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Dress Suits to Hire and the Landscape of Queer Urbanity

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Chapter 8 *Dress Suits to Hire* and the Landscape of Queer Urbanity

Kim Solga

[A] Mythic journeys

In Holly Hughes's 1987 *Dress Suits to Hire*, directed by Lois Weaver and performed by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver of Split Britches, principal characters Michigan and Deeluxe 'travel' to California, Ohio, and, well, Michigan – all without leaving their East Village dress shop. Along the way they cross borders, invade iconic landscapes, and challenge the premiere geomythology driving queer life in America today: that the only good queer is an urban queer, and that to venture, as a gay or lesbian, into the nation's 'heartland' is to find oneself marooned in alien, enemy territory. In this chapter, I read *Dress Suits to Hire* through its 2005 revival in Austin, Texas, in order to explore the performative work it does at the crossroads of rural and urban, straight and queer. I use a combination of human geography and architecture theory to understand how Hughes, Shaw and Weaver play with and against preexisting mythologies about whose bodies belong in what spaces as they draw an alternative map of America's sexual topography.

Dress Suits to Hire takes place in a low-rent New York dress shop. The shop is tiny – 'cramped' and 'claustrophobic' (Davy 156; Schneider 174; Patra 168, 176) – but it is also an elastic, multi-dimensional performance space, one that allows lesbian desire to declare itself, to flourish, and to chafe as it crosses all manner of divides. Scholars before me have been quick to think

productively about the critique of space enabled by *Dress Suits to Hire*: Kate Davy and Vivian Patraka, for example, are both interested in the ways in which the play deconstructs patriarchal space, the space of the Law (Davy 159), or what Geraldine Harris astutely calls ‘the “space of representation”’ (214). While I could not agree more with these readings, I feel that *Dress Suits* scholarship is still missing a full account of how space works in the play *as space*, as the material dimension of its critique of sexual relations. I am interested in how *Dress Suits* manipulates both architecture (that ‘cramped’ dress shop) and geography (the space of the city itself, as well as those iconic landscapes through which Michigan and Deeluxe journey) in order to explore how contemporary America physically and imaginatively compartmentalizes hetero- and homosexuality, cutting bodies and experiences off from one another and creating fear, shame, and dispossession along the way. As I will argue, the material dimensions of space and place are essential both to *Dress Suits*’s sexual politics and to its performance of lesbian possibility.

This article’s roots lie in several encounters I had with Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver in Austin, Texas, in the spring of 2005 during my tenure as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Texas at Austin. Austin is well known as a liberal haven in a sea of Texas red, and yet my socialist Canadian self could not help but feel the push of the political frontier beyond the city’s imaginary walls. I arrived in the United States shortly after George W. Bush’s controversial 2004 re-election; the mood in the nation was divided, and that

division seemed nowhere more palpable than in the shifting borderlands where urban meets ex-urban in the heart of Texas. Although I pride myself on my skills in complex reading, I found myself easily slipping into stereotype while living in Austin. Weren't we but a stone's throw from the conservative trenches, trapped in a garrison with the Republicans at the gate?

When Shaw and Weaver arrived in March 2005 to revive the Obie Award-winning *Dress Suits* at Austin's Off Center, they brought with them a far more productive spatial perspective. As Sue Ellen Case noted in a talk she delivered at UT Austin that spring, Split Britches's performance work has always re-made hostile territory. Plays like *Upwardly Mobile Home* and *Lesbians Who Kill* are set in places we might call marginal or 'in between', staging-grounds for transition. These places are economically and culturally liminal, maintaining an ambivalent relationship to capital as well as to queer and other non-normative subjects. As such, however, they also offer those subjects an opportunity to constitute themselves in critical dialogue with – rather than in preconceived relationship to – both center and margin, producing new, local identities and transforming 'not only sexuality rights, but, more fundamentally, sexualities' in the process (Phillips and Watt 1-2).

