Chapter 4

Constructing Ensemble Topologies

> Topology is the property of something that doesn't change when you bend it or stretch it as long as you don't break anything.
>
> —Edward Witten (Witten n.d.)

At a basic level, the artistic projects of Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service, Nature Theater of Oklahoma, and the TEAM align with mathematical processes: counting, pattern making, mapping, and communicating structure. Perhaps these are processes that supersede disciplinary divisions, with potential to accentuate shared attentiveness to aesthetics. When Nature Theater of Oklahoma embraces aleatory techniques as means for generating choreography, the group effectively stages a kind of performative mathematical uncertainty model that revels in audiences' meaning-making impulses in response to (somewhat) randomly generated sequences enacted by live bodies. When Goat Island completes their life as an ensemble as they reach total performance works numbering the greatest single-digit natural number (9), members of the group reveal their investment in aesthetic principles that govern group action outside as well as inside the performance space. As Paige McGinley writes about New York experimental performance makers, ushering the reader toward a twenty-first-century generation of performance groups including the TEAM, Nature Theater of Oklahoma, Witness Relocation, Banana Bag & Bodice and others, she laments the absence of a three-dimensional representational analysis. Such a medium might explicate the networked connection among groups that "mimics the fractal, spatial storytelling that characterizes so much of the work" (McGinley 2010, 13). Perhaps the very processes of ensemble-centric performance making, ever evolving attempts to layer many sources and many voices into cohesive methodologies and performances, ask for language that evokes the geometric, the structural, the mathematical. Borrowed language can enable an investigation toward defining collective identity for some of these ensembles, marking out shapes and contours that make them what and who they are, able to be stretched and bent but nonetheless topologically intact "as long as you don't break anything" (Witten n.d.).

American Fractals

In the era of the forty-fifth president of the United States, rife with sharp ideological divisions, the ontology of "America" is newly infused with violence and uncertainty. Rhetoric from opposing political poles claims the term as a shorthand promise. For some "America" expresses a commitment to a progressive and inclusive future; for others it functions as a slogan for ravenous (white) nationalism. This particular sociopolitical moment, following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, trends toward conflict around the branding of "America" and what it means to make America great (again): Which shorthand will appropriate the semiotic resonance of the word? Which America will emerge victorious, and which will be supplanted? Political poles forge a myth of two Americas that is fueled in part, perhaps, by a well-established two-party political system with deeply partisan habits. Binaries are, it seems, written into America's code of governance. Within this climate, group-oriented values and processes, collectivity and consensus for example, simultaneously risk deep suspicion and casual dismissal. In contrast to, and sometimes in direct response to, the binary leanings of America's democratic processes, theater-making groups like the TEAM adopt alternative power-sharing models that rely on highly adaptive creative methodologies and a flexible sense of group identity. This focus on flexibility and adaptation, whether by choice or necessity, enables the group to uniquely engage with American sociopolitical culture, to balance at the birthing point of infinite Americas that reject binaries through ongoing processes of becoming.

The mutable architecture of the emerging American moment inevitably accommodates the towers and caverns of America's histories, forging the identities of the present through brutality as well as promise. America is and has been, as Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon remind readers, "a contested term for a contested site" (Jestrovic and Meerzon 2009, 4). Just one country in the midst of two American continents, the United States successfully claims its title as "America" through ongoing utterances that enact an unapologetically colonial grammar. One way to view America is simply as a set of contested acts glimpsed only in pieces: stolen words, stolen space. In some ways, the central act that defines America is that of taking, and that centrality suggests the core of our divisive nationhood: to take *from* renders the victim as other, which renders a shared goal impossible. Collaboration and multiplicity fundamentally detract from radical, utopian individualism. It is this national face, the face that claims authority by rejecting collectivity, that the TEAM challenges through processes and aesthetics that consistently and openly work away from binary acts and representation. In works like *Mission Drift* (2011) and *RoosevElvis* (2013), the group crafts aesthetics that model versions of collectivity that anticipate the Trump-era sociopolitical climate in the United States. Through language, character, medium, and image, *Mission Drift* and *RoosevElvis* function as premonitions: each piece

implements Paige McGinley's "fractal, spatial storytelling" that inherently rejects the very notion of sharply opposed dualities, divisions that form the bedrock of dueling American myths.

