunately, as Morgensen has taught us, making space in settler society for a new image of settler citizens fails to dismantle the very systems that created and excluded these subjects in the first place. The comparison implicit in the title of *Like Me* suggests that, for artists like Wright, acceptance and community for “heartland country” queer youth exists, but only insofar as they are “like” Wright: rural and gay, but also unquestioning supporters of settler privilege.

### ***Rural Drag without Borders***

To conclude this chapter, I want to look at how the settler heteropatriarchy of *rural drag* in country music becomes so strong and supposedly self-evident as to promote itself beyond the United States. Country music’s self-perpetuating rhetoric of *rural drag* is evidenced in the song “Emmylou” by First Aid Kit, a Swedish duo comprised of sisters Johanna and Clara Söderberg. The song, which functions as both a lament over a broken relationship and a plea for reconciliation, reenacts the settler fantasies that undergird much of the country canon, tying this fantasy to country rhetorics of heteropatriarchal inheritance and conjugal romance as a means to salvage the relationship. The song’s lyrics, instrumentals, and accompanying video are woven together into a tapestry of country western and settler colonial imagery, and to do so, the production relies on a performance of *rural drag* carried throughout all aspects of the song and video. In this context, particularly First Aid Kit’s reliance on “hard-core”

country-western narratives and the Söderberg sister's ages and Swedish nationalities, *rural drag* emerges as a rhetoric capable of reproducing itself, one that is not merely a common trope within the country genre, but also becomes a meta-trope that defines the genre and its history.

In "Emmylou," both the song and the video, First Aid Kit employs a unique form of the rhetoric of *rural drag* that works to justify the band's identity as "authentic" country musicians. Musically, the song is unmistakably "country," even as it reveals the performative distinctions between Peterson's "hard-core" and "soft-shell" country music. In the process, the song also inadvertently reveals country music as a genre in which *rural drag* is not only frequently performed but also as a genre which itself has come to be an integral performance of *rural drag*. Tonally, "Emmylou" follows much of the characteristics of "hard-core" country, accompanied by traditional "hard-core" and bluegrass instruments such the banjo and pedal steel guitar, even as the smooth harmonies of the Söderberg sisters might not quite match the rough vocalizations of more firmly established "hard-core" artists such as Loretta Lynn, Johnny Cash, or Lucinda Williams.

Lyrically, the band's identification with "hard-core" is made more explicit, even as it displaces the "hard-core" distinction as a geographically Southern or rural American identity. Peterson notes that "hard-core" performers typically stress their origins, which are often rural, if not specifically Southern or Southwestern. In "Emmylou," First Aid Kit hints at an origin story, though not an American one. "Oh, the bitter winds are comin' in, and I'm already missin' the summer," they sing as the song

begins. “Stockholm’s cold, but I’ve been told I was born to endure this kind of weather.” Though it’s not clear if the song is set in Stockholm (where it is currently cold) or an unnamed American locale (that is cold like Stockholm), the song engages with the rhetoric of “hard-core” country, stressing the singers’ ability to “endure” in the present, rather than taking a more “soft-shell” stance in which the singer looks back wistfully on a hard past life from the vantage point of one who’s “made it.” As Paul Lester wrote of First Aid Kit in an early review of the band, “They sound like a couple of troubled, leathery old weather-beaten back porch bluegrass pluckers from Kentucky but they grew up in Enskede, a suburb south of Stockholm, where they would sing along to radio hits by Britney [Spears] and Xtina [Christina Aguilera]” (No. 447).

To drive home this identification with the “troubled, leathery” sound of two “hard-core” artists, First Aid Kit engages with another characteristic of the “hard-core” sound: association with an “earlier country style” and “references to appropriate country roots” (Peterson 244-45). The band makes this association, though, through a rhetorical parallelism that also implies that First Aid Kit might be the inheritors of a country music heteropatriarchy. As the singer thinks back longingly on an old romantic partner (or, possibly, an old musical partner), the chorus kicks in and the Söderberg sisters imploringly plead, “I’ll be your Emmylou, and I’ll be your June, if you’ll be my Gram and my Johnny, too. No, I’m not asking much of you, just sing, little darlin’, sing with me.” The implication in this chorus is that, should the addressee accept the narrator’s offer, together they could become successors to two of the great artistic and romantic partnerships in the history of country music: Emmylou Harris and Gram Parsons, whose

artistic partnership spawned two albums, *GP* and *Grievous Angel* before Parsons died of a heroin overdose; and June Carter Cash and Johnny Cash, whose romance lasted nearly fifty years, during which they wrote and/or recorded a number of country classics, including “Ring of Fire,” “Jackson,” “It Ain’t Me, Babe,” and “Long Legged Guitar Pickin’ Man.”

In this and earlier chapters, I have described *rural drag* as the process of appropriating the symbols and practices of rural culture in order to assert one’s membership in the heteropatriarchy of settler society. In “Emmylou,” First Aid Kit’s deployment of *rural drag* is a bit more complicated. In inserting themselves into a lineage of grand country partnerships and appropriating the tropes and figures of “hard-core” country music, First Aid Kit is staking a claim to country “authenticity,” not necessarily asserting their participation in systems of heteropatriarchy.

Yet, the point I wish to make about this maneuver is that, regardless of their intentions in employing the rhetoric, the heteropatriarchal and settler colonial values that undergird the logics of *rural drag* continue to shine through. In the first place, a sense of generational inheritance is implied by the song’s insertion of the narrator and her partner into this musical lineage. The structure of this cultural inheritance system also seems to follow a heteronormative path, with the cultural progenitors fulfilled by the male-female pairings of the iconic romantic and musical couplings of Harris/Parsons and Carter Cash/Cash.<sup>45</sup> Within the logics of this framework, cultural significance is passed from

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<sup>45</sup> While June Carter Cash and Johnny Cash are considered one of the quintessential love stories of the country music industry, Emmylou Harris and Gram Parsons were never officially linked



hetero-pairing to hetero-pairing, with the promise that future hetero-pairings will arise to continue the tradition.