Case's talk reminded me that a nuanced engagement with the political economy of space has always formed a core part of Split Britches's performance ethic, both on and off the stage, even as Shaw and Weaver's work in Austin was helping me to reflect on the complex dynamics of the spaces we were temporarily inhabiting together. *Dress Suits to Hire*,¹ I realized, is a play

about space as both myth and invention. It is filled with doubles: it stars a butch and a femme, as ‘twin’ sisters; it represents both the city and the country, ‘real’ space and mythic space, as similarly twinned; it lodges defiantly on the border between ‘us’ and ‘them’. A play about thresholds that messes with thresholds, *Dress Suits* is about passing, carefully, into new territories, the risks and pleasures that attend that passing, and the possibilities for reshaping our collective cultural space that passing implies. It takes place both in a tiny, lonely dress shop in lower-east-side New York *and* out in the heartland spaces to which the women ‘travel’ *and* in the malleable space of performance that makes this layering possible (Harris 214), but that also means it takes place in the often dangerous, well-patrolled border zone *between* these places and others: between the urban, suburban, exurban and rural, on the thresholds between red states and blue states, ‘alien’ America and American apple pie, the ‘real’ America of Fox or CNN, and the ‘fake’, spectacular, kinda-gay America of the WOW Café, PS 122, and the Off Center. *Dress Suits* understands that the border and the double are themselves twins: they form what Dianne Chisholm, following Walter Benjamin, might call a ‘queer constellation’, a dialectic that telescopes the tensions, risks, and opportunities that attend moments in queer time and space.

As I watched Shaw and Weaver rehearse and perform this work, I began to ask myself better questions about my relationship to the spaces around me. What is the real, and what the imagined, difference between Texas’s conservative exurbs and ranchlands and laissez-faire Austin, between

repressed, repressive ‘backwaters’ and the queer, cosmopolitan capital? How does the mythology of the mammoth divide between Austin and the outposts – a political divide to be sure but also, critically, a *sexual* one, with Austin playing the gay haven to Texas’s reputation for gay-bashing – help to produce the images that prop up our preconceived understanding of who may live, of who is welcome, in urban, suburban and rural space? Austin might be ‘weird’, after all, but ‘Keep Austin Weird’ is also a wildly successful marketing slogan: the queer city ironically makes big bucks peddling its difference from mainstream Texas ‘conservative’ opportunism. Which is the myth and which the reality? What harm does each do?

For a month, Shaw and Weaver lived and made performance in this landscape of charged contradiction, and the show that resulted resonated well beyond its historical walls. Against the backdrop of an Austin spring, *Dress Suits* pulled apart the seductive fantasy that had lodged itself in my imagination: the fantasy of the queer city perilously garrisoned away from a largely ex-urban, sexually conservative, angry ‘rest’ of the nation (Munt 119). It interrogated the ways in which we collectively produce nation-space at the imagined crossroads of town and country, ‘deviant’ sex and ‘conservative’ economics, taking a critical look at the power and the limits of geomythology – of how persistent and pervasive spatial fantasies help to shape, for better and often for worse, the world we inhabit together (Fuchs 44). This is not to suggest that *Dress Suits* was altered or updated in any specific way for its Austin run, although the question of its contemporary political resonance – to judge from

talkback and informal workshop conversations – was never far from spectators’ or performers’ minds. Rather, the interrogation of myths about the fraught relationship between space and sexuality already extant in the play’s performance vocabulary was thrown into a particular kind of relief as those myths collided with the charged landscape of Dubya country on our doorstep as well as with the queer-is-cool pop-culture context that paradoxically frames GOP homophobia in early twenty-first century America. Watching from the Off Center risers as Shaw and Weaver reprised their roles as Deeluxe and Michigan, audience members familiar with the play’s history could not help but locate us all in at least two places at once: in the set’s boho but rapidly gentrifying NYC *and* in rapidly-gentrifying East Austin; in Reagan’s America circa 1987 *and* deep in the heart of Texas just five months after Bush Jr. reclaimed the White House and proclaimed the strength of his freshly-earned political capital. As we looked at 2005 through the lens of 1987, the prospect of staging homosexual desire for any audience in any space, no matter how friendly, suddenly took on radical new urgency, and new risk.