To speak of postcolonial America is to articulate impossibility, a fractal spiraling layers upon layers as utopias and dystopias collide. This impossibility is precisely where the TEAM has most consistently and explicitly derived inspiration, which shows up in their pieces that consistently explore American cultural figures/concepts and America's evolving and emerging geopolitical landscape: Richard Nixon (*Give Up! Start Over!*), Allen Ginsberg (*HOWL*), Robert F. Kennedy and the Left Behind book series (*Particularly in the Heartland*), Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and New Orleans (*Architecting*), Las Vegas (*Mission Drift*), Theodore Roosevelt and Elvis (*RoosevElvis*), American jazz (*The Holler Sessions*), and more.[1] *Mission Drift*, which went through numerous titular iterations over the course of its development, is perhaps the most evidently entangled with the TEAM's collective creative processes.[2] The piece moves through time and space, following an enduring couple of Dutch colonists who become infected by manifest destiny, and who eventually find its spectacular and tragic fulfilment in Las Vegas. The process of creating the piece, which is chronicled in Paulette Douglas's documentary film *The TEAM Makes a Play*, also evolved through self-conscious movement through time and space, developing amid great obstacles over the course of years in multiple sites and cities across the United States and Europe. Through both process and aesthetic, *Mission Drift* enacts storytelling that preserves the chaos of collectivity and multiplicity as complex and valuable.

In the first moments of *Mission Drift*, the audience meets a performance guide, a figure that seems to be part narrator, part showgirl, part lounge singer. Her name is Miss Atomic, and she establishes the space immediately as Las Vegas, or perhaps as some facsimile of Las Vegas that reflects what audience members might imagine Las Vegas to be. Miss Atomic's hosting is seductive and musical; she directly addresses the audience and delineates each person present in the room as part of her mysterious, magical inner circle. She purrs, "We make our homes in impossibility" (The TEAM 2013, 13). With that "we," she initiates audiences into a community of misfits, of outside eyes welcomed inside the event, "pagans, Vegans, insomniacs, gorgeous lizards, hospitality peddlers, sweethearts, assassins" (ibid.). Whoever or whyever we are, Miss Atomic invites each of us to enter performance as kin made so by our very differences, forged through our strategies of surviving long enough to stumble upon "our oasis in the desert" (ibid.). For Miss Atomic, secured within the framework of *Mission Drift*, that oasis is ironically Las Vegas, a sprawling, dried-out island of glitter and neon where a fertile valley used to be. If Las Vegas, the economic and geographic muse for *Mission Drift*, has become a problematic oasis that revels in the explosively surface-level spectacular, Miss Atomic suggests that *Mission Drift* offers a watering

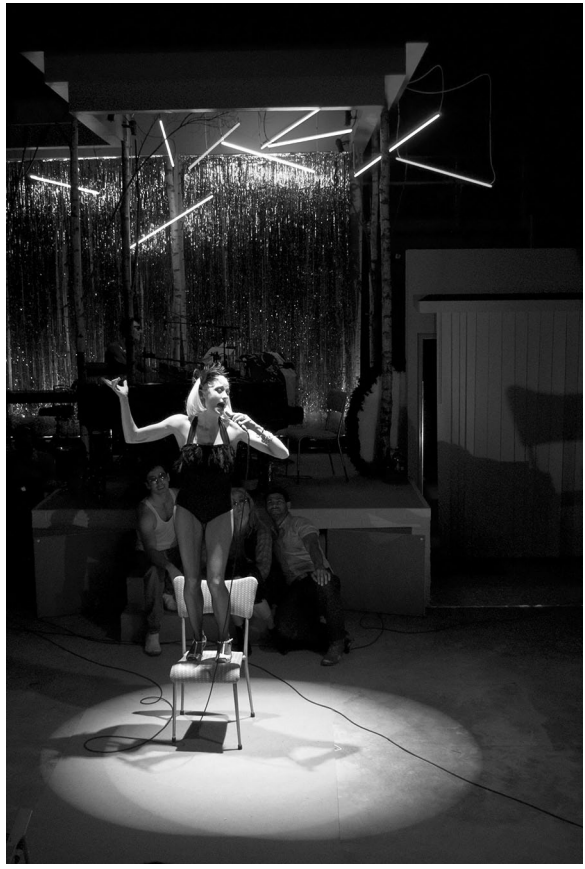

FIGURE 4.1. The TEAM's *Mission Drift*. Pictured: Heather Christian as Miss Atomic, *center*, with the TEAM ensemble. Photo copyright © Nick Vaughan.

