Masculinity has become a relentless test by which we prove to other men, to women, and ultimately to ourselves, that we have mastered the part.¹

The conventions of [theatrical dance] generally ensure that the male dancer does not embarrass any male spectator: the male dancer should not appear sexually desirable and should direct the audience’s gaze towards his female partner; if noticed at all he should be tested and must prove himself through bravura display.²

"Single Ladies" Is Gay

QUEER PERFORMANCES AND MEDIATED MASCULINITIES

ON YOUTUBE

Harmony Bench

Masculinity theorist Michael S. Kimmel suggests that in U.S. culture masculinity is a test. Men must prove their masculinity; it cannot be taken for granted but must be performed over and over—not for women so much as other men. Furthermore, Kimmel argues that "masculine identity is born in the renunciation of the feminine, not in the direct affirmation of the masculine, which leaves masculine gender identity tenuous and fragile."³ Defined through negation, the pool of masculine possibility shrinks for men as it expands for women, both because the contours of American femininity have proven more flexible than those of masculinity, and because female masculinity (e.g., being a tomboy) is not as socially scrutinized and abhorred as male femininity (e.g., being a sissy). Given the precariousness of masculinity, I am fascinated by the number of male dancers who, in 2008 and 2009, posted online videos of themselves dancing the choreography from the music video for Beyoncé Knowles’s hit song "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)," directed by Jake Nava. The phenomenon of male dancers performing "Single Ladies" runs counter to long-standing attempts to "butch up" male dancing in concert dance as well as dance on television.⁴ How, then, do men and boys stage themselves as males when dancing like a woman (i.e., like Beyoncé) to a song about female (dis)empowerment? We could follow Kanye West’s proclamation of the "Single Ladies" music video as "one of the best videos of all time"⁵ and suggest that the dance transcends the gender of its performers. However, as demonstrated in online comments that respond to young men’s performances of "Single Ladies," many online viewers believe that "Single Ladies" is such
a gender-specific dance that it should be performed exclusively by women. Even toddlers and young boys are cautioned against performing the dance, for fear they will grow up gay. For these spectators, submitting to this particular test of dancing skill—a challenge first extended in the abstract and later concretized with the announcement of dance contests sponsored by Beyoncé and any number of daytime talk shows—is to already fail as a man, this ultimate test that “is never over or in some reliable sense passable.”

If, as Kimmel suggests, masculinity is built on a renunciation of femininity, access to attitudes and attributes characterized as “feminine” is constantly mediated by the figure of the homosexual as a failed man. Even male dancers who do not embody queer kinesthetic stereotypes are taunted with gay slurs for their audacity to perform “Single Ladies.” Policing the boundaries of masculinity while at the same time making possible an ambiguity of masculine expression, the figure of the homosexual fills the gap between masculinity as a receding horizon and the femininity against which it is defined. As an “internally excluded difference,” this figure stands as both interdiction and as possibility, creating the space in which young men can perform “Single Ladies” but also restricting their means of access by subsuming all performances under the sign “gay.”

In his essay “The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity,” dance theorist Ramsay Burt reflects on the importance of dancers as mediators between choreographers or choreographic material and audience members: “The spectator responds to the performance itself, while the performer frames the material in ways that limit and direct the kinds of interpretive manipulations a spectator can make.” Though Burt locates this specific intermediate relation in “live performance” where dancers can “sense the audience’s response,” this same relation exists, perhaps to an even greater extent, in social media environments. Indeed, approaching the many re-performances of “Single Ladies” is, in some ways, more revealing than looking exclusively at the choreographic content of Beyoncé’s video. As the number of imitations and reproductions of a given choreography increase thanks to social media’s participatory culture, each performance provides new framing and delimitations, which means that as performers bring their own interpretive and performative lenses to bear on a choreography, the possible interpretations multiply. Taken together, the performances do not limit a spectator’s “interpretive manipulations” but instead expand a choreography’s possibilities with every restaging. Burt goes on to suggest, following art theorist Mieke Bal, that performance should not be considered a transparent expression of a “choreographer’s intentions” and that one must shift the site of analysis from choreography to performance in order to discern the “affective, political, and intellectual relationship [that] is created between dancer and spectator [which is] crucial to the ideas about gender that are brought into play during a performance.”

Though Burt suggests that in analyzing gender individual performances surpass choreography in importance, I hold choreography as centrally important in considering the diversity of male performances of “Single Ladies” and try to sustain equal attention to both.
Pointing to tensions between the choreographic precedents on which Beyoncé's
"Single Ladies" relies and individual performances by Beyoncé and male dancers online,
and to the (sometimes) antagonistic relationship between online performers and online
commentators, I aim to show in this essay how male performances of "Single Ladies" on
YouTube illuminate the perceived possibilities and limitations of queer masculinities.
I argue that online responses to these performances show the conceptual labor of the
homosexual figure, which both holds the place for and mediates the performances of
non-normative masculinities. In putting their masculinity on the line en masse, these
dancers collectively open space for masculine expression not predicated on the renun-
ciation of the feminine but existing in productive physical dialogue with it.

I have organized this essay as a series of encounters between dancers on YouTube. Each
dance-off or dance challenge is a response to or reiteration of "Single Ladies" that pres-
ents a new framework for analyzing the music video and choreography. My emphasis is
on how the dancers approach and perform the dance, how YouTube viewers respond to
those performances, and my own reading of the videos and comments. I have chosen
this method of organization because the dance challenge—a dance that demands a
response from a larger community of dancers—works well as a metaphor for how dance
circulates through social media sites, with performers trying to out-dance one another or
parody/clown others' performances. The dance challenge also mirrors the structure of
negotiations around masculinity online, with physical declarations and renunciations of
masculinity in the videos and verbal jostling in the comments. Although I focus in this
essay on male performances of "Single Ladies" on YouTube from 2008 to 2009, I begin
with a much earlier incarnation of the "Single Ladies" choreography: the short dance
"Mexican Breakfast," choreographed by Bob Fosse and performed on television in 1969.
The background relationship between these two pieces circulating online as Internet
memes—units of cultural information that spread through the Internet in shifting
configurations—informs a historicization of later "Single Ladies" performances. I then
turn to effeminate performances of "Single Ladies," comedic and failed performances of
gender, and finally, the difficulty of using "Single Ladies" as a platform for performing
more conventional versions of masculinity.

SINGLE LADIES AS A SHARED OBJECT: ON DANCE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Elsewhere I have delineated some prominent aspects that characterize the contemporary
trend of dance in social media sites, highlighting their articulation of social media's ide-
ologies of participation in choreography, performance, and spectatorship. Because they
travel from body to body in a way that recalls the operations of viral media, I call chore-
ographies such as "Single Ladies" viral choreographies. "Single Ladies" and similarly
circulating dances accumulate performances into a complex network of movement cita-
tions. Because it was created in response to remix and mash-up culture, re-performances
of "Single Ladies" are integral to the music video's online identity. As such, "Single Ladies" is a special instance of dance in social media. Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" is a privileged performance, a version that sits within a constellation of "Single Ladies" performances that mimic it, reify it, or rework it.