Michigan and Deeluxe may seem at first glance to be garrisoned, too, in their downtown dress shop, but their estate is not really so forlorn, nor so predictable. With two rolling racks of clothing serving for its walls, fancy-dress costumes haphazardly stuffed with gag props in the pockets, their shop’s Austin dimensions proved shockingly, hilariously vulnerable to the spatial infiltrations of camp performance. Acknowledging but also resisting their bodily and social vulnerability, Michigan and Deeluxe transformed their shop into a cabinet of

wonders, a glass closet (Sedgwick 80) that threatened to unleash rather than contain their queer sexuality, producing a cheeky and deeply pleasurable critique of the imagined limits of queer identity in America circa 1987/2005. Below, I explore *Dress Suits*'s relationship (both in text and in performance) to the city in which it is ostensibly set and the challenge it poses to the pervasive and seductive fantasy of the garrisoned queer city. Then, having mapped the *Dress Suits* dress shop geographically, I trace the architectural practices of the dress shop-as-closet-as-stage, taking my inspiration from the look and feel of the revival production. I first explore the shop's renegade dimensions with the help of architecture theorist Catherine Ingraham, and then read two of the play's mythic landscapes – California and Ohio – through the lens of the doubled body that emerges from the dress shop's queer play. This doubled body is also the body that doubles, queerly, as landscape, returning us to the possibility that the spatial framing of sexual identity in contemporary America may be far more malleable than it at first appears.

[A] In and out of the commodity landscape

The constellation of our metropolitan era could not be drawn without images of ruin. [...] Now that the millennial moment is past, the alarm is superseded by the hype of new mass media where metropolitan sexuality assumes a trendy queer face. (Chisholm 254)

The line between queer town and straight country – between the confining dress shop and the worlds it allows Michigan and Deeluxe to

remember, invent, invade, and perform – is the primary spatial division that organizes *Dress Suits to Hire* and the main focus of its playful doubling. The difference between sexy urban and sexually repressed ‘everywhere else’ is one of modern America’s most potent and pervasive geomythologies, and it has only gained traction with the mainstreaming and marketing of gay lifestyles (if not the advancement of gay rights) in the last twenty years. Beliefs about irreconcilable differences between queer city mice and straight country mice are powered by assumptions about sophistication and by the relative social and cultural capital attached to place. Driven by popular television programs (*Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, set in Pittsburgh and Los Angeles respectively; *How to Look Good Naked*, hosted by Carson Kressley of *Queer Eye* fame), the commercialization of Pride events, and the slick face of many urban queer lifestyle magazines, these beliefs insist that queer style thrives effortlessly in the city, where it is not only welcome but generative; the world beyond the city limits, meanwhile, may look to the queer urban for style advice, but that doesn’t mean it’s not ultimately hostile to its values.

In the world Shaw and Weaver conjured for their 2005 Austin audience, however, clothing and other lifestyle trappings offered conflicting signals about sophistication and urbanity that nicely sent up the harmful binaries perpetuated by queer urban/straight rural geomythology. The women are residents of the hip East Village, but there was nothing hip about their on-stage set-up. Their elegant bistro table and chairs and glasses of sherry let them appear as well-heeled as the yuppies moving in up the block, but their dressing gowns were

garish, painted with outrageous florals that gave them the air of slightly campy Grandmas (or aging Drag Queens). They had no way to replenish their sherry supply because they couldn't seem to get out of the shop, which attracted no customers and projected a forlorn face to the street. With only old clothes and spike tape for walls, and nothing but a scant few feet between spectators and performers, this dress shop begged us to witness what it was not. 'Urban queer' became a troubled marker: the women were less urbane sophisticates than a send-up of what we have been trained since the late 1980s to expect queer urban sophistication to look like. This shabby-chic way-downtown setting slammed hard into the reality of market forces circa 2005 (moment of the metrosexual consumer's supreme ascendancy), challenging the easy equation of queer money, commodity consumption, and limitless urban sexual pleasures that has become one of the defining narratives of early twenty-first century Western capitalism.