Tying one's authenticity as a performer to iconic heteropatriarchal couples of the past is by no means a novel phenomenon (consider, as an example, Toby Keith's reference to *Gunsmoke*'s Marshall Dillon and Miss Kitty in "Should've Been a Cowboy"). What makes "Emmylou" so interesting as a study of *rural drag*, though, is the accompanying video to the song, which extends the theme of cultural inheritance hinted at by the heteronormative pairings of the chorus to a more overt attempt at settler colonial rhetorics of inheritance. If, in the song, the Söderberg sisters project an air of authenticity by implicitly claiming a cultural relationship to the respected grandmothers and grandfathers of the country western tradition, in the video, this metaphorical relationship to country western music is extended to include claims to indigenous lands and cultural practices. In the video for "Emmylou," the Söderberg sisters are filmed in an unnamed desert location, similar to the American Southwest, and adorned in generically "tribal" clothing and blankets as they spend their time gazing out at scenic vistas or participating in unspecified religious ceremonies seemingly designed to evoke images of a Native American past (Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

In the video for "Emmylou," First Aid Kit marries the heteropatriarchal imperative of *rural drag* of the song with the settler fantasies of authenticity and

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as a couple, though Harris has spoken in interviews that she felt that she and Parsons had started falling to fall in love, but he died before she was able to tell him (Harris). Beyond their musical collaborations, the tragic star-crossed nature of this relationship helped to elevate the Harris-Parsons relationship from the level of celebrity romance to near mythic proportions in the popular imagination.

inheritance that *playing Indian* offers to both country singers and those hoping to establish their own Americanness. By evoking de-nationalized “Indian” imagery, artifacts, and practices, First Aid Kit suggests that being “born to endure this kind of weather” is more than just an assertion of temperate suitability—it also becomes a claim to the lands and cultures claimed by the settler colonial United States.



**Figure 4.1.** First Aid Kit’s Klara Söderberg, wrapped in an “Indian” blanket, in “Emmylou”



**Figure 4.2.** The Söderberg sisters kneel in front of an altar in the video for “Emmylou”

It also reveals the power of *rural drag* as a rhetorical practice that is central to both a country-western *ethos* and, more broadly, an American *ethos*. Embedded within this practice, as we have seen not only in country music but the local rhetorical practices

of College Station, are histories of settler colonization, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. These are histories of lands both real and imagined—they are the histories of College Station, histories of a groundless “rural imaginary,” and histories of the United States as a settler nation continuing to assert an imperial presence both within and beyond its borders. What country artists such as First Aid Kit, Merle Haggard, Tim McGraw, Lavender Country, and Chely Wright can teach us about *rural drag*’s rhetorical power and influence is the way that beliefs about rural space in the United States are also central to our beliefs about nation, citizenship, history, and sexuality. *Rural drag* reveals that our discourses about rurality are also our discourses about colonization, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. As I will discuss in the next and final chapter, challenging these discourses in the settler United States means we need to recognize and respond to the intersecting rhetorics of land, space, and sexuality.

CHAPTER V

QUEER SETTLERS IN A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE:  
A DECOLONIAL QUEERSCAPE PEDAGOGY

we know the meaning of august, Lord  
cause our tongues are dead birds  
dried in our fathers' dug wells  
and our hands the last of green grass  
give us pardon

– Crystal Boson, “how the gays pray for rain”

It is my hope that the case studies I have presented here—Texan legislative and regulatory documents; cultural performances of race, colonization, and sexuality in College Station, Texas; and country music—illuminate the role of place within the study and practice of rhetoric. Specifically, I have argued that within settler society, rhetorics of rurality are central to the production of a naturalized settler citizenry: performing rurality allows settler citizens to lay claim to land while erasing/eliding the presence and history of Native inhabitants. *Rural drag*, the rhetorical practice I have theorized in this dissertation, developed as a means by which settler citizens can embody the privileges of settler citizenship, namely white heteropatriarchy.

Rather than simply proving an interesting point about the development of “the rural” in American discourse, I believe that the theories I have put forth in this

dissertation should challenge us—as scholars, as teachers, as humans—to reevaluate our relationship to rurality and space in settler culture. I have neither intended to write a defense of the rural nor a critique, and indeed, a pure defense or critique would be impossible since I have written from the perspective that “the rural,” as both a concept and a location, is and always has been constructed and performed. Yet, as gender and sexuality theorists have reminded us (and as our own lives have born out) knowing that something is constructed or performed does not make it any less real and any less impactful in our lives.

It would be tempting to take what I’ve written and argued in this project and look for ways to “queer” rural spaces, to challenge the white heteropatriarchy with which they have been imbued.<sup>46</sup> But “rehabilitating” the American rural *ethos* to include those who love the same gender or don’t conform to gender norms does not address, and may even rely on, the underlying settler colonial beliefs in rurality as reflective of American identity.<sup>47</sup> In fact, it has already been done. Think, for example, of *Brokeback Mountain*, Ang Lee’s 2005 film that provided wardrobe inspiration for the end of Rick Perry’s presidential campaign. *Brokeback Mountain*, frequently dubbed “the gay cowboy movie,” gave mainstream audiences a rural Wyoming gay male romance that resonated with both critics and audiences, winning an Academy Award for Lee. But though the

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<sup>46</sup> And many rural spaces are. Remember: “constructing” and “performing” can result in tangible products, like skyscrapers and Broadway shows.

<sup>47</sup> This is not to say that we should not always be vigilant about making all spaces, including rural spaces, safe for queer and gender non-conforming people. Violence against queer folk in rural space is a sad reality—just as histories of violence against racial minorities, the disabled, and the poor are a sad and still-occurring reality in such areas.

film taught audiences that “gay cowboy” wasn’t an oxymoron, its adherence to the narratives of settler romance also helped ensure that as much as “the rural” might change, it still stayed the same. The tragedy of the film is not Jack Twist’s death at the hands of some rural queer-bashers.<sup>48</sup> Rather, the tragedy of the film is that Jack’s death and Ennis’s internalized homophobia prevented them from fulfilling the tenets of settler romance and Jack’s dreams of homesteading a plot of land in a remarkably empty Western landscape (think of Spurr’s rhetoric of *negation*).<sup>49</sup> Clearly, challenging settler colonial rhetorics of rural space is no precondition for making room for rural queers; in fact, such rhetorics might just help make rural queerness palatable for a general audience.

Instead of rehabilitating queer rurality, then, where I hope this dissertation finds productive ground is in the overlays between rhetorical studies of place and queer composition studies. Recent scholarship in both of these areas has challenged our approach to the study and practice of rhetoric, especially in the classroom, and I see much productive possibilities in the intersections of the two. At the same time, both approaches risk undermining their own transformative potentials when they fail to account for and challenge settler colonial rhetorics and histories.

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<sup>48</sup> The novella by Annie Proulx, from which the movie was adapted, is more vague about how Jack dies, leaving the circumstances of his death up to Ennis’s imagination.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Manalansan IV has also suggested that, in addition to colonizing space, *Brokeback Mountain* is also an exercise in “colonizing time,” in which the movie’s drama unfolds against the backdrop of an unintrusive 1960s and 70s, “as if *Brokeback*’s geological formations make it possible for Jack and Ennis to wage their private yet bucolic war without regard for the challenges of history and at the expense of difference” (98).