hole of another sort. Ushered into her community through her inclusive yet elusive language (is "we" really all of us??), the audience's oasis comes into focus as performance itself; sustenance flickers in Miss Atomic's voice like a promise. She invites us into a performative landscape where "we hallucinate regularly" and confesses her tendency to "play the genies" (ibid.). Immediately, she situates herself as story-spinner, music maker, master of ceremonies. Within each role, she might take on the responsibility of the genie, she might control the magic called theatrical production, she might escort audiences into experiences of performance that fulfill deep desires. But what manner of wish fulfillment will audiences encounter? Does she ask the group to hallucinate alongside her, and does she offer pleasure or pain? Miss Atomic's voice primes listeners to nest in brief experiences of chaotic collectivity, moments

of joining the "we" she throws out like a lifeline, offered to anyone present in the shared space of *Mission Drift*. Welcomed as one of Miss Atomic's Vegans, audience members are free to make their homes in liveness whether they are from Las Vegas or from the stars. Thus, from the opening lines of *Mission Drift*, Miss Atomic initiates paradox through her invitations: to alight within a live event that is already receding, to delineate sustainable habitats within a performance/city/nation whose borders never stop shifting, to quench thirst in a desert. Miss Atomic's words evoke the imperative of the devising group as well as citizens of desert cities: to locate the meeting point between explosive passion and its desolate aftermath, to find the impossible. To make one's home there.

In stark contrast to the captivating clutter Miss Atomic suggests in her opening address to the audience, she next delivers a fable that introduces the concept of divisive nationhood, unrelenting binary, as creation myth.

> Before time there were two twin brothers. Myth, beast brothers. Big scale. They slept between mountains with their legs in separate valleys. Their names were Love and Wrestling . . . Love did everything he could to build up the fucking land: dams, canals, hotels, high rises, casinos. And Wrestling did everything he could to raze the fuckers down. Tornados, earthquakes, explosions, whatever. And on they went, until ONE day, Love realized, "What the hell? Why don't I get these fucking humans to do my work?" So Love put the lust for improvement and development and expansion . . . and expansion into the hearts of humans, and claimed his Lazy-boy throne in the sky. And then he changed his name. To Steve Wynn . . . Everybody's heart has two houses. Two brothers living inside. (Ibid.)

There is something familiar about this story as Miss Atomic spins it for the audience; twinship is a sacred theme that threads through the mythologies of cultures across the world, forming a web through time and space. Like Romulus and Remus, Love and Wrestling are two faces of a single coin, responsible for the creation of cities that signify excess and decadence. Unlike these twins of ancient Roman lore, Love and Wrestling are physically larger than life, god-scale beings whose competitive struggles become ongoing sets of provocations and responses, repeated so furiously that the story of their competition cycles like a snake swallowing its own tail. They play with the land as with a sandbox, with the short tempers and pettiness one might associate with the divine figures of Greek and Roman myth. As childish rivals, Love and Wrestling construct and destroy with the confidence of gods, but with the same primal territorialism one might expect from toddlers building up and tearing down one another's toys.

The twins' game, played across the horizontal and vertical planes of the earth, seems to unfold according to Newton's Third Law. Briefly summarized:

for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Love builds up, therefore Wrestling tears down. Therefore Love builds up, therefore Wrestling tears down. There are, however, more elements to the law of motion governing the two forces Miss Atomic calls Love and Wrestling. Physicist Rhett Allain suggests a wording that more precisely reflects the reciprocity principle of Newton's Third Law. He proposes a lengthier description: "Forces come in pairs. Forces are an interaction between two objects. This means that if object A pushes on object B, then object B pushes on A with the same force but in the opposite direction" (Allain 2013). This wording, reflective, as Allain states, of the relationship between objects and forces claimed by Newton's Third Law, is metaphorically useful as well. Perhaps Love and Wrestling *must* be twins because "forces come in pairs." As a twosome, they push on each other with the same force, in opposing directions: Love (building) pushes up on Wrestling (razing), and with equal force Wrestling pushes down on Love. Even as Miss Atomic names the impulse to create "Love," she undercuts the positive connotations of the word by describing how this force—unchecked—can mask the land or keep it from running its natural course, by covering it with "dams, canals, hotels, high rises, casinos" (The TEAM 2013, 14). Yet, the balanced force provided by Wrestling creates a stable interaction. This changes when Love effectively cheats by substituting his work with the work of humans, abdicating his half, his responsibility to the paired forces, by outsourcing his labor. By retiring to his "Lazy-Boy throne in the sky" and infecting humankind with a lust for expansion, Love unbalances the forces and shifts the rules of antagonism. Presumably, Wrestling still maintains his compulsion to raze the land. Now, in place of two paired forces pushing on one another equally in opposite directions, Love's gaze sinks downward, also pushing toward the ground. With a tongue-in-cheek conclusion that indicts a living Las Vegas real estate mogul, Miss Atomic quips that Love then changes his name to Steve Wynn. Agents and architects of capitalism are, indeed, epic forces to reckon with.