Over the last two decades, feminist and queer geographers have explored the ways in which gay, lesbian, and transgendered people make use of space. This valuable work has, however, coalesced around human geography's ongoing obsession with the city as a site of analysis; the result has been a broad over-emphasis on queer bodies in urban spaces. While critics like David Bell and Gill Valentine have already noted this scholarly gap and argued for work that takes into account, among other things, gay and lesbian networks in 'suburbs and small towns' as well as the 'cultural constructions of rurality' that motivate and reproduce queer urban bias ('Introduction: Orientations' 8),

attempts to remedy the imbalance have fallen somewhat short.ⁱⁱ Six years after making the above argument, Bell remained committed to a view of the city as the ‘sign of desire’ (Califia qtd in Bell, ‘Fragments’ 84), while work by Robin Peace on lesbian spatial practice in the same volume, *Pleasure Zones: Bodies, Cities, Spaces*, finally concludes that the city is the only place in which lesbian desire can truly be recognized, accessed, and purchased (47). Like that of other geographers, Peace’s work reflects an ingrained suspicion of the city’s commitment to commodity fetishism, to pleasures ‘priced and paid for’ (47), and yet appears at the same time to capitulate to this fetishism, arguing that access to pleasure despite the price makes city living worthwhile, if not inevitable, for queer subjects.

Human geography’s pervasive framing of queer space *as* urban space points to larger questions about how queer identities are produced and authorized in relation to (a very limited sense of) place, especially in the US (Halberstam 15). The conflation of ‘gay’ with ‘urban’ and the myths about non-urban space it perpetuates form a central part of what Kath Weston has identified as the ‘gay imaginary’, ‘a sexual geography in which the city represents a beacon of tolerance and gay community, the country a locus of persecution and gay absence’ (262). The gay imaginary is more than an ‘imagined community’ (261); it literally generates ‘gayness itself by elaborating an opposition between urban and rural life’ (274). In other words, ‘queer’ comes into being *as* an urban identity, and *in opposition* to a non-urban one. Queerness appears as fundamentally incompatible with life beyond the city

precisely because the gay imaginary continually reproduces itself through the mythical battle between the city and the space beyond, a battle made iconic in the story of the rural queer refugee who journeys to the city to come out within a community of like-minded peers. The result of this queer spatial mythology is a thoroughly modernist projection of the city as a kind of exotic queer ‘near’, filled with pleasures that appear tantalizingly close, while the non-urban gay or lesbian subject materializes in the equation as the new primitive, a phantasmatic construction feared, loathed and pitied, and through whose imagining urban queers are able to stabilize their own emerging subjectivities (Halberstam 34).

Of course, like all fantasy identifications, the queer urban conveniently obscures the many tensions and contradictions that compel gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered lives in and beyond the city. Halberstam calls the gay imaginary ‘a dream of an elsewhere that promises a freedom it can never provide’ (30), and not simply because that dream hinges on a series of dangerous assumptions about what kind of people live beyond the city limits, with whom they sleep, and for whom they vote. The vision of the city as a sexual refugee camp works against contemporary queer subjects by trapping gays, lesbians, and other ‘deviants’ in cities that may or may not provide them with the resources they need to thrive, or the communities of like-minded peers they expect to find.ⁱⁱⁱ The garrison mentality is, at bottom, a tremendously conservative one, limiting queer mobility and risking a dangerous sexual

compartmentalization in its underlying capitulation: we'll keep the cities, and you, out there, can claim ownership over the rest of the nation.

Is the city really a haven? Must we really relinquish control over every space else? These are the fundamental questions *Dress Suits to Hire* uses to rend the map of contemporary queer geography. Every space it stages – from ‘California’, which appears first as a series of tattoos on Michigan’s body and again in the wake of a hot kiss between Michigan and Deeluxe; to ‘Ohio’, conjured in a loungy stand-up act Deeluxe delivers to raucous audience laughter; to The City, a noir-ish construction ironized by the neon, slightly off-kilter ‘Dress Suits to Hire’ sign glowing eerily upstage – is purposefully phantasmagoric, a pastiche of American place myths that recall everything from Sam Shepard (Patraka 166) to *Brokeback Mountain* and provoke a series of questions about the adequacy of these myths to the needs of contemporary queer subjects. The play’s landscapes are comic, but they are also critically ambivalent: they match a sense of wide-open potential to a sense of real risk and threat. Early on, Michigan tells us that ‘the night [she and Deeluxe] became sisters’ she ‘looked out, and there were no more stars. The sky was full of teeth. [...] We were already in the wolf’s mouth, and it was closing in around us’ (*DS* 117). Recognizing that the American landscape is nothing if not overdetermined with popular, literary, and filmic mythology, *Dress Suits* sets out to stake its claim on landscape by restaging the very narratives that have come to define it.