By now it is well known that in their choreography for the "Single Ladies" music video Frank Gatson and Jaquel Knight quoted lengthy sequences of Fosse's "Mexican Breakfast." When critics and online commentators discovered that Beyoncé's choreographers did not so much compose as arrange the "Single Ladies" dance, they accused Beyoncé of stealing the choreography. In spite of such condemnations, "Single Ladies" sits well within the norms of contemporary cultural production, which art curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud has described as an era of "postproduction"—the reuse of existing works and blurring of "distinction[s] between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work." Just as contemporary artists working in a fine arts setting recycle and recontextualize materials to allow new signification, Beyoncé has repurposed existing choreographic material for her music videos.

Dance Off: Gwen Verdon vs. Beyoncé Knowles

"Most of the same steps, done at twice the speed." 18

Sporting a yellow dress shirt under a white vest with white bellbottom slacks, Gwen Verdon is flanked by two dancers in bright pink. Sunglasses perched in their poofy hair, they hob their heels to the beat, sinking forward by circling their hips and dragging their feet, maintaining a triangular formation with Verdon at its apex. They rock their hips forward and back as they gently press the space around them outward with their hands, circle the stage perimeter in a prance, and collapse their upper bodies into high kicks. Arms overhead, backs curved slightly, left feet in a forced arch and knees bent, they rapidly jackhammer their weight-bearing right heels—a vibration that travels upward to subtly shake their buttocks. The dancers return to their sinking, bobbing, and rocking. Although they sometimes strut and take up the stage space, their gestures are mostly small and contained, creating an overall rhythmic pulsation rather than a brazen display of technical virtuosity. Verdon and her dancers remain "cool" throughout, not appearing to overexert themselves in their execution of the choreography.

Dancing in the guise of her alter ego Sasha Fierce, Beyoncé Knowles and her backup dancers Ebony Williams and Ashley Everett 19 bring more attitude, higher high-heeled shoes, and bare legs to the choreography than Verdon's trio. The dancers' long hair falls over their shoulders and whips through direction changes, and the cut of their black leotards frames their sideways-popping hips. The dancers bring viewer awareness to their collective marital status, pointing out the absence of rings on their ring fingers to the refrain "If you liked it, then you shoulda put a ring on it." Beyoncé sings of her former beau's infidelity and his jealousy that she has moved on. Beyoncé and her dancers bounce in their upper bodies while allowing their hips to smoothly rotate or
strike with the beat. They wave their arms around their heads with vogue style and drill team precision, float above the music with small turns and syncopated chassés, and they smack their rumps and shake their hips.

The sharp attack of Beyoncé's striking hips figures as prominently in the "Single Ladies" music video as Gwen Verdon's constantly rocking pelvis in "Mexican Breakfast." Whereas Verdon's movement is continuous with occasional punctuation, Beyoncé's is mostly punctuated with occasional continuity in its flow. Everything about "Single Ladies" is bigger than "Mexican Breakfast." If Verdon's trio of white women is cool, then Beyoncé's trio of African American dancers is hot, hot, hot. Although Beyoncé and her dancers remain choreographically faithful to the sequences pulled from "Mexican Breakfast," Beyoncé pops her gestures to her song of (dis)empowerment, infusing her motions with an "in your face" attitude that Verdon's playful and inviting performance does not share.

The day after the "Single Ladies" music video was released, Beyoncé remarked in an interview on the BET television show 106 & Park:

I saw this... on YouTube and it's these three ladies and one of them is Bob Fosse's wife, who's this choreographer, and they're doing 'Walk It Out'—they put 'Walk It Out' to the music, it's from like the 60s—and it's one take [...] and I thought, 'wow, how amazing would that be now,' because videos have so many different cuts and different takes, just to see a non-stop dance video, one take all the way through, very simple.20

What Beyoncé saw was not a recording of the original 1969 "Mexican Breakfast" performed by Gwen Verdon and two other dancers on The Ed Sullivan Show, but a video mash-up called "Walk It Out, Fosse." Posted online in 2007 by team members of the design company Diamond Creative, "Walk It Out, Fosse" was part of a wave of mash-ups that followed the 2006 release of D. J. Unk's song "Walk It Out."21

Whereas the Diamond Creative team responsible for "Walk It Out, Fosse" engaged in a form of digitally enabled appropriation, combining Unk's music with the "Mexican Breakfast" video via electronic means, Beyoncé and her dancers engaged in a bodily appropriation of Fosse's movement. In her essay "Stealing Steps and Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Dance as Intellectual Property," dance historian Anthea Krut argues that in so-called vernacular dance forms—particularly those promulgated by early-twentieth-century African American performers and entertainers—copying, lifting, or stealing other dancers' steps has been integral to the learning process and the creation of movement communities around certain dance styles. This is precisely the activity in which Beyoncé herself engages, supported by choreographers Gascon and Knight. As Krut explains, "social dances depend on the give-and-take that makes the idea of granting a dancer a performance monopoly on a particular step or set of steps both problematic
and impractical." One could argue that "Mexican Breakfast" is neither a social dance nor a "set of steps" and should consequently be subject to the performance monopoly Kraut describes as impractical for vernacular and social dance forms. However, in the contemporary domain of social media, once-copyrighted materials circulate following the same logic of appropriation and intertextual reference as the performers Kraut analyzes. Indeed, as Bourriaud describes in his analysis of the aesthetics of postproduction, "Single Ladies" repurposes "objects that [were] already circulating on the cultural market" and gives them new meaning through their recontextualization.

Combining imitation with innovation, Gatsin and Knight intersperse Fosse's sampled choreography with J-settes or eight-counts, which are precision movements that punctuate each count of an eight-count musical phrase. The style was popularized in the 1990s in gay clubs throughout the U.S. South and was picked up by the Atlanta-born Knight for inclusion in the "Single Ladies" video. Though rarely mentioned, the music video also borrows sequences from "There's Gotta Be Something Better Than This" in Fosse's Sweet Charity—most notably the rump snacking, and a stylized version of the hip hop dance move Whoop Rico can also be spotted. Like creators of video or audio mash-ups, Gatsin and Knight remix distinct movement practices in order to create something new from their conjuncture, offering a challenge to dancers and viewers alike with the "mimicry with a difference" of their choreographic arrangement. Additionally, by including Fosse's choreography in her music video, Beyoncé sets it in circulation among a generation of dancers and viewers who are likely unfamiliar with Fosse and Verdon. She recuperates and disseminates Fosse's movement as a shared object that those who imitate her likewise embody. The filming and editing techniques used for the music video, also borrowed from the television incarnation of "Mexican Breakfast," facilitate this task of bodily transference and/or reproduction. Beyoncé and her two dancers are in full view for most of the piece and few edits disrupt their dance sequence, making the transition from a digital media platform to bodily platform reasonably easy.

On February 23, 2009, after many "Single Ladies" fans (and critics) had posted videos of their own dancing to YouTube, Beyoncé announced a dance contest in which participants were to "adhere precisely to the iconic 'Single Ladies' dance routine performed by Beyoncé and her two dancers in the original clip." Although performances and parodies were already proliferating online, Beyoncé refused contestants the liberty of what Tricia Rose calls versioning, that is, of adapting or putting a new spin on an existing piece of music or series of steps. The contest rules specifically stipulated that "no new choreography should be added." Beyoncé could not police the spoofs and other remixes of her video, but she did step in to oversee the reproduction of her version as a way to assert artistic ownership over the material while at the same time inviting its imitation. In this instance, imitation does not diminish Beyoncé's status as author, because the copies, accompanied by Beyoncé's music, continuously pointed back to her (rather than Fosse or Verdon, for example). Yet the migration of dance steps from one body to another across
identifiers of race, gender, and sexual orientation does cause this choreography to multiply in its significations.

