Giving the "Cowboy" the Boot: Disidentification and Queer Norteño Culture in rafa esparza's *Querías Norte*

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The epic fantasy of the Wild West—the horses, the vast landscapes, and perhaps most iconically, the cowboy—has captured imagination since the onset of colonial expansion in the Americas. Unfortunately, the White, masculine, gun-toting image of the Hollywood cowboy alienates any deviance from the norms of the hegemonic dominant culture. This in turn reinforces the racial and gendered stereotypes that harm the true cowboy-esque people of the American West, many of whom belong to the minoritarian groups that the "cowboy" image overlooks. Just as Indigenous populations were forcibly removed from the physical land, popular "cowboy" narratives remove queer people and People of Color from stories of the land, creating a tragic false reality. In the multimedia installation *Querías Norte,* appearing at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver in the 2023-2024 exhibition "Cowboy," artist rafa esparza explores this gap between truth and myth. *Querías Norte* disidentifies with the idolized image of the American cowboy, rejecting its White, heterosexual connotations, while simultaneously drawing on its real-world rhizomes in gay Norteño culture. Through the lens of José Muñoz's theory of disidentification, rafa esparza's art attempts to reconcile queer identity with Latino and Indigenous ancestry. It contends and connects with the "cowboy" by injecting its imagery with queerness and brownness, specifically through the community

Fig. 1. rafa esparza, Queŕas Norte, 2023.

found in queer Norteño night clubs, and employing elements of surface play and multimodality to reveal themes of queer movement and futurity.

Upon first viewing *Querías Norte,* the observer is met with three television screens mounted on poles above a ground covered in cracking, dried adobe, made from dirt, horse dung, clay, and water. The videos depict two Latino men, dressed proudly in ten-gallon hats and work attire, dancing with each other in the desert, surrounded by livestock and horses (Fig. 1). This act of queer tenderness immediately contrasts with the White, hyper masculine, heterosexual image of the cowboy, while still maintaining the subjects' ownership of cowboyness through their rural clothing and location. José Muñoz describes this kind of discrepancy as disidentification, a means of relating to a dominant culture "that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social" (Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 8). In this way, *Querías Norte* neither identifies with or accepts the popularized idea of the cowboy, nor does it completely counter-identify with or disavow certain aspects of real cowboy culture. Instead, the art adopts certain aspects of the cowboy and redeploys them with Queer of Color subjects and elements to expose the shortcomings of the cowboy stereotype. For instance, photographs adorning the left and right walls of the installation depict men dressed as cowboys embracing each other and presenting their bodies in traditionally feminine poses on a red pedestal before a red backdrop. The striking, passionate color helps the photos to stand out against the white wall, forcing a confrontation of femininity and homosexuality within a space typically viewed as masculine. Through these kinds of combinations, esparza transforms the exalted pop culture cowboy to better reflect the nuanced reality and diversity of Western America.

Querías Norte highlights the intersection between racial and sexual minoritarian groups, employing intersectionality and providing a Queer of Color critique of each. Muñoz writes that "subjects who are hailed by one or more minoritarian identity component have an especially arduous time of" the process of identification (Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 8), evident in the way esparza combines and reconciles identities that seemingly compete with each other in *Querías Norte*. To explain this kind of intersection, Jafari Allen employs an analogy that relates Black queer studies to rhizomes, underground stems that interconnect and grow in all directions, as Black/queer work is "neither limited to one place nor destined to go in only one direction" (Allen, 28) and is "generative, as it inspires connection beyond a staid, linear genealogy; it rejects old teleologies of heteronormative natural 'progress' from a single root or (family) tree" (Allen, 29). Due to the violent pervasion of colonial rhetoric, Latino and Native cultures may not always fully accept queer Latinos. Similarly, white queer culture may not accept Queers of Color, demanding a choice between the two identities and forcing subjects to leave one at the door. Those in Black queer studies exist as "outside children" of each separate discipline and must "claim new ways to queerly trace [...] emergences beyond patronymic reconstruction, to do a new dance" (Allen, 30), literally in the case of *Querías Norte.* A painting in the installation depicts queer men wearing cowboy hats, some of which are fading away into the background, conveying their cowboyness as an integral part of their identity, but one that is often forced to disappear as a result of their queerness. The adobe on the ground transforms the white, four-walled interior of the room to an outdoor, living setting, adding brownness and texture to its flat banality in the same way esparza aims to reintroduce queers of color into the Western narrative. Allen's theory of rhizomatics provides a way to interweave identities regarding race and sexuality, which appears in esparza's depiction of gay

Fig. 2. rafa esparza, Querías Norte, 2023.