The dress shop itself is the primary site of this restaging. The whiff of decay is palpable: it may have been cool some time ago; now, it's probably not even all that retro. More important: as an economic enterprise, as a livelihood for these two women, the shop is an abject failure, a marker of their barely-contained poverty. Michigan and Deeluxe live '[i]n the bad part of town' and have 'too many clothes for [their] own good' (*DS* 117). These clothes, however, don't signal their power as queer consumers, only their failure as queer urban capitalists: the shop gives the lie to the popular commonplace that contemporary gays and lesbians are all urban *flâneurs* with disposable income to burn. As Peace notes, lesbians on the whole have much less consumer power than straight or gay men (50), and while it might be easy to assume based on casual viewing of *The L Word* that this deficit has finally been overcome, we need to remember that butch-femme identities grew out of working class culture. The new lipstick-lesbian chic is a product of clever marketing, but is not by any means reflective of a genuine shift in income disparities in lesbian constituencies across the board. The same gay imaginary that produces the city as the de facto queer incubator pivots on an economic base that is far from accessible and remains 'dominated by those with capital: typically, middle-class white men' (Michael Warner, qtd in Binnie, 'Trading Places' 185).

Dianne Chisholm's recent *Queer Constellations* explodes the myth of the city as an unbridled queertopia divorced from the hard realities of socioeconomic positioning; instead, the subjects of her book throw into sharp relief the dependence of the former on the latter. Chisholm's chapter on Sarah

Schulman's Bohemian trilogy, set in the very East Village world of *Split Britches* during a period (1985-95) that coincides with the troupe's ascendance, reminds me that *Dress Suits to Hire* was written and first performed at a time and in a place when the 'bad' part of town in which Michigan and Deeluxe live was becoming very rapidly unaffordable for the artists, laborers, long-time residents, and vagrants who called the lower east side home. In August 1988, just months after the initial production of the play at PS 122, Tomkins Square Park saw police in riot gear squaring off against protesters as they fought the forced gentrification of the neighborhood in a culmination of months of tension. In the wake of this spatial trauma, Michigan's opening monologue, in which she calls the police to report Deeluxe's 'death' but cannot recall where the dress shop is located, reverberates with the anxiety of imminent dispossession.

And yet the dress shop does not only signal poverty and despair; it is also a geography of resistance (Pile 2). Michigan and Deeluxe may have not had much luck renting dress suits in the past, but now they have clearly made a conscious choice to stop trying. For better or for worse, they have opted out of the trade economy, and specifically out of the urban market that insists on queers as the new consumer frontier. Reading the play's 1987 locale dialectically through the pop-culture context surrounding its 2005 revival, we might note that Michigan and Deeluxe are the polar opposites of the über-hip stars of contemporary queer-culture programming. On by/for gay cable programs like *Queer as Folk* queer sex may be trend currency for viewers of

any orientation who want to cruise a harder-edged urban lifestyle, but on mainstream shows like the now-defunct *Queer Eye* and the popular British export *How Not to Decorate*, success depends primarily upon the illusion that ‘queer’ has everything to do with lifestyle and very little to do with sex. Michigan and Deeluxe, on the other hand, deliberately and comically refuse to perform on-trend even as they insist relentlessly upon their right to enjoy sexual acts, in private *and* in public, no matter how old or unfashionable their bodies. If the unspoken motto of the new queer economy is ‘buy gay, but don’t be (too) gay’, Michigan and Deeluxe refuse to sell anything to anybody. They occupy the shop the way one might do during a demonstration, refusing to leave but also refusing to allow its accumulated capital to circulate. And, if *Dress Suits to Hire* offers a snapshot of genuine lesbian dispossession in a specific place (New York’s lower east side) at a specific moment in time (1987), it thus also offers the enduring possibility of menacing the very economy that feeds on such dispossession, more voraciously now than ever.

