18. The Anthropologist's Shadow:
The Closet, the Warehouse, the Lesbian as Artifact

Catherine Lord

In 1994, Millie Wilson and I spent a great deal of time in Santa Fe, New Mexico, looking for lesbians. Most of the time we did this across from the Inn of the Anasazi at the state photo archives. It tends to be either way too hot or way too cold in Santa Fe. Whichever, it was easier to look indoors. We had been invited to New Mexico to produce a project on lesbians, or as lesbians—the finer theoretical distinctions between these performances was and would remain bureaucratically unexplored—by an organization called Site Santa Fe. A contradiction in terms, which is to say a nonprofit corporation funded by wealthy Anglos to boost the market for contemporary art in northern New Mexico, Site Santa Fe proposed to serve as a locomotive of aesthetic gentrification. In the summer of 1995 it would, literally, put up a circus tent in the middle of town to host an avant-garde extravaganza, in addition to dispensing grants to young artists, sponsoring lectures, and taking over the entire fine arts museum and an abandoned warehouse for exhibition space. This last, which would garner in column inches equal parts resentment from locals and adulation from outsiders, was titled Longing and Belonging: from the Faraway Nearby. Only three of the artists belonged, if by that one meant they were residents of New Mexico, and two of them had arrived recently. The other twenty-nine, whether or not we longed, which not all of us did, came from somewhere else: New York, for instance, Los Angeles, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Berlin, Mexico City, Osaka, Havana. Et cetera.

We had been invited, then, from far away, to intersect with a region, to do something specific in a site, to “engage,” according to the curators, “the rapidly changing relationships among individuals, communities, and global networks and institutions.” In a show that aimed to deliver a sly critique of U.S. identity politics to a fractious multicultural community by going transnational—the catalog was careful to
list all countries that could adhere to each artist—our real nationality was lesbian, though that of course could not be included as a valid address. We had entered the artists' service sector, the "site-specific project," a phenomenon evolved in response to the public service demands of funding agencies, museums' desire to expand their audience base, and the needs of those in rapidly growing curatorial ranks to find something distinguishing for artists to do.

We passed many hours in the archives, a one-room affair adjoining the museum. "Lesbian" was not a category in the filing system. "Women" were barely there, in fact, though buildings, roads, livestock, landscape, politicians, soldiers, priests, and various stages in the destruction of indigenous cultures were well represented. The only solution, or the only solution that appealed to us, was to examine every photograph with a human being in it, looking for lesbians, or women who could, or might, or would have been lesbians, or women who might be seen as lesbians, or women who dressed like lesbians, or women in whom we, as lesbians, could take pleasure. Our standards for inclusion were conceptually generous, theoretically informed, and coated in protective irony. Nonetheless, we felt ridiculous, two middle-aged schoolteachers sitting side by side at a library table flipping through folders, taking notes, afraid to tell the archivist, a civil war buff with a photographic memory, what we were really after in case he wouldn't release his copy prints to our archive, wouldn't let our strategic fictions erode the bedrock of the history he was trained to conserve.

We never explained ourselves to the archivist, who kept pleading with us to be more precise in our search, to reflect more carefully on how to describe the object of our interest so that he could help us. Skeptical that the door to our closet actually opened onto his archive, we were instead methodical. We had salted the field. We knew no archive could withstand our fantasy, and so, of course, we found evidence of the culture we had already invented in order to be able to have our desire. These images we would crop to extreme, deliberately decontextualizing detail, and then greatly enlarge so as to evoke and construct an erotics of lesbian looking. We had in mind images that would make visible not the homosexual body, but homosexuality under construction, not the physiognomy or costume of the lesbian, but a means to suggest the conditions in which she might make herself visible, not her appearance but the circumstances in which she might be said to appear. We wanted to make visible not the Lesbian, reified, but the nexus of minor and material transgression that might enable the lesbian to be imagined. We used, therefore, images like the following: the soft bellies and breasts of a group of girls around the turn of the century, cross-dressed in suits and vests and pants; the suggestive proximity of the hands of two Santa Fe rodeo queens in the 1950s, doubtless grandmothers by now; the solitary figure of a woman in a tailored suit awkwardly clutching a small leather handbag; the trim torsos of a group of New Mexico anthropology professionals standing next to a filing cabinet, fractionally too close to each other; and, especially, a couple of images of passing women, one the wife of a prominent anthropologist engaged in a double transgression, a presumably private performance as a male, breasts strapped flat and, stripes
Figure 1. Millie Wilson and Catherine Lord, *Something Borrowed* (detail), 1995, mixed-media installation. Color coupler print, 24 x 14 inches, photographic detail from anonymous, *Miss Rodeo de Santa Fe*, Santa Fe, New Mexico, c. 1965. Photograph by Ken Marchionno; courtesy of Museum of New Mexico, negative 29576.
painted across her chest, as the Pueblo ceremonial figure of a koshare, and the other, a civil war soldier identified only as “Davis, missing left hand,” but unable to button the front of her jacket across her breasts and doubtless missing something else of central importance to the formation of the state and its archive.