Norteño night clubs.

On the back wall of the installation, the painting depicts a scene from a gay Norteño night club, with sets of brown-skinned cowboys dancing, embracing, and kissing. Norteño music and interviews from guests of Los Rieles, a gay Norteño club in Dallas, Texas, play over the videos (Fig. 2). Norteño, Spanish for "Northern," describes a music style known for its polka rhythms and guitars. Norteño originated from Northern Mexico and finds popularity among Mexican immigrants in the US (Margolies). Located near the boundaries between the two countries and between queer and Latino cultures, esparza draws on the sense of well-being found in gay Norteño clubs. Similarly, the videos of the dance take place during dusk, portraying the transition between night and day and mirroring esparza's investigation of the transition between identities. Establishments that welcome those positioned in this area of transition and who transcend any singular label are crucial to fostering a strong community. Regarding the potentiality of queer community, Muñoz "argues against anti-relationality by insisting on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11) rather than ignoring the critical differences and diversities within queer experiences, exemplified in esparza's work. esparza depicts the importance of these clubs and their music, which allow patrons to encompass the entire multiplicity of their identities. Gloria Anzaldúa writes about queer labels, "When a lesbian names me the same as her she subsumes me under her category. I am of her group but not as an equal, not as a whole person—my color erased, my class ignored" (Anzaldúa, 240-250). esparza's work communicates a similar sentiment, as it attempts to reconcile the inaccessibility of cultural practices and spaces to those identifying as queer. In esparza's painting, one figure looks straight at the viewer as he kisses another man, asserting his existence, no matter how seemingly complicated. This dismisses the impulse of any one of his perceived identities—gay, Latino, cowboy—to cancel out any other and critiques the idea of "Whiteness" as default.

This transitionality reflects the movement of migration, central to the stories of many modern-day cowboys. The title, *Querías Norte*, translates literally to "you were wanting the North," evoking a longing for more places like Los Rieles, the hopes attached to moving to new places, and the wanting

of a queer lover. This depiction of cultural hybridity itself acts as an example of disidentification through its combination of queerness, Norteño culture, and cowboy culture. On two corners of the adobe-covered ground, closest to the viewer's original position, sit two sets of cowboy boots with footprints leading toward the direct middle of the adobe plot, where a large circle of footprints depicts the steps of the men's dance (Fig. 1). After a moment of contemplative observation, the docent lets the viewer know that they are allowed, in fact, to walk on the adobe, fully entering the scene that rafa esparza has created. Only through stepping into the footprints of the dancers can the full depth of *Querías Norte* be understood. Sarah Stefana Smith's theory of surface-play describes "practices of layering media (e.g. photography, collage, installation-as-painting) and the topographical geography of the surface itself" as a means of understanding the interiority of racially minoritarian subjects (Smith, 46). The layering of different forms of media and their formation of a new environment craft an atmosphere that portrays the reality of farmers and ranchers on the border and the relationship to sexuality. This presentation "invite[s] spectators to envision themselves in interaction with [the] landscapes" and "give[s] spectators an opportunity to physically experience and imagine themselves" in the "world" he has built (Smith, 55). The multimodality of esparza's use of material and the texture provides dimension to his depiction of queer Norteño culture. The adobe ties the artwork to the kinesthetic sensations of laboring and working with the land, placing class as a relevant aspect of true cowboy identity as well. The unexpected surface acts as a queer method of expression, as it elevates a material traditionally deemed dirty and low, relating to Deborah Vargas' concept of "*lo sucio* or, and by extension, *the sucias* associated with *suciedad*—a Latino vernacular for dirty, nasty, and filthy—as a Latino queer analytic" (Vargas, 715). The centrality of the floor of the installation brings attention to a usually overlooked, literally stepped-on aspect of the art world and queerly confronting normative rules for what can be considered art. The literal depth of *Querías Norte* helps to communicate the interiority of the real, modern-day cowboy as complex and elusive in relation to identification, once again disidentifying with its popularized, reductive imagery and accepted methods of expression.