[A] The closet and the double: myth, body, and the rest of the nation

She puts the cunt back in country,

Pulls the rug out from under me.

(Michigan, *DS* 140)

As a geography of resistance, the *Dress Suits* dress shop both maps and unmakes the landscape of queer urbanity. But the dress shop is not just a landmark on the road to a more complexly-located queer subject; it is also (in

theory, anyway) a conglomeration of walls, windows, a door that never opens, stuff. It is built space. At its most literal, the shop is architecture, a box that surrounds and encases Michigan and Deeluxe, holds them in, marks their bodies as its territory. Catherine Ingraham notes that such an architectonic is, in the most literal sense of the term, classical: classical architecture theory makes a fetish of lines, walls, operations of division. It is based on the logic of the map, of the two-dimensional draft-paper outline, of the mirror stage moment – and thus on a correlative disavowal of what might be going on *between* the lines and walls, between divided bodies, between the sheets (92, 102, 110). Ingraham’s 1998 monograph, *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity*, describes classical architecture theory in terms of what she calls in one chapter ‘The Outline of the (Dead) Body’: a body associated with sexual appetite, one that might mess up the sheets, the blueprint, squiggle the straight line that taut, clean bed linen makes (102). ‘Can we move’ she asks, ‘from underneath, from the negative and hidden structure/space of the line (the smooth bed plane or the ground plane of the architectural plan) to above the line, to the positive and additive structure/space (the space of the bed, and the bodies and acts of bodies in that space; the space of the building, and the bodies and acts of bodies in that space)?’ (102).

I find it marvelously apt that *Dress Suits to Hire* opens with just such an outline, followed by just such a move *above* the line. Deeluxe ‘dies’ in the play’s first moments only to rise again, quickly and provocatively, in order to assume her role in the performance, itself a seduction based around sexual

awakenings. Hers is the body that classical architecture tries to erase from the blueprint: she is brash, butch, 'pure palomino' (*DS* 116). But Deeluxe's risen body is also the body of the actor who may rise to applause despite having been killed off moments before. Reading Ingraham's text through Shaw and Weaver's movements, I realize that the feared body buried within the line is above all a *performing* body: spectacular, fake, irrevocably doubled. The performing body and the sexualized body have doubleness in common: both actor and lover produce what Shakespeare calls 'the beast with two backs'. Rising to the Off Center crowd, Shaw arched her own back seductively, slowly propping herself up as she opened a giant fan and broke into a husky 'Amato Mio', deliberately, obviously, playing the butch channeling the spectacle of her über-femme double, Rita Hayworth (Davy 162-3; Schneider 178). In this moment, both the doubled butch-femme body (Case, 'Aesthetic') and the doubled subject of performance appeared, transforming the as-yet unremarkable dress shop into a boudoir that was also a closet that was also a stage.

In their original, early modern connotation, closets were small, private rooms that enabled an emerging interior selfhood, personal invention (Wigley 347-8). But the closet did not work the same way for all subjects: women, for example, lived in the border zone 'between the inner locked door of the [man's] study and the outer locked door of the house' (348), simultaneously trapped, scrutinized, and permitted a (very limited) level of domestic and cultural power. For Eve Sedgwick, a similar paradox organizes the queer closet: it conceals

only in order surreptitiously to expose the secret against which contemporary (hetero)normative subjects define their own imagined sexual interiority (69-72). The queer closet dangles the false promise of limitlessness, territories yet to be inhabited, like the queer star on TV who superficially symbolizes freedom and equality for the legions of others s/he simultaneously conceals and reveals. In this closet, architecture and geography work, viciously, in tandem to keep gays and lesbians dreaming out, but looking in.