I expect we could have found equivalent images in any large public collection. We were, however, in New Mexico, commissioned to make a project specific to the site that had invited us to mediate it, that is to say, a territory colonized for four hundred years, a territory whose natural resources had long ago been transported far away. Regardless, we were obliged, in some ineffable but distinctly contractual way, through our skill with “material and spatial means,” our ability to “be sympathetic [to] a very specific regional context,” to colonize the site all over again. We undertook to do this not only in spite of whatever skill and sympathy we brought to the region, but precisely because of these qualities. We were working in the service sector—that is, the arts—now deployed to temper processes of colonialism generated by the movement, accumulation, and relocation of transnational capital. If that sounds too abstract, let me ground it in a few of the realities of northern New Mexico: an escalation of real estate values that has rendered the majority of Santa Fe residents Anglo, displacing barrio inhabitants into rural ghettos; a burgeoning local economic sector devoted to various AIDS services and funded by an influx of gay Anglo men seeking “quality of life”; a proliferation of pueblo casinos designed to rectify a long-standing trade deficit by relieving Anglo tourists of their dollars; and, most lately, in the spring of 1998, the removal of the right foot of an equestrian statue of Don Juan de Oñate, a protest by the Acoma against festivities in honor of the man who had in 1599 ordered the amputation of the right foot of every man over the age of twenty-five in the pueblo as punishment for failing to provide food to Spanish soldiers.5

Under such circumstances, the figure of the anthropologist was bound to surface in our work, complicit as the discipline has been in the processes of American and European colonization. Interpreters, buffers, sympathizers, translators, entrepreneurs, informants, refugees, scholars, and artists, anthropologists in New Mexico, as elsewhere, have functioned as one of the region’s extractive industries, along with mining, logging, and ranching. The nineteenth century saw not only the deforestation of New Mexico’s mountains to make cattle fences and railroad ties, the scarring of the earth by removing from it those metals and minerals profitable to industrialization, but also the attempt to “clean out” the pueblos, “ethnologically speaking,” so that one “tidy little collection” after another could be dispatched to the Smithsonian Institution.6

The photographs of one such figure, the anthropologist Matilda Coxe Stevenson, were well represented in the state photo archives, particularly the period of her residence in the Zuni pueblo, in western New Mexico, just before the turn of the century. A large woman who evidently never allowed conditions in the field to permit modification of her Victorian lady’s costume, Stevenson produced her own amateur photographic documentation with an early Kodak camera, basically a lightproof box with a pinhole. You push the button, we do the rest. The consumer would mail the entire
contraption off to Kodak and get another one back in a few weeks, loaded, along with a set of small round prints. As a result of these twin technologies of memory and desire, whatever Stevenson believed she was photographing—pots, natives, ceremonies, ladders—was obscured by the ample shadow she cast across the subjects of her professional attention. There's no point in resisting the seduction of some metaphors, particularly when one is entirely complicit in their late-twentieth-century reincarnation. “Look,” we said, whispering to each other under the watchful eye of the civil war buff, “if we crop out the top half they'll read like pottery bowls. Perfect.” We smiled. It was a moment of mischievous intimacy between two women who had for almost ten years collaborated in love and in work. It was an intimacy that enabled us both to “be” lesbians for the context of an exhibition of the international avant-garde and to “see” lesbians outside that context. It was a moment in which it was personally and creatively evident that the project we had undertaken represented a serendipitous intersection between our lives, our work, and the theoretical foundations for our different practices, Wilson being primarily a visual artist and I primarily a writer and curator. “Public art” and “queer theory” were having intercourse around and through our lesbian bodies. We could perform, embody, register, and fabricate queerness on all sorts of levels.

It should be said now, in that case, that the various intimacies then existing between my lover, my friend, and my collaborator have ended. Change of person, meaning I lose that voice which renders conventional narratives of artistic collaboration. In describing our work, I have neither pronoun nor tense: to use the first person in either singular or plural is both necessary and a fable; I can't write in that fictive historical present that implies unbroken forward movement from the past. Nonetheless, if it is obvious that the specificity of our project evolved from two regions, one located in the arid regions of the American Southwest and one located in our hearts, the erasure of one of these sites may productively denaturalize a narrative of place by bringing queer theory to bear, and denaturalize a narrative of queerness by bringing to bear a politics of place.