The boots, perhaps the ultimate representation of the cowboy, suggest a connection to movement, a core component of the lives of many of those living on the border between the United States and Mexico, adding further complexity to their identities. The mess of footprints and clumps of adobe function as an archive, documenting the emotional significance of the material and the amorous relationship of the two men who danced atop it. esparza's varied collection of artistic mediums—painting, video, music, performance, etc.—itself acts as an archive of information that simultaneously counters and connects with the "cowboy." As stated by Martin Manalansan IV, "the archive is a space for dwelling and a quotidian site for marginalized subjects as well as gendered and erotically charged energies, meanings, and other bodily processes" (Manalansan, 94). esparza's archive of queer expression in an environment typically portrayed as White and heterosexual by the media relates to Manalansan's view of "undocumented queer immigrants' households" as archives (Manalansan, 94). The land, appearing to be formed out of dried mug, but in actuality formed from culturally-significant adobe, holds the emotions of its queer subjects, as well as their history traveling on it. As within academia, mess within high art "focus[es] on the recognition and centering of underrecognized practices, stances, and situations that deviate from, resist, or run counter to the workings of normality" (Manalansan, 94), allowing for the means by which *Querías Norte* disidentifies

with the concept of the cowboy. Therefore, rafa esparza's use of untidiness of adobe made from dirt, horse dung, clay, and water to archive the significance of movement to queer immigrants and cowboys on the border between the United States and Mexico, subverting the popularized idea of the cowboy with the image of the cowboy boots they are inextricably tied to.

Upon closer inspection, the painting on the back wall of *Querías Norte* also appears to be made from actively crumbling and shifting adobe (Fig. 2). This subscribes to an element of queer temporality to the piece, as the crumbling adobe painting positions the scene from gay Norteño clubs as fleeting and falling away to the past. The footprints in the adobe represent past moments of queer joy and dance, originating from a former time. This comments on the erasure of the Latino cowboy in the present, while also providing hope for a queer horizon created by the next stewards of this dance. Muñoz explains queerness through this kind of futurity, asserting that queerness is an ideal that can never be fully assumed, yet exists in impermanent, quotidian acts, such as the dance in *Querías Norte*, that existed only in a certain instance, yet left behind traces of their beauty and significance (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*). Rather than providing pragmatic, realistic steps toward tolerance that discount the possibility of a full queer utopia, *Querías Norte* addresses ordinary moments in the lives of queer Latino cowboys, evident in the audio of the real life accounts from men attending queer Norteño clubs. This follows Vargas' understanding of *lo sucio*, or waste, "as a dimension of time excreted from bodies laboring in pointless doings" (Vargas, 721), simply dancing rather than working, as cowboys are expected to do. The unprofitable, seemingly superfluous act of two men dancing together in the desert rejects "capitalist ledgers of productive labor" (Vargas, 720) and subsequently incites a "craving for the queer, not yet here stench on the horizon" (Vargas, 721). The boots stuck in the adobe connect to Christina A. León's concept of queerness as "being stuck," which she describes "as a state in which an opaque, withdrawn figure is held in an impasse wherein the future is uncertain but the mere persistence of aesthetics implies the potential for dwelling in that very impasse" (León, 371). esparza's suggestion of figures once existing within the space suspends them in a void that obstructs the viewer's perception of their racialized sexuality, linking to its multifaceted nature and its transcension of singular identity. The figures in *Querías Norte* engage in a performance that juxtaposes the intensive, heroic challenges that the media typically portrays of cowboys and provides them with a new, utopic story through mundane, instantaneous moments. *Querías Norte* relishes in the queerness of quotidian, thrown away minutes of the everyday to elevate non-White queer subjects, in spite of and even in celebration of their dissonance with the accepted image of the cowboy.

The horses, vast landscapes, and cowboy attire of the Wild West summon a romantic atmosphere that promises adventure and freedom. However, this image only communicates dangerous half-truths, erasing the reality of those who came before the colonization of the Americas and who remain to this day, actively taking part in queer joy and community. *Querías Norte* disidentifies with the myth of the White, masculine, heterosexual cowboy. esparza achieves this through his depiction of the rhizomatic borderlands between queerness and non-Whiteness, his use of queer surface-play to reveal the complex interiority of the modern-day cowboy, and the effect of time on the artwork's longevity to illustrate the importance of the instantaneous and *lo sucio* to queer utopia. Disidentification allows for the reclamation of an important symbol and a return to its origins. It is time to give the fictionalized "cowboy" the boot and shift towards a future that focuses on the real cowboys of the world, in all their deviance from

White, heterosexual norms. True "cowboyness" exemplifies queer, Latino, and Native communities as they join together in a dance that challenges conventions and enriches the horizon of the cowboy. Yee haw!

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