Tying "Single Ladies" to Internet culture by first incorporating choreography from a viral video and then promoting the dance in an online contest, Beyoncé integrated social media source material and reflected its modes of participation in the creation and dissemination of "Single Ladies." Although the dance contest did not serve as the catalyst for the emergence of "Single Ladies" as a viral choreography, it helped to ensure a future for the routine in electronic and bodily memories by occasioning the multiplication of performances. Beyoncé established ideal conditions for a viral choreography, which requires ongoing performance in order to sustain itself as a shared cultural object and what I call, adapting cultural theorist Sara Ahmed's terminology, a shared object of embodiment.

In The Cultural Politics of Emotion, Ahmed analyzes what she calls the sociality of emotion—the ways emotions circulate between bodies. Feelings do not transfer in a contagious manner, Ahmed argues, as though they were some property that could pass from hand to hand unchanged. Objects of emotion, rather than emotions as such, circulate and accumulate affective responses with continued circulation. Like commodities for Marx, emotions convert "the movement between signs or objects" into affect. For Ahmed, these movements form a shifting and growing set of associations—objects of hate that are linked together out of fear, for example, and that derive their meaning from their relation. Affect is thus the cumulative effect of circulation: "Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs." Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" is just such a circulating cluster of intertextual objects accruing affect—as a song, video, and choreography. Indeed, as a shared object the song outpaces the choreography; listeners sing along with the song playing on the radio more frequently than dancers embody its moves. With "Single Ladies" and other viral choreographies, the set of associations that grow out of movement among its surrounding signs generate affect, but it is movement of a corporeal nature, such as dancing a choreography, that links the affect back to embodiment. Although Beyoncé's status as pop icon and the success of the music video secured "Single Ladies" as a shared object of feeling, it is the choreographic component that renders "Single Ladies" a shared object of embodiment—that is, an object subject to physical restaging and not just digital reproduction, an object embedded in muscle memory rather than a surface of projected affects.

Just like viral videos such as "David Afer Dentist" or "Charlie bit my finger—again!"—videos that create a common ground of Internet cultural literacy without requiring their restaging but that nevertheless seem to compel users to post their own versions—"Single Ladies" invites YouTube users to perform, record, and post their performances of the music video's choreography online. Dancers thereby extend the reach of this shared choreographic object, participating in its circulation by incorporating its motions and disseminating the videated result. As a shared object of embodiment, Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" circulates online alongside other versions that imitate, approximate, and parody the music video. Each version accrues affective value in relation to the
others, and online commentators often compare a video to other versions in their posts. As Ahmed argues, “Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs; the more signs circulate, the more affective they become.” Single Ladies’ migrates from body to body and its ever-multiplying iterations travel the Web. But, like emotions, which are attached to circulating objects rather than being transmitted themselves, the choreography of “Single Ladies” does not copy exactly; it looks different on every body. Furthermore, in the bodies of dancers, the “Single Ladies” choreography has undergone a process of resignification, morphing from a site of female (dis)empowerment to a site that supports the performance of a spectrum of masculinities and male femininities.

MAKING A SPECTACLE OF THEMSELVES: MALE DANCERS AND THE FEAR OF QUEER

In the networked world of social media, male dancers have discovered a space in which to perform for a public audience—often at their peril. As the authors in When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders make clear, to be a male dancer in the United States is already to render one’s manhood suspect. Taking the additional step of posting recordings of one’s dances to social media sites is to submit one’s performance of non-normative masculinity to the judgment of a national and sometimes global Internet audience. If, as John Berger famously suggested in the 1970s, men act and women appear, to be on display as a dancer is to be visually consumed, which is already to occupy a feminized position in relation to a viewer. A man who dances makes a spectacle of himself by offering himself up to be seen. As Peggy Phelan argues in her critique of the visibility politics pursued by the political Left, “Visibility is a trap . . . it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession.” Male dancers, particularly those who present themselves within an eroticized queer frame, not only fall prey to the trap of visibility and come under the scrutiny of those who would police, fetishize, and challenge expressions of minority masculinities. They thereby violate the cardinal rules of male performance as observed by Ramsay Burt: do not appear sexually desirable, and do not embarrass male spectators. Dancers must negotiate this politics of address differently in the space of social media than they would in theatrical venues, as Burt discusses, or even social dance clubs, as Jonathan Bollen describes in his essay “Queer Kineshtics: Performativity on the Dance Floor.” For Bollen, there are queer kineshtetic sensitivities, “queer styles of moving as a sexualized body” that viewers read, whether in the context of a dance club or YouTube. Through their fashion choices and movement styles, queer dancers orient their performances of desirability toward specific audiences keyed into a similar register of desire. Viewers who fall outside that register but who nevertheless read the sexual overtones in their dancing may very well feel embarrassed or even scandalized at such a display.
“Single Ladies” Is Gay

Dance off: Shane Mercado vs. Chris McMillon (Angel Pariz)

“As gay as that was…. He did the choreography perfectly.”

On October 18, just five days after Beyoncé’s music video for “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)” premiered on MTV, dancer Shane Mercado posted his video “Single Man dances to SINGLE LADIES” to YouTube. Mercado dances in his orange and grey bedroom surrounded by everyday objects: dressers against the walls, an umbrella propped in the corner, towels hanging on his door, a plastic sack peeking out from its spot on the doorknob. For this version, which has been flagged as inappropriate for viewers under 18, Mercado wears a costume as revealing as Beyoncé’s: accentuating his slender physique, the top does not reach his nipples and the bottoms are Speedo-like in their simplicity. Mostly bare, Mercado ecstatically wriggles, hyperextends, and flexes his way through the “Single Ladies” dance. Even though his movements are clearly confined by the space in which he is dancing, his skill with hip/pelvic isolations comes across the screen unbound. Mercado begins the dance with a cool, almost cold attitude and a hesitation born, perhaps, of concentration. He sings along, a smile curling at his lips, and by the time he reaches the second chorus of “If you liked it, then you shoulda put a ring on it/Don’t be mad when you see that he want it,” the attitude has melted into a boyish grin. He plays to the camera with irrepressible energy—except for when he worries about running into the furniture. Mercado neither introduces his dance, nor does he say anything at its conclusion; he just walks over and turns the camera off as though his performance speaks for itself.