Back, then, to another relationship between women, involving Matilda Coxe Stevenson and We'wha, the Zuni lhamana, or berdache, the former carefully acknowledged by feminist anthropologists, the latter passionately embraced by some queer theorists. I read it as an encounter of irreconcilable gender formations before the figure of the homosexual, only then being invented in American and European cities, had been able to colonize New Mexico. A formidable woman, eulogized after her death as “able, self-reliant, and fearless, generous, helpful, and self-sacrificing,” that is, by an inventory of attributes arguably gendered male, Stevenson first arrived in the Zuni pueblo with her husband in 1879, under the aegis of the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology. She made numerous return visits, continuing even after her husband's death in 1888. One of the first American women anthropologists, Stevenson in 1904 produced a massive monograph on the Zuni. She was also, to engage in a calculated anachronism, a ballbuster, criticized for high-handedness, throwing her money around,
disrespecting pueblo peoples, pushing her way into activities restricted to Zuni males, and photographing where she shouldn’t. The sickly but sartorially uninhibited Frank Hamilton Cushing, her anthropological competitor in mining Zuni culture, received a letter from a male colleague that caustically forewarned him of “her fair face” and “gentle voice.”11 (“Not!” we would now add.) Stevenson accused Cushing of being an embarrassment to his gender, among other things. “Frank Hamilton Cushing,” she wrote on the back of a photograph of the anthropologist, “in his fantastic dress worn while among the Zuni Indians. . . . He even put his hair up in curl papers every night. How could a man walk weighted down with so much toggery?”12 The Zuni, allowing the two anthropologists more room to maneuver than the anthropologists could imagine reciprocating, had a pragmatic solution to these delicate frictions of gender and nation. Cushing they allowed to dress up as a Bow priest, helping him to become the “White Indian.”13 To Stevenson they allotted the prayer sticks used by Zuni men, telling her: “Though you are a woman you have a head and a heart like a man, and you work like a man, and you must therefore make offerings such as men make.”14

These are the circumstances under which Stevenson entered into a relationship with We’ wha, a potter and weaver, not to mention the tallest, strongest, most prosperous, and most intelligent person in Zuni. We’ wha became Stevenson’s protector, informant, friend, and laundry woman. Stevenson took We’ wha to Washington with her in 1886, where the Zuni “princess” stayed for six months at the Stevenson house. Notwithstanding her “masculine look” and generally “massive” style, We’ wha turned her “sweet smile” onto Washington,15 dazzling everyone from President Cleveland to the ladies of the Women’s Anthropological Society, which Stevenson had founded the year before. Back in Zuni, Stevenson would attend We’ wha’s deathbed, displacing the family in order to record those last, precious words. It is impossible to determine when Stevenson, who in her magnum opus accounted for her friend as both “she” and “he,”16 learned definitively that We’ wha was biologically male. That Stevenson had the courtesy to gender her dying friend female has bolstered the interpretation that her revelation occurred after We’ wha’s death, in some sort of epiphany over the dead body of the “transvestite.” Certainly, jokes about Stevenson’s letting a six-foot Zuni “maiden” infiltrate the best boudoirs in Washington were making the rounds by the early 1900s.17

I’m not suggesting that Stevenson and We’ wha were having a lesbian fling out in the pueblo, or that We’ wha would be rendered intelligible by the term “transgender,” or that Stevenson and We’ wha were narrative foremothers of M. Butterfly or The Crying Game. Or Driving Miss Daisy. It’s undeniable that they got (it) on, impenetrable what they got on, and indecipherable what “(it)” might be in that impossible relationship, at once granted by colonialism the conditions in which it might appear and annihilated by the visibility of that encounter. I was interested in the fact that these two women of intelligence, strength, and learning were partially illegible to each other—as women. This compelled because it suggested a trope, a way to destabilize relations between “women,” and from thence, the cultural specificity of “lesbian” (i.e., a white, twentieth-century thing) in the various sites we were mediating, a way to fabri-
cate into the project the knowledge that things are not what they seem, to suggest a racial of female, and thence an erasing of the firm boundaries of the category "lesbian."

Millie Wilson and I positioned this encounter between the anthropologist and the berdache in various ways, in addition to the photographs that revealed little more of a people's "culture" than the shadow of a large woman whose Victorian costume owed the crisp edges of its outline to that untranslatable gender possibility she had hired to do her laundry. Using the form of a printed type work, free for the taking, we put the story out as a fiction, a compilation contrived from phrases appropriated from Stevenson's anthropological lapses in objectivity: "You brought improvements, soap and glass and candles. She refused to wash your clothes, at first. She was still more averse to ironing, but you persuaded her. You compared the color of her skin to that of the Chinese." There was something irresistible about launching into circulation a kind of uncredited, unanchored, unsettling language about identities that are not heterosexual.\textsuperscript{18} I fantasized this deviant litter defacing tidy Santa Fe when tourists missed the trash can, or going home with curious children to corrupt the family values. Too, there was something appealing about housing these anonymous notes in a pun, a nonfunctional table, a table titled \textit{Soft Parts}, designed to supply stories from drawers perpetually open and painted in the most corrosive of Santa Fe-style colors.

Most saliently, though, we tried to fabricate the berdache story into the exhibition by sending a cloud through the blue New Mexico sky, that is, by placing a large sculptural white wig against a blue wall and titling it in a way that might mark and thus limit the status of those responsible for producing it.\textsuperscript{19} \textit{White Girl} made the room pivot against a six-foot-tall, white, weird, excessive, hairy \textit{THING}—in other words, a kind of bleached version of the monstrous feminine. \textit{White Girl} was festooned with the various white blanks—pots, feathers, beads, fur, and so forth—sold in craft stores
and used in the manufacture of "native" tourist goods in New Mexico. Her central axis appropriated the most obvious element of the headdress of the Kolhamana, the Zuni ceremonial figure that represents the berdache. In the headdress, this stylized division of hair, one side down as a male would wear it, one side looped up as a female would wear it, forms a representation of both/neither man/woman that has become an icon and symbolic focus for various cultures: queer academics, gay organizers, gay artists, and Native Americans of sexual preferences that include gay, lesbian, and various forms of "berdache."