Rhetoric has always been and always will be concerned with place. Consider, for example, that the Western rhetorical tradition traces its origins back to such Grecian rhetoricians as Plato and Aristotle, who were highly concerned with the venues in which rhetoric was practiced, such as courtrooms, the classroom, and the public sphere.<sup>50</sup> Consider further the possibility that practicing the wrong rhetorical strategies in the wrong places could (and still can) lead to any number of consequences, including censorship, imprisonment, or execution, and we can see why Carol Poster might conclude that Aristotle's treatise *On Rhetoric* was intended to be "taught within the controlled environment of Aristotle's school, not widely disseminated to the general public" (244). Consider even further the fact that a descriptive term such as "Western rhetoric" even exists implies that land and place play a crucial role to not only the rhetorical strategies we practice but also the ways in which we categorize and hierarchize rhetorical traditions in relation to power and privilege.

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<sup>50</sup> When rhetoric and place intersect it is because rhetoric is engaged in places by rhetors, a tripartite relationship that should always be considered by scholars and practitioners of rhetoric (i.e. all of us). For example, Aristotle's division of rhetoric into three species—deliberative, judicial, and epideictic—is broadly conceived so as to apply to as many rhetorical situations as possible, without respect to where they take place. Explicit considerations of place are relatively absent from Aristotle's descriptions. Indeed, in breaking down the components of the speech act, Aristotle goes so far as to say that a speech (to which he limits the purview of rhetoric) "consists of three things: a speaker and a subject on which he speaks and someone addressed, and the objective [*telos*] of the *speech* relates to the last (I mean the hearer)" (47, brackets and italics in Kennedy's translation). According to the logic of this equation, place has no impact on the persuasiveness of a given rhetoric, yet the three species of rhetoric, as Aristotle defines them, are frequently employed by individuals who are required to engage these forms in specific places, examples of which might include such locations as a legislative assembly (deliberative rhetoric), the courtroom (judicial rhetoric), or a religious house (epideictic rhetoric). Also worth considering is how these places may have emerged in response to the need for a place in which to practice and display such rhetorical skills.

Contemporary rhetorical scholars have recognized the importance of considering place in relation to rhetoric. Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* transformed the study of rhetoric and writing as it asked us to account for the contestations of power and privilege reflected in writing composed within moments of cultural collision. At the same time, it introduced scholars to a new term that highlighted how such writing always involves struggles over power, culture, and place: "contact zone." The contact zone, Pratt writes, is "the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (8). Space—invested with power, culture, people—shapes the contours of rhetorical practices.

At the same time, rhetoric can be used to shape space. Spurr's *Rhetoric of Empire*, which I have relied on heavily in this project, shows us how imperial rhetorics can work to fulfill colonial beliefs/desires about the lands being colonized. For example, the rhetoric of *negation*, as we saw in Chapter Two, helped to justify the displacement of Native nations from lands desired by the United States to fund the nation's land grant schools.

Responsible theories of space and rhetoric, like those provided by Pratt and Spurr, take into account the realities of colonization. Spatial rhetorical theories that fail to account for these realities, particularly when theorizing rhetorical practices in colonial or post-colonial spaces, can easily slip into colonial rhetorics themselves. Nedra Reynolds's *Geographies of Writing* does just this. Reynolds's book, subtitled *Inhabiting*



*Places and Encountering Difference*, argues that writing practices reflect our relationships to the spaces in which we write and live. “Many of our experiences in life ‘take place’ in a location,” she writes, “and then we draw upon characteristics of those locations to construct memories and to judge or respond to other places” (3). Because of our locatedness as writers, “it’s impossible to ‘get away from’ spatial metaphors in our language about language” (43).

While I agree with Reynolds that spatiality is a powerful metaphor in writing and writing about writing, I take issue with Reynolds’s uncritical reliance on the spatial metaphors of colonization. She argues convincingly that metaphors of the “frontier,” “borders,” and “traveling” are key spatial metaphors used in rhetoric and composition theory in the United States:

borrowing from many theoretical terrains, composition has created or invoked frontiers, cities, contact zones, safe houses, borderlands, community compacts, and various other territories that have influenced, at least metaphorically, concepts of literacy or learning. (27)

Sadly, she never bothers to unpack *why* these metaphors may have such purchase other than a brief acknowledgment of the United States’ own colonial history. As such, Reynolds enacts a displacement of these specifically place-based metaphors, turning them into generic metaphors that can describe broad issues of difference and power, while in turn erasing the specific experiences of people affected by these issues.

For example, explaining why Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of borderlands is so “appealing ... right now,” she writes, “borderlands is one of the geographies difference

makes, creating spaces open to a mix of languages, cultures, and identities,” a claim that forces the realities of colonization, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, sexism, and class oppression that informed Anzaldúa’s book into the generic category of “difference” (28). Reynolds ignores that the borderlands, far from being a place of multicultural celebration, can be a place of what Anzaldúa calls “intimate terrorism”:

The world is not a safe place to live in. We shiver in separate cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched, barely keeping the panic below the surface of the skin, daily drinking shock along with our morning coffee, fearing the torches being set to our buildings, the attacks in the streets. Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. (42)

Hardly the “appealing” world of cultural pastiche Reynolds describes, no? Yet, Reynolds’s continues to romanticize these violent realities, transforming them into metaphors of freedom and mobility. For example, Reynolds writes that “[T]he concept of borderlands ... emerges from both notions of territoriality as well as movement and sees both as integral to the construction of a sense of place. Movement and change are possible, even welcomed, in the borderlands” (43). Reynolds consistent failure to engage the conditions of “territoriality,” “movement,” and “change” in the borderlands naturalizes the ongoing colonization that makes such terms not only possible but

necessary.<sup>51</sup> As Reynolds own writing reveals, rhetorical theories of space that refuse to account for the conditions of colonial power risk furthering colonization through writing.

Queer studies in rhetoric and composition has been less quick to explicitly respond to rhetorical considerations of space, in part because queer studies has only recently emerged within the discipline. Yet, sexuality and place have always been intricately interwoven (“We’re here! We’re queer! Get over it!”), and so while outright interrogations of space in queer comp/rhet studies are not as frequent, it is not hard to spot queer rhet/comp scholars making use of spatial rhetorics in order to make their arguments about visibility, safety, and representation in the composition classroom. David Wallace’s essay “Out in the Academy,” for example, reminds us that queer theory must be applied to the “mundane encounters” that make up daily life in academic and institutional spaces (65).<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Jonathan Alexander’s pedagogy of “sexual literacy” not only helps students learn to articulate their understandings of cultural discourses of sexuality, such literacy, as queer people quickly learn, is central to

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<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, Reynolds relies on colonial metaphors to describe writing practices, slippages that reveal her own failure to critique the colonial conditions of her theory. To wit: “As composition grew and developed, different settlements sprang up all across the wide frontier, communities characterized by differences in philosophy, political allegiances, or research methods” (31). In another moment, she writes, “When space is parceled out, as in absolute space, the result is boundaries, borders, fences, and no-trespassing signs with varying degrees of subtlety. The wide-open frontier, for example, gradually became a set of territories owned by individuals and protected from intruders” (37). Such writing naturalizes the idea that a “frontier” ever existed and that it wasn’t already populated by people with pre-existing territories that were also protected from intruders.