A day after Mercado’s “Single Man” appeared online, Chris McMillon (aka Angel Pariz) posted his own version, “Angel Pariz ‘Single Ladies’ By Beyonce Dance Cover,” McMillon (Angel), who maintains an online presence and personality on YouTube (Angel has a video channel that contains his performances of many music video dances, including those of Britney Spears, Lady Gaga, and Beyoncé), dances in a sparsely furnished room. He wears a black and green fitted top, black booty shorts, boots, and a do-rag. Unlike Mercado, McMillon’s whole body remains in the frame but the image is low quality. The pixilation of the image, combined with his skill at performing a dance associated with women, renders McMillon’s sex unreadable, or so he seems to himself believe, declaring to viewers through his captioned video “Oh… and by the way… I’M A BOY I’M A BOY I’M A BOY I’M A BOY!!!!” In fact, McMillon calls attention to many aspects of his dancing, filling the frame with text bubbles encouraging viewers to go to his Facebook page and to help send him to the Ellen DeGeneres Show, or to visit his Twitter feed or MySpace page. This video of McMillon dancing, in other words, is an advertisement for McMillon and is connected to other videos all referring to McMillon’s attempts at fame (part of his Facebook address is “makemefamous”).

Both performers over-exaggerate their movements, filling their confined rooms with exuberant torso articulations (Mercado) or head and arm motions (McMillon), bringing the percussiveness of clubbing and the largess of drag queen performances to bear on their dancing. They both overplay the Fosse-derived movements, the rocking
pelvis becomes, dare I say, penetrating, and the “butt jiggle” that results from rapidly raising and lowering the heel of an outstretched leg becomes a different kind of ass-shaking all together. Mercado, for example, sets his buttocks swaying from his tailbone while McMillon seems to stomp at the floor with bug-squashing insistence. The absence of high heels may be the genesis of these dancers’ errant backrides, but more likely their mis-performances are linked to their reading of Fosse via Beyoncé rather than via his unparalleled interpreter Gwen Verdon. This is not to say that following Verdon’s style would have altered the reactions of online viewers, many of whom criticize Mercado and McMillon for their spectacularly gay performances, but in following Beyoncé, they magnify (and queer) some of her movement tendencies not visible in Verdon’s rendition.

What seems to be at issue for many viewers is a combination of Mercado’s and McMillon’s queer movement styles, their revealing outfits, as well as the fact of latching onto “Single Ladies” as a shared object of embodiment. According to some viewers, the choreography should be the exclusive domain of women; its embodiment should not be shared across gender lines. Yet, as choreographer of a large portion of the sampled steps, Bob Fosse made more of a distinction between male and female sartorial styles than movement vocabulary. Given that “Mexican Breakfast” was a “family-friendly” performance for television audiences, the sequences that Gatson and Knight borrowed are not particularly gender-coded or even highly sexualized. It would be incorrect, then, to assert that the choreography itself excludes male performers. It seems, rather, that it is the inevitable residue of Beyoncé’s singing and dancing image that sounds such assertions, despite the choreographers, lyricists, music composers, and music video director all being men. If Beyoncé as a commercialized fantasy haunts and informs male dancers performing “Single Ladies” on YouTube, the latter are also circumscribed by a circular logic that suggests all males (including children) who dance (“Single Ladies”) are gay because only gays would be caught dancing (to “Single Ladies”).

In his analysis of choreographer Joe Goode’s stage-based work “29 Effeminate Gestures,” David Gere argues that fear of effeminacy, or perceived effeminacy, is at the root of this gay-induced anxiety. “What exactly, then, are the physical codes that signify effeminacy?” he asks. Reading Goode’s performance, Gere observes that “Enthusiasm comes unbridled. The gestures are effulgent,...excessive....Excess is enabled when the [societal] chains constraining one’s corporeality break and shatter to the floor.” Similarly, Mercado and McMillon dance big, luxuriating in their “gestural freedom,” even in the small rooms in which they dance. But following in the footsteps of the sexually assertive, body-confident Sasha Fierce rather than the softer, more vulnerable, “feminine” Beyoncé persona, Mercado and McMillon invest their performances with the maximum energy possible. Their dancing is truly over the top, uncontainable, effulgent and excessive—effeminate but not exactly feminine, a point to which I will return later on.
Regardless of their approach, Mercado and McMillon unapologetically frame their queer bodies for online viewers. Neither dancer has disabled comments on his YouTube videos, which offer readers a repository of viewers’ sentiments. Many of the comments praise the dancers for their skill, but some viewers respond with slurs such as “faggot,” “bicha,” or extended statements such as “Damn this is just disturbing…straight up awful. yeah maybe he is imitating Beyonce pretty good but the dance is suppose to be done by WOMEN! Is feminine so yeah that makes this dude pretty much a fag” [sic]; and “errr ugly lady boy, u got a dick mate act like you fucking got 1!” [sic].44 Other comments are a little subtler (”wtf??”, “that was weird”) or offer qualified praise (“I think yur the gayest person in the world but yu got talent man” [sic]).45 Even some commentators who identify themselves as gay are reticent to advocate for Mercado and McMillon’s performances of “Single Ladies,” arguing implicitly or explicitly that such performances fulfill shameful and toxic gay male stereotypes. Queer theorist Judith Halberstam suggests that contemporary politics around gay pride offer gay men a way to “work through gay shame by producing normative masculinities and presenting themselves as uncastrated, muscular, whole.”46 Halberstam notes that the shame experienced by gay men as children “has to do with exposing their femininity and dramatizing their failure to access the privilege that has been symbolically reserved for them”—their failure to perform phallic masculinity.47 Performances such as those by Mercado and McMillon undermine attempts by gays and lesbians pursuing a politics of assimilation, who, in hopes of garnering recognition and validation by the dominant straight culture, promote the collective embodiment of gender norms.48 The fear of queerness and of effeminacy in particular, in other words, is a shared fear.

The threat Mercado and McMillon pose to some viewers seems tied to what the latter perceive as the dancers’ shamelessness. Halberstam contends that “the sissy boy is the incarnation of shame,”49 but by appearing online in all their sissy glory Mercado and McMillon refuse to be ashamed of their dancing. Viewers’ caustic comments on their videos thus supply shaming mechanisms to offset the performers’ lack of shame—a lack that appears as threatening to these viewers as the symbolic castration the dancers seem to represent. Though the performers are no longer children, viewers continue to exert social pressures toward gender conformity, engaging in what Bollen calls “the forcible production of abject homosexuality”50 exposing femininity and diagnosing homosexuality wherever alternative masculinities appear. What plays out in the comments, however, is not a uni-directional shaming of queer subjects by hetero/homonormative subjects. In addition to shaming the dancers, the viewers who post negative comments are also shamed: first by the videos themselves in which queer shamelessness shames viewers and prompts them to post their homophobic or effemino-phobic indictments, and a second time when commentators voicing support for the performers shame those viewers for their offensive and socially unacceptable posts. Shame is volleyed back and forth with each successive retort, the parties involved incensed by their inability to adequately shame those who are affectively alien to them.
Sara Ahmed uses the term *affect alien* in her essay "Happiness and Queer Politics" to describe the killjoy, specifically a (black) feminist killjoy who ruins the enjoyment of others by pointing out the sexist and racist implications of what those in an affective community enjoy. She explains, “When we feel pleasure from happy objects, we are aligned [with others]. We become alienated—out of line with an affective community—when we are not happy in proximity to objects that are attributed as being good.” If a majority of Mercado’s and McMillon’s viewers value the videos and, through their enjoyment, constitute an affective community around the videos as happy objects, those who find displeasure disrupt that affective community with their derisive remarks and contribute to “the loss of a shared atmosphere.” But if one community of viewers can be discerned through their displeasure at what they read as the dancers’ queerness, on what grounds are positively inflected affective communities established in relation to the dancers or their videos? A survey of the comments seems to suggest that it is not the performers’ queerness that turns the videos into “happy objects,” since even viewers who do not chastise the dancers for being gay deflect into accepting the dancers “just the way God made them,” or make it known to other commentators that even though they are complimentary toward the performers, they themselves are not gay. Yet it would seem, then, that the competence of the dancers affords spectatorial enjoyment on which to construct an affective community among viewers. In these videos, skill and sexuality are tethered. Mercado and McMillon are clearly skilled dancers, but for a male dancing in this style, to dance in a competent way is to dance in a “gay way.”