The binary manifested by Love and Wrestling reverberates allegorically; possibilities surface that speak to the inner state of both individual and nationhood. One comment on the nature of the individual is clear, as Miss Atomic closes her story with a summation: "Everybody's heart has two houses. Two brothers living inside" (ibid.). Presumably, this is an enjoinder that acknowledges the constructive alongside the destructive potential of humankind, both of which are equally present and equally forceful. This tidy interpretation is perhaps overly reductive given the context of Miss Atomic's full story and the remainder of *Mission Drift*, which suggests that unchecked construction enacts a colonial violence. At one point, Dutch colonist Catalina cries out in an expression of sexualized manifest destiny: "I want to have a thousand babies!! And I want to give them each a piece of this land. And I wanna do you on every acre of this continent" (ibid.). Rather, the TEAM's text seems to suggest that, when balanced forces are perverted, as they become when Love

fills humankind's hearts with "the lust for improvement and development and expansion . . . and expansion," the resulting gravitational force downward toward destruction is undeniable (ibid.).

By personalizing Newton's principle of reciprocity, punctuated with the twins' expletive-laden emotional responses to one another, Miss Atomic emphasizes the binary as central to both the individual and to America's foundational psyche. She then advances that binary toward its inevitable and destructive conclusion: delegation. As long as Love and Wrestling participate in their antagonistic match, they abide by a particular structure governed by rules, representing duality while cooperating according to a shared intention. To describe this another way, in Miss Atomic's fable the twins compete individually but play the game of competition together. When that relatively organized competition erodes and Love takes on an executive rather than an active role, the checks and balances provided by opposing forces are no longer effective. This dynamic seems eerily prescient in terms of America's contemporary sociopolitical climate, one in which the relatively predictable machine of two-party antagonism is experiencing substantial upheaval. Following the 2016 election, the forceful duality of American politics seems to trend increasingly toward unstable tension. As the Las Vegas Miss Atomic describes, a spectacle of excess, of expansion experienced to the maximum degree, so too American political structures begin to signify the spectacular. Mainly focused on or emerging from the nation's highest executive office, following the election of President Trump there is an explosion: an excess of media coverage, an excess of informal communication (tweets), an excess of celebrity. In Miss Atomic's origin story, when the binary of equal forces breaks down, one turns into a real estate mogul who contaminates humanity with a desire for excess and then watches the game from on high. In the Trump era of the United States, in place of the Lazy-Boy in the sky there is a White House. And in place of Steve Wynn there is another real-life real estate mogul, President Trump, who tests the limits of partisan loyalty while delegating responsibilities from the highest office in the land.

Even as the trajectory of the Love and Wrestling tale advances toward a broken law of motion, Miss Atomic's poetic statement about the human heart tends toward the infinite. This conjures a replicating image of the human heart that contains two brothers in two houses, creating a fractal-like model. In this way, perhaps the TEAM's *Mission Drift* offers up images of foundational binaries while simultaneously enacting a refusal of uncompromising duality. Miss Atomic's description could infinitely loop, were one to zoom in and see the pattern continued: There were two brothers, and inside their hearts were two houses with two brothers living inside. And inside their hearts were two houses with two brothers living inside. And inside their hearts were two houses with two brothers living inside, and so on. By comparing the nature of the human heart allegory in *Mission Drift* to the properties of fractals, new ways to read the TEAM's aesthetics emerge: complex pattern

making and infinite possibility supplant the stable antagonism offered by enduring binaries.