<sup>52</sup> “As teachers,” Wallace writes, “if we limit our uses of queer theory solely to high-culture texts, we are missing important opportunities for helping students learn to engage in and produce discursive strategies that may help bring about institutional and social change as well as transform their own lived experience” (66).

knowing how to navigate our bodies through spaces that may pose risks to our health and safety.<sup>53</sup>

Yet, as decolonial scholars like Morgensen, Rifkin, and Andrea Smith have taught us, queer communities and scholarship often uncritically rely on settler colonial understandings of space and nation in order to articulate a place within settler culture. In “Queering the Contact Zone,” for example, Jan Cooper decries Pratt’s theory of the “contact zone” as a pedagogical apparatus. Pratt’s theory, Cooper argues, is worrisome for queer pedagogies because of

the anthropological tone it gives to the whole enterprise of describing interpersonal interaction in a composition class ... *Contact* as a term for [the students’] exchanges has a detached, clinical tone in this context that corrals social interaction in a bland way, and Pratt’s assertions about its “joys” and “sufferings” are rarely conveyed in others’ descriptions of it.  
(26)

There seems to be a sad irony that the ways in which Cooper critiques Pratt seems to be reenacting some of the very colonial power struggles that Pratt was theorizing in the first place. Cooper’s view of the “contact zone” as “anthropological,” for example, seems to

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<sup>53</sup> Alexander defines “sexual literacy” as “the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self- and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and for ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms” (5).

be confusing Pratt's description of the scientific and imperial histories of contact zones with a prescription for how to enact them in the classroom.<sup>54</sup>

Cooper argues that students cannot be expected to bring and represent static cultural identities to the classroom (an argument Pratt never actually puts forward) because "cultures are more permeable, mixable than DNA, and reproduce even faster. ... Perhaps an even better observation is that it's difficult to use the metaphor of *contact* to describe interactions between people (of their texts) addressing identifications that work more like fluids or gases than solids" (26-27). Students can't come into "contact," Cooper argues, because cultures don't contact; they mix, like "permeable ... fluids or gases." And in this moment, Cooper makes use of the imperial trope of *insubstantialization*, "the object of representation is seen as an immaterial counterpart to the dissolving consciousness of the subject, a dissolution which can be joyful ... or profoundly disorienting" (Spurr 142). By articulating the classroom as a collision of gases, Cooper risks *insubstantializing* students' experiences and lives, a move that Spurr argues allows the colonial center (Cooper's teacher?) to arise "out of an orientation that understands the Orient as a space of disorientation" (143).

What I hope for is a new "turn" in rhetorical and composition scholarship that combines spatial considerations with the contributions of queer studies in a way that

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<sup>54</sup> Cooper later characterizes Pratt's argument in a way that positions it as colonial, arguing that Pratt's pedagogy stems from contemporary anxieties about the changing role of the teacher in the classroom: "If we're no longer lecturers, then perhaps we can be cartographers or participant observers that assist the subjects of our ethnographies" (35).

recognizes how settler colonial practices and histories are central to both approaches.<sup>55</sup>

Queer theory has given us many scholars who offer a model for responsible queer and decolonial approaches to the intersections of space, sexuality, and rhetoric, such as Sara Ahmed, Smith, Morgenson, and Rifkin. We should also remember and rely on Anzaldúa's teaching that identity cannot be separated from our languages, from our land, or from our bodies. "I am my language," she writes, "Until I can take pride my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (81). And elsewhere, "*Tejanos* lost their land and, overnight, became the foreigners" (28). And again, "We are taught that the body is an ignorant animal; intelligence dwells only in the head. But the body is smart. It does not discern between external stimuli and stimuli from the imagination. It reacts equally viscerally to events from the imagination as it does to 'real' events" (59-60). And finally:

The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. (102)

The "dualistic thinking" that Anzaldúa asks us to uproot extends throughout settler society, emerging as the "taken-for-granted binaries" of man/woman, black/white, rich/poor, urban/rural, and colonizer/colonized that I explored in Chapter Three. In order

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<sup>55</sup> Many queer composition scholars have critiqued composition theory's "social turn" of the last few decades for failing to accommodate discussions of sexuality and queerness and have called for a "queer turn" (see Alexander and Wallace).

to challenge and disrupt these binaries and dualistic thinking, we need to engage with identities and histories in ways that are truly intersectional and that situate ourselves, our writings, and our classrooms in spaces shaped by the histories of the people who inhabit them. I conclude this chapter, and this dissertation, by proposing a decolonial queerscape pedagogy that reveals the overlays of sexuality and desire in the classroom while actively challenging the colonial histories of the academy and queer communities in settler society.

### **Settler Classrooms and a Decolonial Queerscape Pedagogy**

The U.S. academy is a settler institution that relies on, promotes, and perpetuates the ideologies of settler colonialism in the United States, including the notions that the United States has a “manifest destiny” to claim the lands, bodies, and knowledges of indigenous and non-white peoples for projects of white expansionism. Scholars and teachers who refuse to account for their participation in settler society perpetuate the traumas of settler colonization on the lands, bodies, ideas, and histories of colonized peoples. This is particularly true for queer scholars and teachers when one considers that, according to Morgensen, “[w]hite settler heteropatriarchy creates queers who resolve their exile through land-based relationships to disappeared Native people” by staking imaginary claims to indigenous cultural and sexual practices (6). It is a practice that courses through queer theory, as well. Driskill calls this an “old story within ‘the new queer studies’: Native people, Native histories, and ongoing colonial projects happening on our lands are included only marginally, when included at all” (“Doubleweaving,” 70). This refusal to acknowledge *and* centralize the experiences of Native people and Native

histories in queer theory, Driskill argues, means that queer theory's critiques risk reinforcing the settler colonial "master narratives" that justify violence against Native people simply by refusing to acknowledge Native bodies in the first place (75).

In imagining what a queer pedagogy might look like, I cannot help but think how imbricated settler colonial histories and logics are in the academy, both as a physical and ideological institution. I worry about the violence a queer pedagogy might perpetuate by failing to make Native and Queer/Two-Spirit<sup>56</sup> teachings central to its practice. In this essay, I propose a decolonial queerscape pedagogy, one that recognizes and challenges the heteronormative assumptions that permeate our classrooms and understands how these assumptions are central to the projects of settler colonization. Decolonization, writes Driskill, refers to "ongoing, radical resistance against colonialism that includes struggles for land redress, self-determination, healing historical trauma, cultural continuance, and reconciliation" ("Doubleweaving," 69).<sup>57</sup> A decolonial queerscape pedagogy centers the contributions of Native and Queer/Two-Spirit activists/scholars to practice "a decolonial work that is responsible to the land and lives it builds itself on" (86). I respond to Driskill's call by proposing a decolonial queerscape pedagogy that

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<sup>56</sup> The term "Two-Spirit" is an "intentionally complex" term employed by many Native GLBTQ people. Driskill writes that "*Two-Spirit* is a word that itself is a critique. ... It claims Native traditions as precedents for understanding gender and sexuality, and asserts that Two-Spirit people are vital to our tribal communities" ("Doubleweaving," 72-73).