As I mentioned earlier, the male performers I have observed on YouTube perform not so much in a feminine way as in an effeminate or queer way, as though performing-woman remains beyond reach and the only access to femininity available to men (regardless of their sexual orientation) is through the stereotypical figure of the homosexual. There are many viable reasons for the figure of the homosexual mediating and transfiguring male femininity into queer effeminacy in online performances of "Single Ladies": dancers are gay and are not afraid to show it; dancing “like a woman” is subtler than the showier style of dancing “like a homosexual” (which is why women continuously lose “Single Ladies” dance contests on daytime television shows); Beyoncé’s alter ego Sasha Fierce is a drag queen, that is, a fantastical version of femininity at home in the exaggerated aesthetics of camp; male femininity as such does not exist in the cultural imaginary except as gay, and for various reasons people (regardless of orientation or gender identity) feel compelled to continuously diagnose queerness wherever attributes coded as effeminate appear without female bodies. As masculinity theorist R. W. Connell suggests, the category or “social identity of being gay […] is now so well formed and readily available that it can be imposed on people whether they like it or not.” The label gay erases all nuance and subsumes all slantwise performances of masculinity under its singular rubric. Alternate tactics of performance such as comedy, parody, and clowning offer a partial way out of this bind, but accusations of gayness/queerness have become so habitual that any escape is tenuous and provisional.
Although colloquial usage has adapted the meme fail to express any kind of displeasure independent of competence assessment, the term was once framed by the tragedy of a sincere but inadequate performance. In a curious development of gender norms, young men have built on the success of television shows such as Jackass, which showed guys engaged in dangerous pranks and stunts, and the amateurness of Internet culture to articulate failure as a technique of (white) masculinity. The success of failure, it seems, has given young men leave to perform acts of superlative stupidity, as well as feats for which they do not possess the requisite skills, in front of a camera. Epic failure, that is a failure that is so complete and so miserable as to have been previously unimaginable, is a type of failure that is so satisfying to viewers that it becomes a “win” in its own right. Spectacular failures of the “epic” variety rival skillful execution. Whereas for the most part this results in so-called fail blogs being populated by extreme sports accidents and misadventures with power tools, this same ethos seems to have also opened up a space for “gender fails,” or failed performances of gendered identities. The term gay has adapted many of the same features as “fail,” though it is more derisive. As an insult directed at a person, it has largely taken the place of “retard,” which was used with excessive frequency in the 1980s and which has since largely fallen out of favor as a socially unacceptable derogatory term. However, where “retard,” as crass as it is, pointed to a failure of competence based in mental acuity, “gay,” usually directed at men or boys, links that same failure to manhood and sexual orientation. Whereas “fail” connotes a misfire or mistake, when used derisively toward a person, “gay” implies that the failure is one of gender. In other words, “fail” points to the action undertaken (You failed at...), while “gay” points to the person undertaking that action (You are gay).

Dance off: Joe Jonas and Cabby

“hilarious!!! and at the same time totally wrong!!!!”

“It’s for the fans,” his brothers coax, and after much persuasion, singer Joe Jonas emerges from behind his brother, revealing himself to be dressed in a long-sleeved black unitard and high heels. As part of the countdown to the fourth Jonas Brothers album release, Joe Jonas dances to “Single Ladies.” “Dances” is perhaps too generous. Rather, Jonas wobbles, wags his finger, grimaces, and lip synchs while the “Single Ladies” song plays. Perched atop high heels, Jonas is unable to maintain his balance and he bounces from the torso up. True, he does manage to shake his butt, presumably for the pleasure of his female audience, but otherwise Jonas’s performance is nearly unwatchable. He is alternately geriatric in his attempt to remain upright and electric in his body’s flailing about as though prodded by shocks. Jonas is clearly watching the video while performing, and he doesn’t know the words to the song. He does not dance with the intent of showing his skill. Instead, he stages a form of self-mockery that strategically foregrounds the absence of skill.
It is unclear what has motivated the Charlotte, North Carolina, radio personality Cubby (Jake Edwards Squires) to remake music videos by Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, and others. His version of "Single Ladies," performed in his living room, seems to have initiated his series of music video remakes. His black leotard and bare legs have now become something of a trademark in his home-based performances, but what really makes Cubby stand out from the crowd of imitators is his bulging belly. Unapologetically overweight, Cubby dances to songs by some of the leading contemporary female vocal artists and posts his videos online. For his video, "Cubby dances to Beyoncé Single Ladies," Cubby has edited together several takes. He doesn’t indicate if the cuts are a result of displeasure with his performance or lack of stamina, though the introduction of a handkerchief after the third cut suggests the latter. After editing, his video is under two minutes long, while the "Single Ladies" video is over three minutes.

While Joe Jonas’s mockery is both self- and other-directed, which is to say, Jonas pokes fun at Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies” and his performance of it, Cubby’s seems mostly self-directed, as his dances seem to be sincere acts of fandom. Jonas stages his embarrassment at appearing in a unitard (one cannot be too eager to don a unitard and still be considered a “real" man) and his failure at "Single Ladies" in order to secure a masculine position, though some online commentators find proof of Jonas’s presumed homosexuality in his having performed this dance at all. Cubby, in contrast, is not embarrassed and in fact seems rather empowered in his performances. What viewers mostly respond to in watching Cubby’s videos is his obesity.

There are, to be sure, innumerable instances of young men and women failing at prescribed performances of gendered identities online. In fact, a search for “Single Ladies fail” on YouTube results in mostly female performers, who have identified their own performances as fail(ure)s through titles and tags, who do not possess the skill to perform either the “Single Ladies” choreography or Beyoncé’s/Sasha Fierce’s diva-like femininity. In her essay “Throwing Like a Girl”: Gender in a Transnational World,” dance theorist Susan Leigh Foster analyzes similar misperformances that lead to gender’s choreographic undoing in contemporary postmodern dance choreography. Of interest for Foster is the way gendered movement citations function such that performers “underscore the pretense of their performance.” She suggests that citing and parodying gender’s codes by putting on and taking off gendered identities destabilizes gender as a cultural construct. Foster points to British choreographer Lea Anderson’s full-length work Yippee!! and the Japanese performance collective KATHY as examples of artists mining a “globally circulating set of [gender] codes” as gestural fodder for performing feminist critique. This “repository of codes,” Foster suggests, “can be tapped to accessorize any body.” Although Foster’s analysis centers on femininity as accessory and the spaces of failure that performers carve out for themselves within femininity as a representational terrain, her provocative suggestion that gender, now globally uploaded, can be corporeally down-
loaded to suit various purposes is evidenced by the sheer number and variety of male performances of "Single Ladies" that can be found online.