These elements, then—photographs, wig, and take-away texts—were intended to color and to queer the central and most complex part of the installation. It never got a title, as I remember, but it came to be called, conversationally, The Wall. When we—to return to that problematic pronoun—were developing a proposal for Site Santa Fe, the logic was, as far as I can reconstruct it, that if we had to spend a lot of time on the road, we might as well not spend most of it with straight people. I suppose we turned ourselves into faux anthropologists, as we ironically described ourselves and as the curators later made official, both as an escape from our straight work worlds and in protest against a genre that Hal Foster has called "pseudo-ethnographic reports in art that are sometimes disguised as travelogues for the world art market."20 If the request was to produce a project about lesbians specific to a geographical region, the challenge was to truck the dirt into the museum in a way that would perhaps reduce the ethnographic gaze to a squint. Our proposal to Site Santa Fe, then, written with lesbian tongue well inside lesbian cheek, was to go to New Mexico, find fifty to one hundred
individuals who "lived outside the institutions of heterosexuality," and borrow from them an object of personal significance, entirely of their choosing, that they had not themselves made. These we proposed to install in the Museum of Fine Arts, along with a text written by the lenders addressing the significance of each object.

New Mexico is a big state. Suffice it to say that we drove thousands of miles, distributed flyers, advertised, attended gatherings that ranged from gay youth groups to church services, women's night at the hot springs to pueblo dances, incurred a huge phone bill, and after about a year's work persuaded eighty-three individuals to lend to the Museum of Fine Arts for six months an inanimate object that would fit inside a twelve-by-twelve-inch box.

The lenders to Something Borrowed, as the project came to be called, almost all from northern New Mexico, ranged in age from seventeen to eighty-three. They included Anglos, Hispanics, members of various indigenous nations, and African Americans. Their occupations were various: a good sprinkling of artists, writers, students, and professors, a few anthropologists and schoolteachers, as well as a psychologist, a lawyer, a fireman, a waiter, a chiropractor, a curandera, a builder, a rancher, a judge, a janitor, an electrician, a singer, a baker, a community organizer, a clerk, a manufacturer of sex toys, an ex-prostitute, and an ex-cop. The idea, however, was neither to "out" the lenders nor to interpellate them to visibility under the culturally specific label "lesbian." Nothing in the framing devices of the installation, therefore,
said “lesbian.” Nothing in the loan requirements dictated that a lender be publicly identified by her full name, her legal name, her place of residence, or her occupation. Nothing in the loan requirements obligated the lender to be “a lesbian,” or even a woman. Indeed, *Something Borrowed* netted a few practicing heterosexuals who didn’t mind associating with lesbians, as well as two men, one straight and one gay, who lent an object in memory of women who had lived in long relationships with women but who they insisted would never have described themselves as lesbian. It also included objects lent by women of various ages who found the label repellent, irrelevant, or simply less central than other adjectives. I hope that we invented a structure of visibility that allowed the category “lesbian” to dominate while at the same time undermining the predictable essentializing reactions by fogging exactly that visibility, instead foregrounding revelations that had nothing to do with sexuality or intimacy, encouraging the use of codes, making spaces for silences, allowing the name withheld to function as both shield and provocation.

If this structure was a means to withhold the object of the ethnographic gaze by selectively obscuring the legibility of an essentializing category, it was countered by displaying the borrowed objects in a way that would titillate with the promise of exactly such a reading, a reading made inevitable by the site in which we were working. In New Mexico, a state where anthropology and its effects are ubiquitous, anything on a shelf with a label reads as a sign of culture, a material trace, probably stolen, of a group already declared to be other. (The fifty thousand tourists who visited the Museum of Fine Arts that summer did so on the same ticket that admitted them to the anthropological museum up the hill.) An eighty-foot wall of objects on plexiglass shelves, arranged in a grid, was a strategic tease, anthropology conceived so that it could not help but fail, so that any disciplinary hopes for order would be buried under material specificity. There was no conceptual rationale whatsoever for the arrangement of the objects, besides the formal commitment to create a nonhierarchal visual field and putting anything really expensive out of reach.

There were, as one would expect, objects that more or less clearly signaled a lesbian identity: the 1927 Victory edition of *The Well of Loneliness*, lent by a retired and still closeted schoolteacher; a motorcycle helmet with a pink triangle; lent by a nineties dyke, and a motorcycle helmet with a woman’s symbol, lent by a seventies lesbian; two brown-skinned Barbies having at it; lent by a young Chicana-about-town; a certificate of marriage from the Metropolitan Community Church, lent by a recovering alcoholic; a coming-out journal; a blank journal, a gift from the lender’s first lesbian lover, a gift in turn received from her mother; and the world’s first functional and reasonably priced dildo harness, made by two young entrepreneurs.