<sup>57</sup> Decolonial critiques and projects differ from "postcolonial" critiques whose theories and stories reflect a different reality than that faced by Native people who still live on lands occupied by settler colonists. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith illustrates this tension when she quotes Aborigine activist Bobbi Sykes's response to a conference on post-colonialism: "What? Post-colonialism? Have they left?" (24).



asks teacher-scholars to ally with Native claims to sovereignty in order to challenge the invisibility of alternative sexual identities and histories in the settler classroom.

Every institution of higher education in the United States has a settler history. As Janice Gould points out, “It is obvious that there is not a university in this country that is not built on what was once native land” (81).<sup>58</sup> Insofar as they reside on contested lands gained through the actions of settler history and insofar as they reproduce settler ideologies through the production of traditionally Western forms of knowledge, universities and colleges are settler institutions. For example, Powell refuses to ignore the lived and recurring histories of violence and oppression upon which the academy is sustained. She shows how settler histories continue to shape academic discourse when she writes:

I believe that rhetoric as a discipline has been and continues to be complicit with the imperial project of scholarship in the United States. I believe that rhetoric as a discipline does not see the foundation of blood and bodies upon which it constitutes itself. I believe that many of us who work within the discipline participate daily in un-seeing, in denying, and, in doing so, perpetuate the myth of the empty continent. I believe that

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<sup>58</sup> From the beginning of colonization, educational projects, especially Indian boarding schools, were a key tool in forcing Natives to cut ties with their communities and assimilate into settler culture, often with the goals of creating docile laborers. For example, Deborah Miranda analyzes boarding school educational materials to show that these schools “had, at the center of their curriculum, no intention of educating American Indians for anything but vocational and subservient positions in the lowest strata society” (214).

scholarship in America can never be staked forth on neutral ground.

(“Blood and Scholarship,” 11)

Powell makes clear that imperial logics are more than just an unfortunate chapter in the history of the American academy. They continue to structure and inform our personal and professional actions as academics. That they do so without our knowing it is perhaps a hallmark of the strategies of settler power. As Morgensen aptly notes, “Settler colonialism is naturalized whenever conquest or displacement of Native peoples is ignored or appears necessary or complete” (16).

As an outpost of colonial power, the academy sets the terms for how we theorize our world. Settler educational systems rely on the production of a specific form of knowledge meant to bolster Western imperial conceptions of how the world is ordered. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, “Imperialism provided the means through which concepts of what counts as human could be applied systematically as forms of classification, for example through hierarchies of race and typologies of different societies. In conjunction with imperial power and with ‘science’, these classification systems came to shape relations between imperial powers and indigenous societies” (25).

The division of humanity into hierarchies is carried through the systematic organization of knowledge found in the universities. The methodologies and knowledges of the West are placed at the top of the hierarchy, categorized as rigorous and objective, while non-Western ways of knowing are debased as primitive, superstitious, biased, or subjective. Within the settler colonial research paradigm, indigenous knowledges are

replaced by supposedly more advanced approaches. “Deeply embedded in these constructs,” Smith points out, “are systems of classification and representation which lend themselves easily to binary oppositions, dualisms, and hierarchical orderings of the world” (55). These classificatory constructs constitute what she calls “research ‘through imperial eyes’ ... an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings” (56). What is knowable, in other words, is that which is organizable according to Western precepts.<sup>59</sup> Anything outside of these formulations is not true knowledge. This categorization also enacts a colonial violence. Powell remarks, “We have cut the wholeness of knowledge into little bits, scattered them to the four winds and now begin to reorganize them into categories invented to enable empire by bringing order to chaos and civilization to the savage” (“Listening,” 15).

The academy, and by extension, the academic classroom, constitute in part what I call a “settlerscape,” a visual and ideological horizon upon which the settler gaze is fixed, surveying, quantifying, and organizing according to the logics of settler colonialism (which are also, but not only, the logics of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy). Within the classroom, a microcosm of the settlerscape is recreated,

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<sup>59</sup> Michel Foucault traces this practice back to the “Classical Age” of Western culture, which divided all of knowledge, or the *episteme*, “in terms of the articulated system of a *mathesis*, a *taxinomia*, and a *genetic analysis*” (*Order*, 74). This articulation and division, he argues, informs Western analysis and research. “The sciences always carry within themselves the project, however remote it may be, of an exhaustive ordering of the world; they are always directed, too, towards the discovery of simple elements and their progressive combination; and at their centre they form a table on which knowledge is displayed in a system contemporary with itself” (74).

sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously, as a group of settler and colonized subjects join together to reenact and practice settler colonial rhetorical strategies that they will later employ in their “natural” progression from the university to the colonial marketplace.

One way in which the university classroom mirrors the larger settlerscape of the university is through the conscious construction of distance (read as objectivity) within the classroom. Smith points out that the concept of distance in research “is most important as it implies a neutrality and objectivity on behalf of the researcher. Distance is measurable. What it has come to stand for is objectivity, which is not measurable to the same extent” (56). Under this view, personal attachment and overt historical and sociopolitical ties to one’s research agendas leads to questions about one’s ability to remain “objective” in relation to their research, a standard which creates an unfairly steep barrier for researchers engaged in understanding and dismantling histories and systems that have subjugated and oppressed them and their communities.

This preoccupation with distance and objectivity extends to the university classroom as well. bell hooks notes that the classroom has become a place in which eros/passion is actively discouraged, leading to spaces of disengaged pedagogy that fails to provide transformative education for students. hooks argues that teachers who actively value their students and privilege the classroom experience are viewed with suspicion by an academic community that places research and publication at a premium over teaching. She argues:

Some of the suspicion is that the presence of feelings, of passions, may not allow for objective consideration of each student's merit. But this very notion is based on the false assumption that education is neutral, that there is some 'even' emotional ground we stand on that enables us to treat everyone equally, dispassionately. ... To allow one's feelings of care and will to nurture particular individuals in the classroom—to expand and embrace everyone—goes against the notion of privatized passion. (198)

hooks's observations about the dispassionate classroom reflect the intransigence of settler ideologies in the academy, from the field to the archive to the classroom. In the dispassionate classroom, the imperial center is again reconstructed, such that, as Smith explains, "Distance again separated the individuals in power from the subjects they governed" (55).