However, the effects of what Foster might consider gender-destructing performances can also be put to the service of gender restabilization in the comments viewers leave in response to a video. As Judith Butler notes in *Gender Trouble,* "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right." According to Foster, Anderson's performers offer viewers "a slightly different flavor of the feminine" with each glamour-infused scene, but male dancers performing parodies of "Single Ladies" on YouTube miss the mark in their portrayals of feminine movement codes. They do not seem to have privileged access to the feminine gender codes—accessories that Foster describes—even as they clearly leave (a dominant version of) masculinity behind in their performances of slightly different flavors of queer.

Take, for example, Joe Jonas, who fails remarkably in his parodic portrayal of femininity. Despite framing his performance as one demanded by fans, Jonas's sexuality comes under intense scrutiny. With more than 25,5 million views on YouTube and around 275,000 comments, it is not surprising to find a range of responses to Jonas's performance. What is surprising is that the term *gay* is the statistically most common word used in the video's comments. Some viewers suggest that the "horrible...unwatchable" quality of Jonas's dancing of the video proves he is straight, implying that a "proper" gay man would/should dance well, while others think his spastic dance is a cover and that "a straight man would have worked [the choreography] out." Most viewers are simply shocked to see Jonas wearing a unitard and heels.

As a point of comparison, it is useful to examine how the television shows *Glee* and *Saturday Night Live* parodied "Single Ladies." I will not discuss these in detail since they were made for television, which has its own history of repackaging cultural material for popular televisual consumption. However, along with Cubby's performance, they offer representational strategies of which Jonas does not avail himself.

In the first season of *Glee,* the show's gay character, Kurt, who has joined the McKinley High School football team (it's a long story...), dances to "Single Ladies" to help him make a field goal. Though it requires much convincing, the entire team eventually learns a sequence of "Single Ladies," which they dance on the field as a diversionary tactic. "Single Ladies" is deployed in the hypermasculine space of a football game where it lends the element of surprise to an underdog team. Dressed in football uniforms, it is impossible to tell the sex of the dancers, though the context suggests that television audiences read them as male. The dancers move somewhat gruffly, as they would not want to be seen as effeminate by the other team. They are already taking a risk by performing this dance. It is crucial for both the narrative and the framing of the dance that McKinley scores—otherwise the football players' embarrassment at losing a game would be compounded by the humiliation of their out-of-place, cross-gender dancing. In performing "Single Ladies," they are risking public humiliation; they put their masculinity on the line as their last best hope for winning the game.
In the *Saturday Night Live* parody starring Beyoncé and Justin Timberlake, a trio of male "dancers" also put their masculinity on the line, but their uniform is quite different from that adopted by the cast of *Glee*: black unitards and high heels, but more important, affected hand gestures, body postures that emphasize their hips, and lips when they speak. In other words, the men perform gay in order to deflect accusations of being gay. Instead of female impersonation, theirs is a form of gay impersonation. The skit suggests that Beyoncé and the three men are in a studio to record the "Single Ladies" music video, but the male dancers are hopeless—even Timberlake, a former member of dancing boy band *N Sync. They do not know the choreography and appear not to have much experience wearing high-heeled shoes, so with each take they shake their butts, bumb and grind, and devolve into a hot mess until Beyoncé refuses to put up with their dancing any longer. Though the men physicalize queer codes, they are neither fierce nor competent in their dancing; they are bumbling, hapless, and humorous.

In contrast to the performers on *Glee* and *SNL*, Cubby appears in his living room rather than on a television comedy. It would seem that he should have been subjected to the same biting criticisms as Mercado and McMillon, but this proves not to be the case. There are some gay slurs in his videos' comments, but the humor users find in watching him dance almost cancels out negative responses regarding Cubby's weight or perceived sexual orientation. Like Mercado, McMillon, Jonas, and Timberlake, Cubby shows a lot of leg in his leotard. His dancing is more restrained than Mercado and McMillon, however, and it is clearly difficult for him to perform the choreography. Cubby is no "twink": he does not have the youth, slender build, stamina, or practice that many other dancers have. Cubby does have amateurism on his side, which has been valued in social media, but it is really Cubby's corpulence that sets him apart from the sea of both amateur and practiced dancers performing Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" online. Cubby's skin-tight costuming challenge to the cultural desexualization of obese people even turned him into something of a folk hero for a time. Some users post things like "omg," "my eyes, my eyes!" or "I can't unsee that," but comments also tip over into a strange form of admiration: SexyGal127 says, "mad props to you man, you got some guts for dancing like that" and magicalpoop declares, "You have balls of steel, sir."* Humor as the demonstrated absence of dancing skill does not rescue Jonas from gay slurs, but it almost works for Cubby. This discrepancy can be traced to their performances: Jonas has tried too hard to fail, revealing his insecurity and rendering his performance just a regular "fail," while Cubby's self-secure performance is so unexpected and such a breach of decorum that it earns him an "epic fail" and thus boosts his status according to the logic of social media.

In contrast to the performances of "Single Ladies" by Cubby and those shown on *SNL* and *Glee*, all of which demonstrate preemptive maneuvers or gimmicks that help stabilize the masculinity of the performers (football gear, playing gay, being overweight), Joe Jonas has no cover, no defensive tactic to deflate criticisms. Whereas the other situations enable their performers to accrue cultural capital for their performances that make up for a lapse in gendered behavioral protocols—McKinley High wins the game, Justin Timberlake
gets to be popular again, Cubby gets millions of views online and appeared onstage with Beyoncé in an Atlanta concert—Jonas does not set himself up to gain anything from his performance. His is a defensive rather than offensive or anticipatory performance. Whereas Timberlake embraces his parodic gay character, Joe Jonas cowers behind his brother, reluctant to expose himself. Already suspected of being gay, hounded by paparazzi to come out, and catering to an audience of teen and pre-teen girls (with their crushes and school girl fantasies), Jonas is right to be anxious about his scrutinized masculinity. Without a narrative in which to couch his performance or an ingenious scenario in which to recuperate his gender fail, he opts instead for a spastic performance in which he actively repels the feminine codes placed on his body through Beyoncé’s fashion and the “Single Ladies” choreography. In an attempt to not be emasculated by his unitard, high heels, and broken wrists, Jonas fails at performing both masculinity as well as femininity. Because he is suspected of being gay and because his young fans (or their parents) might take offense at any allusion to queerness—his own or that of imagined others—Jonas also has no recourse to the figure of the homosexual as a way to defend his challenged heterosexuality through a mockery of minority masculinities. But even though he does not embody or parody queer kinesthetic codes, his performance is nevertheless criticized as evidence of homosexuality.