Like a performance ensemble's process or assemblage of story, a fractal becomes itself through movement: to the human eye, fractals become legible and recognizable through the motion of magnification or compression—of moving in or moving out. Famous fractals, such as the boundary of the Mandelbrot set, for example, are compelling static images made substantially more so when the process of detail-unfolding is animated. Even as a static image, with the potential of detail-unfolding alive in the imagination, the Mandelbrot set is what science writer John Briggs calls "the most famous object in modern mathematics," which excites the fascination of nonmathematicians, who "have been attracted by the set's haunting beauty and the idea of abstract mathematics turned into tangible pleasures" (Briggs 2008). Fractal animation software is now readily available, and one common form the "tangible pleasure" takes is through the mesmerizing motion of screen savers, framed like hanging artwork or like mini-dramas bounded by a doll-sized proscenium arch, by the edges of the computer screen.

If many are mesmerized by the movement of animated fractals across private screen spaces, perhaps there is something in that fascination that carries over into encounters with the "fractal, spatial storytelling" of contemporary performance groups like the TEAM (McGinley 2010, 13). Fractal-like aesthetics can function as trackable markers; locating repeating pattern potential in Miss Atomic's blueprint of the human heart is just one way an audience might perceive this aesthetic. In the TEAM's *Mission Drift*, for example, storytelling moves from the general to the specific, from icon to individual and back again, through an evocative assemblage. Like the fractal, with no beginning and no end but only greater detail, the TEAM's storytelling tries out different starting perspectives, plotting moments like points for the audience toward a whole that becomes gradually focused as the performance advances.

Beyond her opening address and storytelling to the audience, Miss Atomic of *Mission Drift* is an example of a character, created by the group's collective writing and rehearsal process, that contains multitudes. Played by musician and TEAM collaborator Heather Christian, Miss Atomic is at once narrator, singer, bandleader, and beauty contestant. Within the context of the performance, she is both soul of the story and of Las Vegas, a showgirl whose authority functions on multiple levels. In Paulette Douglas's documentary *The TEAM Makes a Play*, which chronicles the developmental process of *Mission Drift*, viewers encounter the character as an addition that initially surprised Heather Christian, who had originally been contracted to compose the score for the piece. Following the group's research into the history of mid-century "Miss Atomic" Las Vegas beauty queens, showgirls photographed as pinup girls to sell the spectacle of the mushroom cloud, Miss Atomic—played by Christian—was eventually written into the project (Douglas 2013). She

gradually becomes, as the documentary follows the working and reworking of *Mission Drift*, a narrative lynchpin that enacts the spectacle of the very big as well as the very small.

While the spectacle of the Atomic Age initially conjures a vast disruption of space and landscape, it emerges from subatomic processes. The display of mass destruction, stitched into the white mushroom cloud–shaped costume Lee A. Merlin wore in 1957 as Las Vegas's Miss Atomic Bomb, and the expanse of desert outside Las Vegas that became known as "the most bombed place on Earth" were made manifest by splitting atomic nuclei (Blitz 2016). Miss Atomic of *Mission Drift* is, then, a figure heavy with symbolic resonance: she is the face of the Las Vegas showgirl cum Miss Atomic beauty queen; she is the implosion of weaponized radioactive particles; she is the soul of Las Vegas that Matthew Paul Olmos describes as "continually imploding on its own appetite" (Olmos 2012). Responding to the group's performance at P.S. 122 as part of 2012's Coil Festival, Olmos also describes ways in which Miss Atomic takes ownership over the pathways the audience traverses through layers of epic and quotidian stories: "Acting as a guide of sorts, Miss Atomic treats the world as though it is a cabaret-style lounge in one of the downtown Vegas casinos, often talking at the characters, almost as if she is controlling them" (ibid.). She also enacts the spectacle of smallness, a lack of control represented by the energy potential of the atom that endures as a part of an ever-changing whole until it is disrupted and weaponized. In the Pulitzer Prize–winning work *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon-Marigolds*, Paul Zindel's scientifically minded Tillie opens the play with a monologue celebrating the atom's function as a means of connecting time and space:

> He told me to look at my hand, for a part of it came from a star that exploded too long ago to imagine. This part of me was formed from a tongue of fire that screamed through the heavens until there was our sun. And this part of me—this tiny part of me—was on the sun when it itself exploded and whirled in a great storm until the planets came to be . . . And he said this thing was so small—this part of me was so small it couldn't be seen—but it was there from the beginning of the world. And he called this bit of me an atom. And when he wrote the word, I fell in love with it. Atom. *Atom*. What a beautiful word. (Zindel 1997 [1970], 1)