In the classroom, we may think of these "subjects" as both students and fields of study. A distance emerges between the student-subject and the instructor in the settler classroom. Instructors maintain an "objective" and dispassionate space between themselves and their students, allowing students little glimpse into their personal lives, no acknowledgment of the passions and preoccupations that must necessarily blur the lines between the instructor and their other identities beyond the classroom. The instructor exists solely as the conveyor of information/knowledge and the cipher through which to evaluate the progress and/or failure of each student to properly synthesize the information conveyed within the classroom.

We physically maintain this objective distance, as well. Within the settler classroom, we are trained (sometimes explicitly, sometimes through our own experiences as students) to lecture from a position of visibility, demonstrating our knowledge, when necessary, on boards or screens positioned at the eye line of students. The setup is one of masterful gaze: we command the attention of every student; we direct our attention to each student; we recognize and police the attentions a student may direct elsewhere, often calling the attention of the entire class to the student in the process. The setup might remind us of Foucault's theories of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* as an organizing principle to create docile bodies who internalize the gaze of an authority figure. Yet, it should also remind us of the imperial trope of surveillance, outlined by Spurr as "the originating gesture of colonization itself, making possible the exploration and mapping of territory which serves as the preliminary to the colonial order" (16). Through the panoptic implementation of surveillance, the classroom is surveyed, mapped, and explored, all means to the end of a controlled and "objective" academic experience for students and instructor alike.

The subjects of what we study, and how we divide our studies into "fields," also reflect colonial attitudes about the value of certain frameworks of knowledge. Smith writes that, from an indigenous perspective, Western research is "research which brings to bear, on any study of indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time, space and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialized forms of language, and structures of power" (42). This "cultural orientation" directs the colonial division of the world into

various branches of knowledge, or disciplines, which Foucault argues “appeared when man constituted himself in Western culture as both that which must be conceived of and that which is to be known” (*Order*, 345). Essentially, disciplinary boundaries exist to reflect and justify Western conceptions of modern humanity. The fact that indigenous and non-Western forms of knowledge are not accepted within this framework is because they reflect non-Western conceptions of humanity and the world.

The settler classroom is born out of this creation of the “governed subjects” of disciplinary knowledge. Each course promises students exposure to a specific form of knowledge or methodological approach to understanding the world. Within the classroom, the instructor is in control of this knowledge-subject, dictating what, how, and why it will be studied in the class. As in the first of the double-meanings of “subject,” the instructor again fulfills the role of the colonial administrator, displaying mastery of the knowledge-subject and demonstrating the appropriate critical “distance” one must keep within the academy. The students might be seen as “administrators in training,” learning through repetition and example how to engage with and manipulate the subject in ways that support the advancement of empire.

In the composition classroom, this enculturation can be rather direct. If every place is imbued with the authority of specific rhetorical conventions, a classroom in which rhetoric and composition is taught, practiced, and evaluated can be especially fraught with contestations of rhetorical authority. A classroom in which a Western/Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition is espoused as “rhetoric” (not even “proper rhetoric,” which would at least acknowledge other rhetorical forms while still twisting in

the knife) can be painful and shaming to students whose rhetorical practices come from other traditions. Valerie Balester (*Cultural Divide*) and Lee A. Tonouchi (“Da State of Pidgin Address”) have both made convincing arguments about the ways a rigid focus on “proper” rhetorical strategies can marginalize and discourage students raised in African-American and Pidgin rhetorical traditions. Remember, too, Powell’s critique quoted above of the failure of rhetoricians and the academy to acknowledge the histories of colonization and genocide upon which their discipline resides and the “foundation of blood and bodies upon which it constitutes itself” (“Blood and Scholarship,” 11). Because all rhetoric in the United States reflects the specific settler colonial histories of the lands on which it is practiced, a rhetoric and composition classroom that fails to account for its relationship to imperialism is especially complicit in bolstering the ideologies of the settlerscape. To refuse to acknowledge these histories in the classroom is to enact the same violences and even some new ones, reinscribing settler ideologies and rhetorics onto the bodies and identities of colonized students.

### **Queerscapes and Queer Colonization**

Part and parcel with settler ideology is the promotion of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, not as separate though aligned ideologies, but as central to the perpetuation of settler culture. Necessarily, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy are not promoted *as* ideologies but rather as natural and self-evident, a move which makes it deliberately difficult to challenge and dismantle them for decolonial purposes. Scholars working to decolonize queer theory, like Driskill, Morgensen, and Rifkin have demonstrated that decolonial work must account for the heteropatriarchal logics that



undergird settler colonization and that responsible queer theory must account for the ways in which homophobia and heteropatriarchy are inextricably tied to settler colonization. “Heteronormativity,” writes Rifkin, “is a key part of the grammar of the settler state. ... [C]ompulsory heterosexuality can be conceptualized as an ensemble of imperatives that includes family formation, homemaking, private propertyholding, and the allocation of citizenship” (37). The “allocation of citizenship” requires that subjects, queer and non-queer alike, promote the tenets of the settler state to receive the recognition of the settler state. The implications of this for queer studies, as Morgensen puts it, means that:

The problem is not that white, class-privileged, national inheritors of settler colonialism have been central to queer accounts. The problem is that all conclusions drawn from such accounts fail to explain not only all who are excluded from them but also all who are *included*: because the only possible explanation of queerness under white-supremacist settler colonialism is one that also interrogates that condition. Queer studies must examine settler colonialism as a condition of its own work. (26)

A responsible queer pedagogy must also account for the histories and realities of settler colonization. If the contemporary classroom represents a microcosm of the settlerscape, then it would follow that it would also be sustained by white supremacist and heteropatriarchal logics. It would also follow that the continued invisibility of these logics is central to the unchallenged perpetuation of the classroom settlerscape.

Such logics may become visible if we look to the spatial rhetorical strategies that queer communities have used to carve out spaces for community and sexual expression in homophobic society. Gordon Brent Ingram has theorized the construction of queer space in response to homophobic marginalization and repression. Sexual marginalization, he argues, leads to alienation, which in turn leads to the development of alternative social networks, which can lead to more marginalization. Together, the “cumulative interactions and the associated environmental constraints and opportunities” that arise in relation to these queer spaces form what Ingram calls a “queerscape” (28-29).<sup>60</sup>

Public space can often be a space of danger and hostility for queer people. In response to the oppression and policing of public spaces by a homophobic society, queer communities have responded to homophobia by making “oppositional use of public

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<sup>60</sup> One strategy to centralize power in the hands of settler subjects is by making invisible competing identities, ideologies, and histories without actually removing them, because settler society requires non-settler ways of being to convince itself that it provides a superior alternative. Often, these very categories are created in order to assert cultural and social divisions, which are then used to justify exclusion from the benefits of the settler state. For example, as Somerville has demonstrated, scientific discourses of racism and sexual perversity in the United States developed together to make sense of “cultural anxieties about ‘mixed’ bodies, particularly the mulatto, whose symbolic position as a mixture of black and white bodies was literalized in scientific accounts” (37). Further, as Cohen has noted, this development has led to the queering of nonnormative bodies and lives, outside of a simple white/non-white binary, that limits “the entitlement and status some receive from obeying a heterosexual imperative” (26). Settler colonialism provides the terms of discourse for these alternatives lest they speak their own realities in a way that threatens to undermine settler society’s supposedly self-evident claims to existence. In essence, settler colonial ideology pulls a bait-and-switch, acknowledging that non-settler forms of socialization threaten the settler state while describing as threatening the very parts of those alternative forms of socialization that are either not threatening or do not even exist.

space” in a way that reconstructs these spaces for queer use overtop the existing heteronormative uses of space. Ingram writes:

A queerscape is also an aspect of the landscape, a social overlay, where the interplays between assertion and marginalization of sexualities are in constant flux and the space for sexual minorities is “decentered,” in terms of increasingly supporting stigmatized activities and identities.