The *Dress Suits* shop-as-closet functions differently. It distills its pernicious transparency into a forced encounter between audiences and the stuff in the closet queers are supposed to be ashamed to let others see. It lets Shaw and Weaver play with/in the lines, but its only deception is the notion that that there is any barrier separating ‘us’ and ‘them’: in truth, we’re dangerously close to their permeable, transgressive bodies. In the original PS 122 production of *Dress Suits*, the walls of the shop were quite clearly demarcated by large windows with arched casements placed at the back and sides of the performance area, creating a ‘voyeuristic’, peek-a-boo effect and foregrounding Michigan and Deeluxe as ‘to-be-looked-at’ (Davy 156-7). In the 2005 revival, Shaw and Weaver shed this set, opting instead for a floating floor; the neon ‘Dress Suits to Hire’ sign and a mannequin marked the back of the space while rolling clothing racks marked the sides. The space was a kind of glass closet, but not one that invited the voyeur. Its performatic quality, denoted by the racks of campy costumes and their concealed props, was structural: performance literally held the room together. While I do not want to imply that this sense of

theatricality was downplayed in the original production – far from it – I do want to highlight the important differences the shift in set made. The specter of walls and windows (solids and voids) was gone; in its place was the specter of bodies, echoed within each item of clothing that formed part of the ‘walls’. The space, made of bodies, was profoundly vulnerable to them; in turn, the audience became vulnerable to the space, whose borders seemed more a function of custom and play than of the power of our eyes to maintain their cohesion. If this space was a closet, it was not for us: it did nothing to keep ‘us’ out and ‘them’ in. Instead, it mirrored and doubled the auditorium: we were on one another’s turf, in each other’s private space.

Dress Suits’s spatial interventions thus work, simultaneously, against both prevailing sexual geomythologies and classical architectural practice: the play brings down both the house that frames normative sexual division and the land that house is built upon. Shaw and Weaver’s Austin performances disrupted spatial fantasies on both domestic and national levels, in ways that were at once personal and public, physical and imaginal, abstract and embodied. By way of more concrete example, let me turn to the first of the play’s two central, iconic journeys into the American heartland: the women’s trip to ‘California’.

The trip is less a journey than a ‘ritual’; it requires dressing up. Deeluxe, clad in a skin-tight, strapless, blue sequined gown and heels, removes her earrings, picks up a toothpick, and puts on a cowboy hat. Michigan pulls a pair of pink cowboy boots and a hula-hoop from one of the clothing racks and

begins to munch on a wad of gum. The setting shifts from tiny urban shop to open road: we're somewhere between Tulsa and California, somewhere between 'the big city' and 'your last chance' (*DS* 128). (See figure 8.1). Michigan lives here. She tells us a coming-out story, but it's not what we might expect. There's no heading for 'the big city' in this story; there's no tentative uncertainty, no ubiquitous rural-queer sexual identity confusion. She knows what she wants and she's going for it, and the girls she solicits want it, too (118, 127). This vaguely suburban, vaguely rural place is queer as hell. Deeluxe pulls up, the traveler. Schticking the stock road-movie narrative, Deeluxe tells Michigan she's headed for California. Michigan corrects her: 'You're gonna see California, but you're not leaving this station. 'Cause I already seen California, and I'm gonna show you my shots' (128). Michigan then proffers her body, covered in tattoos of popular, family-friendly tourist attractions: Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm, Universal Studios. Theme music from 'A Man and a Woman' swells; the 'sisters' kiss. Then Deeluxe declares: 'So that's California, huh?' (129).

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Caption:

8.1 Lois Weaver as Michigan and Peggy Shaw as Deeluxe in *Dress Suits to Hire*, Austin, Texas, 2005

Photo by Lori E. Seid

This is ‘the Disney dream of a totally constructed environment, where everything in the landscape, including nature itself, is manufactured’ (Chaudhuri 15). Deeluxe’s journey West appears as tattooed simulacra, ‘[snap]shots’ of an iconic progress mapped dialectically onto Michigan’s sweaty, hungry body; California materializes as the sum of its attractions, the places families go to purchase an idealized image of themselves. But those ‘attractions’ quickly become something else here – queer attraction, lesbian desire. As Michigan kisses Deeluxe she turns ‘out there’ into ‘in here’, public into private, reversing the schematic of Sedgwick’s glass closet. Then, just as quickly as the ritual begins, the journey ends, and we are back in the dress shop, back in NYC, back in Austin: we were, of course, here all along. Where is this California we traveled to? Is it only ‘real’ to us here, in the shop, in the heart of the city? Is it only real on TV? Is it someplace between here and there, home and away, city and highway, myth and body? And if it is less a destination than a space between acts, assumptions, and desires, how do we map it, pin it down, call it either straight or queer?