There is something in Tillie's earnest explication of the power of smallness that flickers in *Mission Drift*'s gaudy Miss Atomic. In place of the idealized path of the atom Tillie describes, from an exploded star to whirling planets to her own hand, Miss Atomic's very existence references the breaking of the atom, the fractured ideal of structure connected over space and time. In her world, commodification occurs across the landscape at all scales:

JORIS: Are you excited for this morning's test?
MISS ATOMIC: I sure am Mr. Darling.
JORIS: What do you think it's gonna look like?
MISS ATOMIC: Well, I saw the pictures from Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and I heard they just keep making these things bigger! So I think it's gonna be big.
JORIS: Big?
MISS ATOMIC: Huge. I think we're gonna feel it from here. And I think it's gonna hit us all right in the face . . .
JORIS: I'm so fucking happy. They're gonna be testing these things almost every month, and I think we should celebrate each one here. (The TEAM 2013, 57)

In this scene, Joris the Dutch-colonist-turned-Las-Vegas-business-tycoon exhibits Miss Atomic the beauty queen, and prompts her as he might prompt an audience plant. Through softball queries, he utilizes her sex appeal in order to frame the bomb tests as entertainment extravaganzas. There is little for Miss Atomic to respond to, save for the size of the bomb, the size of its blast. The phallic subtext is clear, the exchange an uneasy harbinger of the second decade of the twenty-first century, when the U.S. commander in chief responds to nuclear threats from North Korea's Kim Jong Un. Tweeting, President Trump asserts, "I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his" (quoted in Choudhury 2018). Like Joris, President Trump is a business mogul, a figurehead for excess and real estate holdings that consume vertical as well as horizontal space. While Miss Atomic is the prime audience and performance partner for Joris, President Trump's communication casts the listening nation—and the world—in a role similar to the passive, gendered one inhabited by Miss Atomic. In this scene she functions, first and foremost, as an echo that underscores Joris's preoccupation with size: "I heard they just keep making these things bigger!" (The TEAM 2013, 57). The disconnect, between her affect and the evident destructive capability of the bomb, is unmistakable. She references pictures of "Nagasaki and Hiroshima" as though describing other Las Vegas attractions, and "Mr. Darling" is as unaffected by her reply as she seems to be. This is, evidently, a time and space when mammoth scale overtakes mammoth consequence.

Alternatively, perhaps this scene represents an environment intensely seeking to maintain and renew a grasp on the present. In Matt Blitz's article "Miss Atomic Bomb and the Nuclear Glitz of 1950s Las Vegas," he notes that "while the world gawked and shuddered in fear at the sight of these explosions, 65 miles southwest of the testing ground, the residents of Las Vegas reacted about the way you'd expect: with kitschy, light-hearted, commercialized giddiness" (Blitz 2016). Aided by this perspective, this scene might stage Miss Atomic and Joris's performance exchange as an example of

forceful attempts to live in the present moment. Indeed, Las Vegas signifies and also creates concrete economies around the pleasure of the present. To the world, as Matt Blitz suggests, the explosive testing in the desert just outside Las Vegas generated fear. To Las Vegas, it was an opportunity to co-opt another kind of spectacle for entertainment and profit. As the TEAM's Rachel Chavkin observes in a 2010 interview, "Things look very different depending on where you're standing in America" (Martin 2010, 116). When Miss Atomic stands onstage, she stands in for the Miss Atomics of history but also for the pleasure-seeking attitude of the Las Vegas that successfully commodified the Atomic Age. She stands in America, or rather the TEAM's performed facsimile of America, occupying multiple spaces at once. A powerful figure in terms of the structure of *Mission Drift*, she is powerless when caught in the web of the renewing present: her character as played in relation to Joris has had her words stripped away, pared down to bare bones of an agreeable bombshell: I think it's gonna be big! Occupying multiple perspectives within *Mission Drift*, she is both inside and outside the story, outside and inside this moment drawn from American history, outside and inside photographic artifacts that show past Miss Atomics dressed in gauzy mushroom clouds. By occupying multiple locations simultaneously, *Mission Drift*'s Miss Atomic becomes like a static image of a fractal. One is always inside and outside a fractal as one zooms further into the pattern. Zooming out from the given perspective, replicating patterns tend toward infinity. Zooming in from the individual perspective, equivalently infinite complexities reveal themselves.