Queerscapes embody processes that counter those that directly harm, discount, isolate, ghettoize, and assimilate. A queerscape is, therefore, a cumulative kind of spatial unit, a set of places, a plane of subjectivities constituting a collectivity, which involve multiple alliances of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transsexuals and which support a variety of activities, transactions, and functions. ... Like the landscape, the queerscape is a cultural construct that provides a territorial basis for considering opportunities for and persistent disparities in access to public space and various respective services and amenities, as well as options for personal and collective expression. (40-41)

As Ingram describes it, queerscapes embody imaginative responses to systematic homophobia. Queerscapes are not necessarily “safe spaces” for queer action, but they do provide strategic spatial alliances for queer communities to engage in personal and communal queer expression.

In theorizing the queerscape, Ingram is not proposing a new construction of space but attempting to make sense of existing queer uses of space. His failure to

account for Indigenous and settler colonial histories in his theory, while disappointing, reflects the settler imaginaries created by many queer activists as they struggle for inclusion within the settler state.<sup>61</sup> Though Ingram sees queerscapes as alternatives to the “processes ... that directly harm, discount, isolate, ghettoize, and assimilate,” his description of this alternative is remarkably similar to the processes of settler colonization. For example, he claims that with a large number of queer-identified people, “there is a ‘queering’ of adjacent environments in terms of a limited safety in numbers as a means of countering repression and developing more diverse and dependable relationships” (41). Though developed in order to provide the resistance to homophobic oppression that strength-in-numbers provides, this process mirrors the processes of settlement practiced on Native lands and territories by the U.S. government. As a result, queerscapes have the potential to recreate the very structures of colonial oppression that perpetuate the heterosexism it seeks to undercut.

Opening up queerscapes to the critiques of queer Indigenous scholars and activists creates the possibility of a decolonized future broader than the aims of any single political group. Queer activists can learn much from the expertise of queer Indigenous people who “have been under the surveillance of white colonial heteropatriarchy since contact,” write Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Morgensen in the concluding essay of *Queer Indigenous Studies* (212). “Queer

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<sup>61</sup> Ingram does make reference to colonialism and empire, though he does so in a way that implies colonialism has ended: “Most of these conditions are regulated in terms of the overlapping vestiges (the societal artifacts) of colonialism and empire, as well as today’s flows of globalizing capital” (36-37).

Indigenous critiques,” they point out, “do not look for recognition from the nation-state for our pain and suffering because of identities, but seek to imagine other queer possibilities for emancipation and freedom for all peoples” (213). As Driskill argues elsewhere, “For Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ people and our allies, part of imagining our futures is through creating theories and activism that weave together Native and GLBTQ critiques that speak to our present colonial realities” (“Doubleweaving,” 70).

### **Decolonial Queerscape Classrooms: A Practice of Alliance and Resistance**

Revealing queerscapes in the classroom opens up pathways for challenging notions of access in the academy, as they relate to race, gender, sexuality, class, and colonization. Because queerscapes overlap with “normative” spaces, revealing and/or forming queerscapes in the classroom can be a productive way for students and teachers from multiple perspectives to understand the always personal histories of privilege and marginalization that are systematically enforced in settler culture, specifically the settler classroom.

But queerscapes also reflect the contours of the landscapes in which they are formed. Because the academy and classroom are also settlerscales, a queerscape classroom may easily become a colonial queerscape classroom that uncritically resides on the lands and ideas appropriated by settler colonialism. When we queer our classrooms without accounting for these histories and realities, we risk constructing what Powell terms a “prime narrative” that covers over difference in order to promote the illusion that we are “held together by the sameness of our beliefs” (“Down by the River,” 57). In reality, settler heteropatriarchy affects Native and non-Native queer

subjects differently, and if we want to challenge heteropatriarchy in the classroom, we need Native and non-Native alliances to “spur one another on to even more disruptive tactics” (57). Thus, when Ingram writes that “a queerscape is essentially a sum total of subjectivities, some more closely linked, for a time, than others,” we have to push this lest we rest on a “prime narrative” of multiculturalism that erases the colonial experiences of Natives and queer Natives on settler lands (43). We need to incorporate alliances (between queer and non-queer; between Native and non-Native) into this “sum total of subjectivities” so that the focus is more on the “closely linked” than the “sum total.”

Decolonizing the classroom is an endeavor fraught with many seemingly insurmountable obstacles, not least of which is the fact of the classroom’s location with the university system, which is, in addition to being housed on stole Native lands, also situated within regional and national accreditation systems steeped in settler colonial legacies. As long as we are required to evaluate students using normative grading systems, match institutional benchmarks, or justify the value of our classes by the number of students we can attract to them, and as long as these classes take place on contested lands, we will necessarily be participating in a colonial structure. In positing a decolonial queerscape pedagogy, I am proposing the emergence of what Ingram describes as “a plane of subjectivities constituting a collectivity” within the settler university, “a cumulative kind of spatial unit” composed of, and centering, the specific histories, practices, and identities of all subjects in the classroom, settler and non-settler

alike (41). As I envision it, a decolonial queerscape classroom begins at the intersection of three contested realities within the settler classroom: space, knowledge, and bodies.

Queerscapes emerge from within contestations of space and embody “constellations of sites of various habitudes and utilities” (Ingram 41). In the settler classroom, that space incorporates not only the classroom but also the surrounding environs and lands upon which the classroom/academy rests. These are spaces designed to actively ignore or discourage the intrusion of bodies and identities that threaten settler colonial authority. But because “the existence of the oppressed is necessary” to the existence of the oppressors (Freire 58), these unwanted subjectivities are often lumped together into an undifferentiated mass under the guise of multiculturalism, which can be “highly problematic for any minority group, and particularly for Native communities who are not necessarily seeking equality so much as working to maintain literal and rhetorical sovereignty” (King 211). Challenging settler space in the classroom requires both a vociferous acknowledgment of the contested lands on which the classroom is located as well as vigilance towards the construction of space within the classroom. Without this constant awareness, queerscape classrooms may perpetuate the “imaginaries of indigeneity” that queer non-Natives often pursue in making claims for settler recognition (Morgensen 227).