There were objects explicable as “lesbian” only in terms of the lender’s story: one of the rings exchanged by two thirteen-year-old girls, who remained lovers for five years; the basket in which a prostitute used to keep her condoms; a tassel that marked the moment of a lawyer’s graduation as well as her return to the closet; the worn cloths with which a mother had washed the backs of her daughter and her daughter’s
lover, signaling her reluctant acceptance of the relationship by offering them the same gesture of sensual intimacy that had been a ritual in her relationship to her husband; the plastic bucket used to haul water by the dykes on a separatist back-to-the-land collective; the kente cloth doll two middle-aged professionals gave to their recently adopted African American infant son; a videotape of the Sound of Music with Julie Andrews on the cover; the vanity license plate that two New York stockbrokers put on the RV in which, having cashed in their options, they fled the rat race; the coffee pot used by the photographer Laura Gilpin and her “companion” Betsy Forster on their camping trips in the 1930s around the Navajo reservation, the place where they could be most themselves; a hand-made card given in 1975 to the homecoming queen at the University of New Mexico, the only such queen in history to arrive at her festivities in a dykey three-piece suit; the pink plastic lunch box carried by a house painter to her jobs with all-male crews; a scrapbook page that memorialized the lender’s mother, who ran Santa Fe’s only gay bar for twenty years and on her deathbed had the pleasure of having her daughter come out to her; the Othello sheath knife acquired by a young tomboy; the jacket patches worn by the Sirens, Albuquerque’s lesbian bikers; a glove used by the Baby Ruths in their softball games in the hot desert sun; and a spinster’s ring on a rubber monster woman, lent by an eminent folklorist.

There were tributes of all kinds to love and family and death: Aunt Nelly’s cup and saucer, from the daughter of a family that talked things out over coffee; the gardening gloves, one of his and one of hers, used by one artist’s parents; the wool comb made in the 1970s by an uncle who went to Vietnam and didn’t come back the same; the lures used by a grandfather who taught the lender to fish in silence and killed himself one Valentine’s Day; the seamstress’s tool used by a musician’s mother to pull the
Figure 6. Millie Wilson and Catherine Lord, Something Borrowed (detail), 1995, mixed-media installation. Camp coffee pot, c. 1920, loaned by Jerry Richardson, Santa Fe, administrative judge, age 45. Photograph by Ken Marchionno.
buttons through denim fabric in the jeans factory in El Paso where she worked for thirty-five years; a sliver of bone in a silver Navajo box, saved by one student from her mother's cremated remains; the music box to which a couple in Oklahoma used to dance, a gift to them from their children, who saved pennies to buy this luxury; a notebook of songs loaned by a cowboy, part of a collection he inherited from a woman who had seen him through his childhood in the ranch country south of Santa Fe by teaching him to play the banjo and whom he hesitated to disrespect by naming her a lesbian; the tourist guide produced by a woman who passed as a man, lent by her companion of twenty years; a toy given by a grandmother; and a drawing of a cat lent by a woman who still mourned the child who had made it.

There were testaments to hate: the photograph and medals of a woman dishonorably discharged from the Air Force for homosexuality; a book on the right wing, lent
by two Albuquerque businesswomen; a homemade toy abandoned after a homophbic mother had ended her daughter’s friendship with an older woman; and a base- ball glove lent by an engineer whose father had raised her as his son but, when she confessed to an interest in girls, bragged about pushing a queer under the wheels of a truck. There were tributes to finding a self: a runner’s medal, that last pack of cigarettes, a collection of political buttons, an artist’s keys, an adobe brick, a child’s life vest; a doll made of a soda bottle and sea grass, so that its nappy hair would be as splendid as the lender’s; a paperback copy of Paula Giddings’s *When and Where We Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*.

And finally, there were fables, riddles, and admonitions: the pair of dykes lent by an electrician who had the daily pleasure of cutting wire with a pun; the joke glasses lent by a teenager who didn’t want to go below the surface; the photograph of a woman in a bouffant hairdo amid a sea of uniformed men, lent by a woman who had been the only female graduate in the 1964 class of the Albuquerque Police Academy; and, lent anonymously, by an anthropologist, an empty shelf “to stand for the manifest but elusive range of invisible and unnamed women who live together or alone, among all classes, everywhere in New Mexico.”