‘California’ challenges the imagined distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’, in here and out there by layering the American open road onto the ‘cramped’ space of the urban closet, queer sexual desire onto the (manufactured) image of heterosexual family fun. Deeluxe’s ‘Ohio’ monologue, the play’s other iconic journey, offers a similar palimpsest, but with a twist; it trades not on the geomythology of the G-rated family road trip but rather on the rabid metropolitan stereotype of a white trash, rural world. Shaw pulls on a black

tuxedo jacket, pockets filled with magician's tricks, and pulls out the crass story of Uncle Bert, who 'porks' Aunt Helen after dinner (while she still has mayonnaise on her arms) (*DS* 142). 'And that's Ohio', Deeluxe deadpans. 'Ohio' is the grotesque white trash landscape of *urban* mythology; it gives Shaw's sophisticated urban theatre audience a glimpse into Bert and Helen's closet. And *that* is 'Ohio': it carries, from the start, queer connotations.

As in 'California', here the landscape is branded, this time more forcefully, troublingly, onto a lesbian body. 'That's why I never take all my clothes off all at the same time', she tells us, 'so you can never see the Ohio in me' (141). 'Ohio' is the stain of homosexuality, and the shame of place Deeluxe evokes is the shame of the glass closet. In Ohio's wood-frame farmhouses everybody can hear Bert and Helen's gross sex: the house *is* Ohio *is* loud, embarrassing fornication. But 'Ohio' is also rural shame, staged against the supposedly more obvious shame of being gay. The monologue trades in and sends up what Laura Crawford identifies as the core urban myth about rural homosexuality: that rural queers should all feel nothing but sexual shame, and once they get to the safety of the big city they should feel nothing but shame for the place from which they've come. Deeluxe offers an alternative to this homely shame: queers can put on a show about it. Reading orientation through location, Deeluxe uses 'Ohio' to play with our assumptions about the lines between 'our' urban sophistication and Bert and Helen's trashy rural 'deviance', between gay sex and straight sex, and between our culture's

paradoxical correlation of queer identity with *both* urban sophistication *and* rural sexual shame, with both closet and landscape.

In ‘Ohio’ and ‘California’, Michigan and Deeluxe journey to the heartland in order to play with its precarious stereotypes about sexuality and space, but instead of naïve bumpkins clashing with urbane sophisticates we get queer collisions and doublings, political re-appropriations of landscape and re-inhabitations of built space. Michigan and Deeluxe produce both the forgotten, ‘other’ queer metropolis and the feared/loathed ‘rest’ of the nation from within their walls, demanding that we recognize both ‘in here’ and ‘out there’ as mythic spaces generated through the workings of discourse and performance, through the frightful tales we show and tell one another about where we might safely travel and what spaces must, of necessity, be out of bounds. Of course, I do not wish to imply that all American landscapes are safe for all queer subjects; sadly, we’re not there yet. Nevertheless, it is fitting, I think, that *Dress Suits*’s final journey takes Michigan both back to her namesake state and back in time, to a moment when lesbian desire marked the land in the shape of ‘[t]he woman who was an animal. Loup-garou’ (149). Of course the story she tells us is a myth – but it’s a myth in service of a new history, a queer history of heartland America. We may never, perhaps, be able to extract the ‘real’ land from its mythic counterpart, but two myths will always be better than one.

Notes

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ⁱ Throughout, I identify *Dress Suits* closely with Shaw and Weaver. This is not to efface Holly Hughes as co-creator, or the key ways in which the play reflects her own spatial politics.

ⁱⁱ *De-centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis* (2000) is a good, albeit rare, exception.

ⁱⁱⁱ While urban infrastructure is no doubt far better equipped to support queer subjects in than the networks in smaller communities, plenty of gay and lesbian migrants nevertheless find themselves disillusioned by city living (see Weston and Spurlin). For another take on the limits of urban queertopia, see Case, 'Toward a Butch-Feminist Retro-Future', and Binnie, 'The Erotic Possibilities of the City'.

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