Acknowledging contested lands requires that we situated our classes within a space larger than the classroom but specific to the immediate environment. At the most basic level, this means we need to know the history of the lands on which we teach, a history that includes the stories of all of the land’s inhabitants. Rather than seeing our

classes as a zero-point from which learning begins anew each semester, we should make use of institutional histories that have resulted in the specific spaces in which we teach. At Texas A&M University, for example, my students and I conduct archival research into the histories of marginalized communities in the university and surrounding communities. In doing so, we fulfill university requirements for conducting primary research and practicing rhetorical techniques in the Advanced Composition course I teach, but we also learn how research methodologies and rhetorical strategies are shaped by histories of contested space in the region.

We must be vigilant about the contestations of space that happen within the classroom as well. As sites of privilege, classrooms have historically been cordoned off to all but a few of the most privileged in settler society. Even with the removal of official barriers to admission, unofficial barriers exist, and higher education continues to be largely populated by members of privileged groups. The classroom, then, when populated by students and instructors from marginalized communities and backgrounds, is a contested space. As a contested space, we must be critically engaged with how we fill this space. How does the class physically align itself in relation to the classroom, for example? Because queerscapes make use of marginal spaces, we should seek to identify the marginal spaces in our classrooms.

At my university, I often teach in a “standard” classroom with five or six rows of desks, a podium, and a chalkboard at the front. In this room, the marginal spaces tend to emerge as the less visible desks situated near the back or side of the classroom. As a white male instructor at a traditionally conservative university, I notice that the seats



near the front and center are largely populated by apparently white students, students who, through the course of the semester, tend to speak more in class and feel more comfortable challenging me and engaging the other students in discussion (whether invited or not). Students of color, working class students, and queer students, on the other hand, disproportionately populate the marginal spaces. The students in these spaces tend to contribute less in class discussions, but I also notice that they tend to engage more personally (and more creatively) with the subject matter when writing classroom projects.

Some semesters, I reveal my sexual orientation as a gay man to my students. When I do this, I sometimes sense a shift in the physical and emotional dynamics of the classroom. Many times, the “front and center” students become more comfortable challenging me or calling out my “agenda” as a queer teacher. The students in the marginal spaces, on the other hand, do not necessarily contribute more to my prompts in class, but I do notice that they will engage with the “front and center” students more, often challenging their assertions and providing alternative rationales based on their personal histories and experiences.

I attribute this shift not to a greater acceptance of my sexuality from the students in the marginal spaces but to a recognition of the shifting contestations of space in the classroom. As a white male, my authority in this space is often unchallenged, and even supported, by the students who tend to sit as close as possible to me in the classroom. After coming out as queer to my students, the space that I occupy in the classroom is suddenly revealed to be a contested space to students of privilege in the class, though

marginalized students may have been aware of it as a contested space well before I come out.<sup>62</sup>

These vectors extend beyond our classrooms, too. Scott Lyons has argued that key to Native sovereignty is a relationship with the land that is “made truly meaningful by a consistent cultural refusal to interact with that land as private property or purely exploitable resource. Land, culture, and community are inseparable” (458). To decolonize our classrooms, we must realize that our classes do not end at the walls of the classroom; we and our students are responsible to our communities in which we live and the land on which we teach, work, and study. Morgensen says that, “[h]aving questioned desires to belong to the settler state or to possess Native history, non-Native queers can consider the groundlessness that follows critiquing settlement as a condition of their existence” (226-27). This “groundlessness,” he argues, can be a productive space from which alliances between Native and non-Native queers can be formed. Likewise, facilitating this groundlessness in our classes can open our classes, and the academy, up to decolonial alliances in which we work together for decolonization.

The construction of space and land and the limitations to access in these spaces are tied to access to knowledge within the academy. Access to knowledge (and access of knowledge) is key to challenging the forces that separate the “plane of subjectivities”

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<sup>62</sup> My experiences and tactics are not meant to be generalizable beyond my own classroom. As an able-bodied, white, male teacher, I am able to access privileges many other instructors, queer and non-queer, may not when identifying and teaching towards marginal spaces. Where I hope this example is useful is in making visible the vectors of power and privilege that converge in my body, the bodies of my students, and the space we call the classroom.

that constitute a queerscape from the privileges enjoyed by hetero-colonial subjects. As I discussed above, colonial cultures construct what counts as “knowledge” in Western culture so as to affirm colonialism’s conception of humanity and the privileged role of the settler subject in the world. In a decolonial queerscape classroom, we should be open to other forms of knowledge, such as those drawn from personal experiences, that are formed as a community, and that are temporally relevant or have *kairotic* value. This means that we must be open to the possibility of students becoming the providers of knowledge within the classroom. When students engage their wealth of personal knowledge, and when they pool their knowledges together, they are better positioned to take advantage of the “personal and collective expression” offered by the queerscape (41). As Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, power inculcates self-doubt and denial in the oppressed who are taught to believe that only the “professor” has the knowledge. “Almost never do they realize that they, too, ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men” (63).

Finally, a decolonial queerscape pedagogy accounts for the contestations of bodies within the classroom. This requires, first of all, recognizing that there *are* bodies in the classroom, and importantly, that these bodies can form erotic alliances. hooks argues that the de-eroticization of the classroom perpetuates the binaristic separation of the mind from the body, and discourages enthusiasm and passion within the classroom. Noting that the erotic is not merely confined to sexual drives (though these should not be ignored) but constitute a force that propels us to self-actualization, hooks writes:

Given that critical pedagogy seeks to transform consciousness, to provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully, to some extent it must rely on the presence of the erotic in the classroom to aid the learning process. ... Understanding that eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that it can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know, enables both professors and students to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination. (194-95)

hooks argues that teachers need to be open to allowing passion to emerge in their classrooms, first from themselves and then from their students. In the process, “the classroom becomes a dynamic place where transformations in social relations are concretely actualized and the false dichotomy between the world outside and the inside world of the academy disappears” (195). In allowing the erotic and the passionate to emerge in the classroom, the erotic alliances of the queerscape can begin to form, and the class can begin to interrogate (passionately!) the “landscape of erotic alien(n)ations” that constitutes every classroom but cannot be examined without the revelation of the queerscape (Ingram 27).

These three contested realities of the settler classroom—space, knowledges, and bodies—are interwoven, and deciphering the settler colonial ideologies that informs one requires that we decipher them all. Restricted access to space limits access to certain forms of knowledge, while the colonization of other spaces may lead to the theft of other

knowledges. The bodies we inhabit, and the erotic attachments we form with them, may be used against us to discredit our knowledges or deny us access to lands, to places, to learning, or to community. By revealing the queerscapes formed in relation to the settlerscales of the classroom, we move closer to understanding and reclaiming these contested realities in the classroom and in our lives.

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