To be sure, there are plenty of online viewers who have no fondness for the Jonas Brothers or their music and who take cheap shots at them and other boy bands. But explaining away some of the comments on the YouTube video does nothing to alleviate the ridiculousness of Jonas’s grimacing performance. For comedians and others who perform parodies of gender for the sake of humor, the gender fail is necessarily double: one must initially fail at one’s own gender and then fail at the gender one portrays in order to rescue the first. The second failure must be greater than the first, outwitting it. In the realm of social media, only a male’s spectacular failure at femininity offers to compensate for performing feminine codes in the first place. Even then, the outcome is not guaranteed as the online reception of Jonas’s performance demonstrates. Nor are there assurances for those men who abandon unitards and high heels in favor of conservative but stylish men’s clothing. They do not martyr themselves to their clothes in the way that Mercado, McMillon, Cubby, and Jonas do, yet they too find their masculinity questioned.

**DANCE LIKE A MAN**

Given the widespread failure of gender in male performances of “Single Ladies”—a failure welcomed by some and abhorred by others—is it even possible to dance “Single Ladies” “like a man”? Although I admit I am not sure what that phrase means as a physical practice, since masculinity is an impossible test, I will nevertheless venture to suggest that it is possible to dance the “Single Ladies” choreography in a masculine manner, but to do so requires that performers bypass Beyoncé’s Sasha Fierce personality and sexualized
performance quality. In a sense, such performances return to the classic style and comparative gender neutrality of "Mexican Breakfast"—whether or not the performers acknowledge any intention to dig down into this sedimentary layer of Beyoncé's performance.

Dance off: Purple Haze (Darius Crenshaw, Grasan Kingsberry, Brian Brooks) vs. t59180 (anonymous)

"no bono but you guys can dance"60

Purple Haze performs their rendition of "Single Ladies" with, they note, some choreographic adaptations. The dancers are from the touring Broadway musical The Color Purple, and as such they wear early twentieth-century slacks, vests, and caps, and they are framed by the golden hues of the musical's set and lighting. They are very dapper indeed. The leader struts backward to take his place downstage, and as music begins the other men join him in a triangle of shifting weight—side to side, hand on hip or rib cage, with an occasional flourish of the hand and wrist. "Now put your hands up"; they kick at full height, outdoing Beyoncé's 45 degrees. Taking up the stage space, the dancers do not mine their steps but take their time, filling the music by sitting gently into their hips. They maintain a low center of gravity—the movement of their upper bodies rests atop rooted lower halves. They initiate their movements cleanly, remaining very close to Beyoncé and her dancers in performance quality. Reinforcing their gentlemanly qualities, they occasionally remove and gesture with their caps, and, crucially, they omit the choreographic keystone: instead of gliding their heads back and forth atop their shoulders, continuously rotating their left hand from one side to the other to display the absence of a ring, they insert entirely different choreography. The choice to exclude such a strong symbol of female (dis)empowerment is striking.

Visually establishing their maleness at the outset, the unamed male dancers in t59180's "Single Man Single Ladies Beyoncé" perform bare-chested, exposing the shapelessness of their well-developed muscles. They have mastered the choreography's sequencing and phrasing but dance somewhat conservatively, keeping close to Beyoncé's energy and effort. These young men neither underplay nor overplay Beyoncé's gestures and the femininity with which she executes her movement, and they are nuanced enough in their imitation that they even copy Beyoncé's facial expressions, smiling when she smiles. Though they miss a few changes of head direction, their performance remains one of the most accurate imitations on YouTube in terms of duplicating Beyoncé's movement quality and intention.

Both Purple Haze and the two anonymous dancers approach "Single Ladies" as a sexy but gender-neutral dance that anyone can perform. In their period-style costumes, the dancers in Purple Haze move through the choreography in a gentle manner that fosters a refined masculine expression, while the bare-chested anonymous young men in baggy jeans suggest participation in street dance aesthetics that embrace fluid movements alongside the more familiar percussive and discontinuous moves. Neither group attempts to undermine homoerotic registers; nor do they amplify them. They perform
Fashion choices, as it should by now be apparent, are crucial to how men frame their dancing bodies on YouTube. In dance clubs, Bollen argues, the bodily orientation of dancers indicates to whom they address their dancing. This facing, along with proximity to other dancing bodies, becomes the foundation upon which “social relations are ventured, negotiated, and sustained on the dance floor.” In contrast, YouTube dancers perform in the absence of other dancing bodies and thus do not manifest their affiliations through their spatial proximity to others. Dancers in videos nevertheless create their own kind of facing or what, following Rosalyn Diprose, Bollen calls “opening onto others.”

Fashion is the key to this mode of address. For example, whereas Mercado and McMillon dance in outfits that sartorially signify the performers’ queer identities, the unitards that Jonas and Cubby (and Timberlake) sport are intended as a farcical doubling back to position the wearer as one who would never or should never wear such an item of clothing, while the attire of the anonymous brothers and Purple Haze does not itself suggest the sexual orientation of the performers. Nor is it clear from the dancers’ performance style toward what target audience(s) they orient their dancing.

The dancers in Purple Haze and ts1918o permit homoerotic readings without dampening the enthusiasm of (purportedly) straight female audience members. Indeed, both groups perform a conventional fantasy of the smooth, sexy, sensitive guy who can sweep a woman off her feet. Responding to this portrayal of masculinity, women offer mock proposals of marriage, and both men and women comment on how sexy the performers are. This is also true for other performers who adopt a similar approach to the piece in terms of fashion and movement styles. For example, online commentators compliment Joner Hall, who won a “Single Ladies” dance contest on the Rachel Ray Show, for his dancing skills as well as his physique (his butt is particularly admired), and Jeremy Cox and Alex Wong of the Miami City Ballet (the latter also of the 2010 season of So You Think You Can Dance) are adored for their fun and boyishly innocent version performed in dress shirts and ties. Comparing comments across all the videos mentioned in this chapter, it is clear that viewers tend to be more comfortable with the masculinities that Purple Haze and ts1918o perform, and the tone of their language shifts accordingly. It helps that they perform in groups, distributing masculinity across bodies in such a way as to render masculinity a cumulative effect rather than the singular property of any one body. Still, masculinity reads primarily through the dancers’ physical appearance, including developed muscles, choice of attire, and movement styles. The dancers masculinize the space around them in socially familiar ways, and as a result they are criticized far less frequently than other “Single Ladies” dancers. Despite performing “Single Ladies,” the dancers seem to embrace gender norms at the level of self-presentation, troubling viewers’ ability to visually apprehend their sexual orientations.
Removing fashion choices and bulging biceps from the equation, Purple Haze and ts9180 make a strategic aesthetic choice that further differentiates them from other online performers. Simply put, they do not attempt to embody Beyoncé. They neither demonstrate the likeness of their approximation to Beyoncé’s own performance as do Mercado and McMillon, nor do they show how their imitation falls short like Jonas and Cubby. Instead, they bypass Beyoncé’s performance, dancing the choreography rather than performing Beyoncé. With this maneuver, they set themselves alongside Beyoncé as interpreters of this choreography rather than as derivative performers—Beyoncé wannabes. This frees them to move through the choreography in a manner different from Beyoncé, but because of this difference their renditions are closer to Beyoncé’s than are the videos in which dancers try to copy her. Performing on Broadway, where, no doubt, all the performers have encountered Fosse-style movement, surely assists Purple Haze in reaching the choreography behind Beyoncé’s performance. Because ts9180 gives viewers no personal information, I cannot say what has facilitated the performers’ interpretation of the choreography, in which, ironically, they copy minute details of Beyoncé’s performance.