It was a queer place, this wall informed by the closet, or more accurately, this wall that performed and formed the closet, which is of course hardly ever a closet, in the conventional sense of an architectural receptacle for those kinds of private property intended for rotating display, but rather a bedroom, a studio, a garage, a trailer, a kitchen, a bar, an office, a classroom, a casita, a cabin, a hogan, or a file cabinet, a drawer, an armorio, a locker, a wallet, a tool chest, a basket, or just an old cardboard box. To imagine that these assorted doors and lids and flaps could or would possibly open onto one piece of queer territory called lesbian, one coherent community, one culture, was to catch oneself sweating to invent a fiction both reductive and redundant, or so I still hope. It is also to suggest the delicate, often treacherous, negotiations around issues of visibility that hounded the project. The price of visibility is high for queers and other deviants, since it provides both the solace of community and the curse of pathology. We neither wanted to pay that price, at least in full, or ask our collaborators to do so. At least we wanted to haggle. We were trading in paradox. We had gathered a collection of artifacts from a finite set of individuals who could not be accommodated under the label our presence as lesbians, especially a brace of domesticated lesbians, was supposed to authenticate. Verifiably lesbian in part because we were coupled, able to find the members of our tribe because we performed coupledom by flaunting it as both bait and camouflage, our role in the site-specific recuperation of identity politics was to reveal insider information, to serve as native informants, to solicit and to certify a singular culture to which we were said to belong, to which we had to belong in order to have a nationality legible to the terms of the exhibition. In other words, the artists needed strategies that would at least postpone their capture as ethnographic objects. In this sense, the wall was a collaborative performance between two rogue anthropologists and a motley band of natives who at the least wanted to
represent themselves and at the most didn’t want someone else’s culture to manifest itself as a by-product of their pleasure.

In this intersection between queer theory and site-specific art, between the venerable institutions of the domestic closet and the museum warehouse, between “private” storage space and public treasury, between two theorized queers and a specific pomo market, there were bound to be slippages. It was clear every step of the way that *Something Borrowed* ran the risk of either being expelled from visibility altogether or corrected so that it could register in a heterosexual field of vision. It was more than once suggested that we might like to locate our project in a site out of the mainstream, usually in one of those (innumerable) houses way out in the country where two women used to live together. On other occasions, meetings with the museum staff sparked paranoia about putting “uncurated” material on public view. “This is a conservative town,” it would be said. “There are lots of lesbians and gays in New Mexico. People are very tolerant here, but they don’t want it shoved in their faces.” The real fear, I would say, was that the lesbian phallus would penetrate the museum. But it was no joke. We had already strolled in through the barn door. We were sitting at the conference table. The museum therefore had to achieve a bureaucratic sublimation of its fears, which engendered a panic attack about the possibility that someone might lend us a dildo (though it seemed unrealistic to expect that anyone would give up her dildo on a six-month museum loan) or that someone might use “obscene” language in her text (though it remained unclear whether obscene meant the f-word, the c-word, the p-word, or whether just the l-word would suffice). These discussions were, mercifully, rendered moot when one of the museum’s chief curators suddenly left town. Though the story may well be apocryphal, local scuttlebutt had it that the departure involved the accidental demolition of a pottery bowl while engaged in the on-site practice of heterosexuality with one of the museum guards.

During the process of installation, we were asked by the museum director to consider the possibility of putting one piece in the show on a pedestal, so that children couldn’t see it easily. The piece in question was a case of artifacts titled *Flirt*, full of the lesbiana that came from our drawers. No one could explain exactly what it was that would be so dangerous to children: surely not a medical textbook, a work by Ruth Benedict, a picture of a woman in uniform, a snapshot of women playing baseball, a couple of bridesmaids kissing, a rubber stamp with the letter Q, two friends in an affectionate embrace, or some of the right-wing hate mail we received during the course of the project. We declined to raise *Flirt*, explaining that since we had in fact designed it low precisely to give access to the gay children in our audience, altering the design would compromise our intentions.23 I expect this small act of resistance made us the only artists to be honored with a warning label, installed just outside our exhibition space. (In a serendipitous act of hypercorrection, this placed the label next to an enormous, round, velvety maroon orifice by Anish Kapoor.) Installed after the private opening but before the influx of tourist “families,” the sign advised that some material in *Something Borrowed* might be more appropriate for adults. Mysteriously, no one
in the museum could recall who had directed that the label be installed. We asked that the sign be moved to the museum’s front door, so that its pall would be cast upon every artist exhibiting in the museum, whereupon it disappeared entirely.

Other frictions between the closet and the warehouse revolved around the fascination generated by particular, strategic knowledges and their obverse—particular, strategic ignorances. As Eve Sedgwick has eloquently argued in her deconstruction of the closet, ignorance is never just ignorance but rather “ignorance of a knowledge,” and such ignorances, “far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth.”24 Considered from a slightly different angle, it’s generally a privilege not to have to learn, and so calculated blindesses in our audiences became part of the work.25 Entrenched heterosexuals, so to speak, had the hardest time, frequently dismissing the work as a debased version of women’s history or obsessing about the audacity of certain cultural borrowings. (“Julie Andrews?” I heard one woman say. “They can’t just have Julie Andrews!”) Gay and lesbian people, or those familiar with gay and lesbian cultures, tended to gravitate to objects that could yield familiar readings about alternate gender identities or positive self-representations—baseball gloves or pocket knives or figures that could be read as spiritual icons—but often didn’t stop to attempt to decipher what they couldn’t immediately understand. Millie Wilson and I, of course, hadn’t a clue as to the entire significance, if any, of our borrowings. I think that as artists, we wanted to foreground surface readings as a way to decline certain anthropological rituals. Our corruptions of disciplinary standards disappointed anthropologists along with artists: evidently, we had managed to achieve amateur status on both counts. And with few exceptions, the art press declined to notice what we believed we had made visible, that is, the fluidity of identity formations.