While Jestrovic and Meerzon remind readers that America is a contested term and a contested site, the TEAM reminds audiences that America is also a contested act and a contested time. Emerging cultural and sociopolitical mythologies posit both America and theatricality as liminal spaces one must theorize rather than inhabit. Or perhaps habitation can occur only through performativity, grasped at through the staging of complex patterns made up of shifting perspectives.

As the performance/performance text of *Mission Drift* sharpens into a whole, it retains a fractal-like identity that enables performance scholar Daniel Sack's reading of the piece's final moments, in particular his description of the cast members' gaze over the audience, as evoking "not the world of every possibility but the worlds of endless potentiality" (Sack 2015, 195). As the cast looks out, audiences are reminded that fractal-like potentiality exists before and behind; there is no beginning and no end for that kind of spatial storytelling. It becomes itself by moving in any direction, by unfolding detail made evident by looking inward or outward, in any direction toward and within "worlds of endless potentiality." *Mission Drift*, then, engages with the spatial, the geographic, and the topographic, as though formulating a map of the emerging American present in which American histories and imagined futures collide.

FIGURE 4.2. The TEAM's *Mission Drift*. Pictured: The TEAM ensemble. Photo copyright © Nick Vaughan.

Rock Bands and Revolving Doors

While all the collective creation groups under discussion would define themselves and their methodologies differently from one another, each develops distinct sets of ethics. John Britton describes the concept as akin to a particular game the group agrees to play together. He writes that the "'rules of behaviour' are the ethics of a group. The ethics that underpin a creative process have a profound effect on the nature of the work produced" (Britton 2013, 309). Much of what happens inside a rehearsal room, or through the processes of assembling and organizing methodologies and source material, is beyond the gaze of audiences and scholars. There are, however, ways in which particular ethics or tendencies toward particular ethics announce themselves. One key component concerns the ways companies shift and change over time, ways in which they retain identities as established group or ensemble while sometimes unhinging and reshaping themselves. This might happen on multiple time scales, across years and apart from individual projects, or within specific performance development processes. This is the component of group identity I refer to as topological: How might we understand the particular properties of collective identity that can be moved and bent without breaking the whole of the collective? For particular groups, what makes group identity what it is?

John Collins, director of Elevator Repair Service, notes that for a healthy handful of contemporary collectively oriented companies, group "success is associated with their ensemble identity" (Collins 2013, 235). He marks out his own group, in company with others including the Wooster Group, Mabou Mines, and Forced Entertainment. One could add to this list considerably, including proliferating collective creation and ensemble-minded groups of varying generations that are more recognizable for their groupness than for individual member contributions: San Francisco Mime Troupe, Bread and Puppet, Radiohole, and so on. While there may be notable leaders associated with most of these companies, the powerful connotation of a group identity/aesthetic persists, and the ensembles retain credited authorship for performance works. Further, Collins discusses his experience as the Wooster Group's longtime sound designer in comparison to his directorship of Elevator Repair Service, leading him to the observation that fixed ensemble members do not necessarily equate with ensemble identity. The Wooster Group's membership has changed substantially over time, and ensembles fluctuate from production to production. Observing this shift from inside the group, Collins describes a period of time in the 1990s during which he became aware of the group's constantly changing ensemble makeup: "The plays of The Wooster Group seemed attributable to a collective neither permanent nor exclusive. Nevertheless, a Wooster Group identity remained—there were still a few familiar actors, LeCompte continued to direct and the shows bore recognizable trademarks" (ibid., 238). For Collins, the identity of the Wooster Group seems to be primarily rooted in directorship and aesthetics rather than in the contributions of particular performers. This model reflects in the ongoing history of Elevator Repair Service as well. Noting himself as the single common denominator in all of Elevator Repair Service's projects, Collins suggests that the group identity of ERS emerges from a combination of consistent aesthetic leadership and methodology rather than from an ensemble made of particular individuals. He writes, "An ensemble *method* is more essential to longevity than the maintenance of an exclusive and permanent membership" (ibid., 236). Collins, therefore, distinguishes between an ensemble entity and ensemble action. He defines collectivity, a group-centered ethos, as a phenomenon that relies on a particular mode of interaction among director, performers, designers. This interaction, it seems from Collins's perspective, may rely most prominently on leadership provided by directors/facilitators.