Though obviously skilled performers, neither group allows their own personalities to overshadow the choreography, thus allowing the subtlety—and gender ambiguity—of Fosse’s movement to show through. Whether the dancers are aware of it or not, the choices Purple Haze and ts9180 make return “Single Ladies” to a movement style one can imagine Fosse performing himself. They recuperate the possibility of Fosse’s own masculine presence, first sidestepped by Verdon in “Mexican Breakfast” and later erased by Beyoncé in “Single Ladies”—an absence compounded by the song’s lyrics. Indeed, though Fosse does not himself perform in “Mexican Breakfast,” he and other male dancers perform many of the same movements as Verdon and her female dancers, examples of which can be found in Liza with a Z (“Bye Bye Blackbird”), Sweet Charity (“Rich Man’s Frug”), and Pippin (“Glory”), among many others. Where Beyoncé’s rendition choreographically references Fosse, viewers and dancers who are unfamiliar with dance’s gestural histories and repertoires are likely to miss its presence in “Single Ladies” as a critical residue. In her book Queer Phenomenology, Ahmed suggests that heterosexuality constitutes a field in, around, and against which we orient ourselves. “Heterosexual bodies ‘extend’ into spaces,” she says, “as those spaces have taken form by taking on their [heterosexual] form.” Although “Single Ladies” strongly implies heterosexuality, the theatricalized femininity is foregrounded as constitutive of this particular field. Performers thus orient themselves around femininity as they extend into the space carved out by Beyoncé, a space that has relegated Fosse to the background in order to take on Beyoncé’s form.

I began this chapter with Michael Kimmel’s assertion that masculinity is a test, of which the renunciation of femininity is a crucial component. Yet over the course of this essay, I’ve surveyed a diverse group of men willing to submit to a test of dancing skill that requires proximity to “the feminine” in its alignment with the pop icon Beyoncé. Some
of the men I’ve described performing “Single Ladies” complicate their performances of masculinity with effeminacy, and others don the trappings of femininity (unitard/leotard, high heels) while rejecting feminine (kin)esthetic codes. Still others assert their masculinity through performances of gentility. Dancing “Single Ladies” and posting their recordings online, these dancers submit their performances to the scrutiny of viewers outside their affective communities. Many are berated for failing to appropriately perform the gendered behaviors assigned to their sex, for embodying a dance many viewers perceive as gender-specific, and for dancing in a way that online commentators designate as gay or queer regardless of whether or not the performers use such terms to describe themselves. Though viewers continue to approach their dancing through the mediating figure of the homosexual, reducing deviations from conventional masculinity to the adjective “gay,” these performers shift the ground of contemporary expressions of masculinity within a broader U.S. cultural milieu. They collectively refuse the renunciation of femininity as the essential qualification for masculinity, and they do so not tucked away in dance clubs and theaters or even in the character “types” represented on television sitcoms; they do so circulating online in front of an anonymous audience of millions. For that, as one viewer put it, they have “balls of steel.”

NOTES


5. West famously interrupted Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for Best Female Video in order to announce this public assessment of Knowles’s work. *MTV Video Music Awards*, MTV, September 11, 2009.

6. Other commentators compliment male performers by suggesting that they dance to “Single Ladies” better than Beyoncé did or better than a woman could.


11. Ibid., 152.

12. Ibid., 153.

13. YouTube comments are not an unproblematic "archive of feelings" (see Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), but because they contain viewers' responses in their own words and offer a range of responses, from the inflammatory and reactionary to the complimentary and appreciative, I find them valuable as a gauge of audience attitudes and reception.

14. The idea of Internet memes has been adapted from Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene*. The author postulates the presence of gene-like entities, which he calls memes, that spread ideas and cultural phenomena such as catch-phrases, fashion trends, and beliefs. Memes are units of information that repackage themselves through variation and mutation to survive new cultural scenarios. This concept has been applied to viral media and can refer to any object, image, or idea that spreads through the Internet, whether forwarded and uploaded in unchanged form or recontextualized with each iteration. Examples of Internet memes include "Om nom nom nom," "Evil Bert," "Hitler Finds Out," and "LOL Cats." Users reinvigorate Internet memes by applying familiar phrases or images to new contexts, and they create branching memes from content joined in mash-ups. See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).


17. Beyoncé has used Fosse-inspired choreography before. For example, Beyoncé's "Get Me Bodied" music video borrows movement and scenery from "Rich Man's Frug" in Fosse's *Sweet Charity*. Her apocalyptic Afro-futurist music video for "Run the World (Girls)" similarly incorporates movement created by the Mozambican dance group Tofo Tofo, though in that instance the Tofo Tofo dancers also appear in the video.


20. "Beyoncé confirmed."

21. "Walk It Out, Fosse" went viral after being mentioned by blogger and gossip columnist Perez Hilton.


23. It is noteworthy that choreographic works were not even covered by copyright law in the United States until 1976—seven years after "Mexican Breakfast" appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.


26. Many thanks to D. Sabela Grimes for this observation.


38. In McMillon’s second "Single Ladies" video, "Beyonce 'Single Ladies' Part 2," he notes the shops from which he has purchased each item of his clothing, again turning his body and his video into an advertisement.

39. Male and female fashion choices also converged at times in Fosse’s work, for example, with women appearing alongside men in top hats and coat tails.


41. Ibid., 356–57, original emphasis.

42. Ibid., 357.


44. Tangledup86, comment on Shane Mercado, "Single Man dances to 'SINGLE LADIES.'"

45. AaronAcadisinn, comment on Shane Mercado, "Single Man dances to 'SINGLE LADIES.'"
47. Halberstam, “Shame,” 226. Halberstam is specifically referring to white gay men and to gay shame as a movement in the service of white gay men, but her comments on male privilege and normative masculinity are more broadly applicable.
48. Jonathan Bollen notes that “there are gay men for whom ‘girly’ is a style against which to define their dancing” (304). He goes on to state that gay men tend not to dance “girly” while cruising, and that one adopts a style of dancing according to what one hopes to accomplish through dancing, namely, having fun or cruising/getting cruised (304).
54. “Gay” can also be directed at any object or situation a speaker dislikes or by which he or she is inconvenienced. Because I am concerned in this essay with videos of dancing that people have posted online, I attend to the human-directed uses of this term and do not consider its wider range of meanings as intended primarily by U.S. teenagers.
55. It is possible that some YouTube users who simply write “gay” as their comment intend their truncated insults to mean “that performance is gay” rather than “the performer is gay.” However, when directed toward a person, I find the distinction untenable.
58. Ibid., 61.
59. Ibid., 60.
61. Foster, “‘Throwing Like a Girl’?” 60.
62. Ibid., 60.
63. I used the Google Chrome ad-on OpinionCloud, which analyzed the 999 most recent comments (as of 22 March 2011) on Jonas’s YouTube video.
64. 3GPalmSprings, comment on Joe Jonas, “Joe Jonas Dances to ‘Single Ladies’.”
65. slachack, comment on Joe Jonas, “Joe Jonas Dances to ‘Single Ladies’.”
70. Bollen, “Queer Kinesthesia,” 293.
71. Ibid., 293.
72. Tags, descriptions, and other metadata are another key way to designate "facing."
75. Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 92, original emphasis.