Something Borrowed was a performance in many senses of that word. As a work of art, it was specific to its two sites, impossible to duplicate, and absolutely ephemeral. At the same time, it was a performance of queered identities. I don’t want to underestimate the fact that in any American city it would have been a performance to put an object on that wall, for it entailed outing not into a specific space but into the kind of visibility that allowed the possibility of glimpsing the lesbian, or of being glimpsed as lesbian, and positioning oneself in relation to those eventualities. At the same time, it was a performance that by its revelations installed other closets, relying for its effect on creating a group declared to be “in” by being “out” to varying degrees as lenders, while foregrounding their decisions to withhold disclosure about whatever they wished, to draw their own boundaries about public revelation.26 What could it possibly yield—about identity, about evidence, about self-representation, about materiality—to choose one object to stand for oneself on a museum wall? What could an artifact hope to reconstitute about “a lesbian”? If lesbian is a performance, a gender, a kind of necessary drag, what sort of identity formation could these objects support? If the artifacts were “lesbian,” in any culturally resonant sense, what would that imply about those who owned the identical banal objects—a washcloth, a ring, a journal, a doll, or a bird’s nest found on a beach?
Something Borrowed turned both “lesbian” objects and “lesbian” lenders into decoys that revealed the museum warehouse—in reality nothing more than an expensive renovation of a late Renaissance Wunderkammer, a cabinet designed to house curiosities collected in “foreign” parts—to be identical to the closet of the domestic house, especially when the door to that closet opens not just onto the utopian master bedroom in which heterosexuality is said to be practiced for the natural ecstasy of reproducing itself, but onto the allegedly democratic, inclusive, free meeting ground of a gallery in which, of course, public space has already been sexualized and colonized by making it normatively heterosexual, in the process not only privatizing but articulating the realm of intimacy (observe that the master bedroom can no longer get by on just one closet), eliciting and banishing sexuality to the realm of a private rather unimaginatively conceived as a bedroom and building in that bedroom a closet, in other words, a small dark inferior dirty trivial space in order to contain its fears of pollution so that it can maintain the immense landscape of the public as a space with which and within which it can flaunt its desires, its memories, its rites, its little ceremonies of exclusion. The door to the closet never shuts properly, both because of the curiosity from which it is fabricated and because of the requirement that those stored behind it open the door over and over and over again to reassure the masters of the bedroom that they have a location in which they can always be found, to which they can always be returned. As all queers know, you can’t step into, or out of, the same closet once, or even twice. The point about closets is that the door must constantly be kept in motion, and as we all know, one can never have too many closets, and they are never ever big enough. Is it really any wonder that the burgeoning market niche for organizing systems for heterosexuals (check it out: there’s always space for “his” clothes and “her” clothes) is exactly contemporaneous with a pitched battle for civil rights based on sexual orientation? That the closet would or could or should “hold everything,” to appropriate a trademark that precisely contains the problem, is a fantasy of consumption engineered to give certain intimacies public credence and to criminalize others, a trick that otherwise and more drearily goes by the name “heteronormativity.”

Notes


3. I rely here on Andrea Fraser’s deconstruction of rhetoric and history in “What’s
Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere?" October
5. For an account of the mutilation, see Ramon A. Gutierrez, When Jesus Came, the Corn
      Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846 (Stanford, Calif: 
6. The phrases are Frank Cushing’s, from an 1882 letter to Joseph Stanley-Brown in 
      which he describes his plans for Oraibi. Quoted in Jim Ostler, "Discourse," in A Zuni Artist 
      Looks at Frank Hamilton Cushing, with cartoons by Phil Hughe and discourse by Ostler 
7. In any complex collaboration, it is impossible to separate the individual contributions 
      of equal partners. After all, the point of collaboration is that the whole is greater than the sum 
      of its parts. That I am the author of this account, produced without the participation of 
      Wilson, is in no way intended to diminish her role or her work. Neither is it intended to sug-
      gest that Wilson should bear any responsibility for my speculations about, or readings of, our 
      project.
8. Berdache, derived from Arabic and Persian words for the boy in a male homosexual re-
      lationship, is a term popularized by North American anthropology. Vividly and literally an or-
      ientalizing term, it does not account for the specificity of cross-gender roles in nearly 150 North 
      American societies, roles that do not derive from the sort of Western traffic in gender that 
      produced the figure we would describe as "homosexual." Almost all, which is to say 120, of the 
      anthropological descriptions of the berdache attest to biological males assuming female social 
      roles, making the fleeting references to biological women performing male social roles ext-
     ремely tantalizing, for instance, the "manly hearted women" of the Plains tribes. Unsatisfac-
      tory and contested as the term berdache is, no other word so easily opens complex perspectives 
      on multiple genders in relation to social roles. Literature on the berdache is enormous and un-
      even, but see especially Will Roscoe, "How to Become a Berdache: Toward a Unified Analysis 
      of Gender Diversity," in Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and 
      History, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994); Charles Calender and Lee M. 
      1983); and Harriet Whitehead, "The Bow and the Burden Strap: A New Look at Institutional-
      ized Homosexuality in Native North America," in Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction 
      of Gender and Sexuality, ed. Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (New York: Cambridge 
      Mexico Press, 1991), is the seminal celebration of the Zuni berdache.
10. Matilda Coxe Stevenson, "The Zuni Indians: Their Mythology, Exoteric Societies, 
11. Washington Matthews to Cushing, August 8, 1881, quoted in Curtis M. Hinsley, The 
      Smithsonian and the American Indian: Making a Moral Anthropology in Victorian America, rev. 
      of Stevenson's reputation.
12. Quoted in Hughe, Zuni Artists, 94.
15. These phrases appear in press accounts of We' wha's tour, and are quoted in ibid., 
      59–60. Roscoe's book, esp. chaps. 1–3, is the best account of this relationship.

17. Stevenson’s estranged friend, Clara True, proposed to the Smithsonian in 1908 that the We’wha story would be the “cream” in her humorous write-up of the aborigines for a charitable affair that would benefit hospitals: “I should of course leave out all the objectionable features for instance ‘We-wha’ being employed as lady’s maid for a time by an ethnologist and being around the dressing rooms where pompadours were being ‘done,’ which happened.” Roscoe, Zuni Man-Woman, 72.

18. There were, altogether, three take-away texts, one on the anthropologist and the bedehale, one on coming to voice, and one that appropriated newspaper accounts of an event that took place in Santa Fe in the early 1950s, when a doctor called Nancy Campbell kidnapped for ransom a little girl, the daughter of a prominent local businessman, who was in a day or so found unharmed at a Santa Fe motel now popular with budget-minded families. Campbell, convicted by an Albuquerque court that denied her insanity plea, was tried in the press by language that named her as, and convicted her of being, a lesbian, within once using the word: “She was a prominent woman. She was boyish. She was businesslike. She was a mannish type. She had short hair. She had broad hips and narrow shoulders. She was strong-willed. She was fired with ambition. She was educated. She was as normal as any other woman.”

19. White Girl, designed mainly by Wilson and executed by theatrical wig mistress Lee Burnette, should be seen in the context of Wilson’s various spectacular harppieces. For a partial description of these, see Miriam Basilio, “Corporal Evidence: Representations of Aileen Waormos,” Art Journal 55, no. 4 (winter 1996): 56–61.


21. We did not want to privilege the access of artists, as skilled object producers, to the museum, and we did not want to curate a lesbian art show. Though the decision was undemocratic, and doubtless unresponsive to part of the “very specific regional context” we had been asked to address—that is, the number of lesbian artists unrecognized by the New Mexico mainstream—if I had it to do all over again, I’d make the same decision.

22. Foster, “Artist as Ethnographer,” 182, uses this term dismissively—“rogue investigations of anthropology, like queer critiques of psychoanalysis, possess vanguard status: it is along these lines that the critical edge is felt to cut most incisively.” Personally, I find the connection between these two social formations of the nomad tantalizing: both typically structure escapes from the nuclear family into another field altogether.

23. Neither of us, as I remember, had in fact been so prescient, but the fiction was our best recourse.


25. I still take especial delight in the hidden labor that only a curator, or another artist, could infer. For example, it cost the state plenty to receive these “lesbian” artifacts into its warehouse on temporary loan. Each object had to be described, measured, identified by the materials that constituted it, photographed, assigned a monetary value, and inventoried as to cracks, foxing, fading, wrinkling, and other signs of degeneration. The process yielded a few emblematic collisions between the warehouse and the closet, as when the museum’s registrar filled in all the necessary data on the dildo harness—black leather, metal ring, stitching, etc.—but then described it on the loan form as a garter belt. We were speechless. Warehouse 1, Closet 0.

26. We were not anxious to provide a list of eighty-three targets in a state then battling its
version of "special rights" amendments. The label for the wall of objects—a large panel that
gave name, occupation, age, residence, and story—was an intricate web of pseudonyms, false
residences, aggrandized occupations, and stories that addressed absolutely everything but the
obvious. Anonymous, in this wall, was definitely a lesbian and usually poor, not a rich person
securing his property, as is usually the case when a museum agrees to withhold the identity of
a lender.

27. I think Judith Butler’s "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in The Lesbian and
Gay Studies Reader, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New
York: Routledge, 1993), is foundational for subsequent discussions of the closet and the public
sphere. See also Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," Critical Inquiry 24, no. 1

28. Or perhaps Something Borrowed did nothing of the sort. Perhaps I’m simply project-
ing the reception of a collaborative work in order to assert intention, refabricating in order to
lay claim to agency. I am, after all, leading this narrative toward closure by the declarations of
special knowledge for both artists and natives. Neither artists nor lesbians nor former lovers of
any sort are supposed to control the spectacle they make: the privilege of interpretation is as-
signed elsewhere. But that, it should be evident by now, is simply to open the door to the site
of another closet.