Interestingly, while Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service, Nature Theater of Oklahoma, and the TEAM all adopt methodologies that utilize group-generated creative material, group identity—not simply group organization—still has a close relationship with directorship. But what is the role of directorship within collective models? These contemporary groups do not adopt models of leaderless collectivity, but rather prompt renewed questions regarding the relationship between leadership and egalitarianism. If these groups create work that is attributed primarily to the group, what

is the role of the director/facilitator in terms of establishing and reinforcing methodologies that give rise to that work and therefore to a group identity that is legible to audiences? In a 2017 interview, the TEAM's Jake Margolin observes that as the TEAM grows and evolves, one concept under investigation is the constitution of TEAM projects as such (Margolin 2017). Rachel Chavkin addresses this further, adding:

> The question of what defines a TEAM project is a developing one. Previously, it was a project that I as director proposed to the group because the initial inquiry (examples: American capitalism, the history and present-day implications of American/Scottish ties) felt like it was in line with our mission. I would gauge excitement/engagement amongst the company members to first and foremost see if/how/whether that initial question would blossom into a larger project, and then secondarily to see who might participate in it, and in what way. Sometimes I would present ideas with specific artists attached, grown out of sidebar conversations: *RoosevElvis* is a good example of this, featuring Libby King and Kristen Sieh playing two historical figures each had become obsessed with as individuals, and involving Jake Margolin who has long been interested in subverting and expanding notions of gender. Now . . . now it's expanding. In the past year+ we've added these Petri Projects where a company member can receive developmental support for a project that I'm not attached to as director. This is developing in part because we're all individually pretty deeply empowered generators, but not all of us have our own strands or opportunities to develop work on our own outside of the TEAM—as Frank Boyd did with *The Holler Sessions* in Seattle (that work was a co-pro with the TEAM in large part because the character and much of the text grew out of a process for a TEAM/Sojourn Theatre commission for KC Rep in 2013). And there's a real live and quite sensitive question as to whether the TEAM will have a producing relationship to these petri-projects beyond development support. We've not crossed that bridge yet, though I imagine it will be a major topic of discussion at our 2019 retreat. (Chavkin 2019)

It may be inevitable, as careers of group members shift and change, for the group to reconsider and reevaluate its identity. Chavkin, for example, won a Tony Award in 2019 for Best Direction of a Musical, and takes on increasingly high-profile projects apart from the TEAM.[3] The resource of time can be scarce; while all members of the TEAM take some responsibility for collective fund-raising, Chavkin and the TEAM's producing director tend to be the strongest driving force behind grant writing and development opportunities for the company's work. However, even as Chavkin's contribution occupies a central space in the TEAM's identity and practice, the group takes steps to

focus attention on the collaborative body rather than leaning into perceived hierarchies that can accompany the role of the director. For example, the group prefers to list founding members alphabetically, and their methodology of self-organization is in some respects in sharp contrast to John Collins's description of ERS. Collins asserts this himself, particularly in terms of how the two groups operate in terms of a commitment to a permanent ensemble. He writes:

> For many groups, maintaining a consistent and utterly recognizable contingent of performers is paramount. They organize themselves more like rock bands than producing companies . . . The TEAM, an ensemble formed out of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts in 2004, consists of a larger group of artists but defines itself just as rigidly. Their "members" have special privileges and responsibilities, greater and more serious than non-member participants, and are expected to collectively represent the ensemble . . . That rock band approach embraces a go-it-alone, defiant self-reliance . . . These ensembles, unlike ERS, officially anoint their core members and organize themselves more as a utopian community, less as a hierarchical corporate structure. (Collins 2013, 247)

Collins suggests that this "rock band approach" adopts an unsustainable utopianism. Certainly, prioritizing a permanent or near-permanent ensemble does communicate a certain idealism, a certain ethics reflected in the group's rules of behavior or membership expectations. ERS is unique among the collective creation studies of this project, in that it is the only group that deliberately rejects permanent ensemble as a model. While Goat Island, Nature Theater of Oklahoma, and the TEAM have consistent directors and evolving and shifting performing artists (in the TEAM's case, it is significant to note that membership has grown), turnover has been relatively low. However, sustaining a permanent ensemble requires enormous effort, energy, and compromise. Coordinating schedules, maintaining commitment, evolving artistically in compatible tandem with others, making space for other professional commitments when performance-making groups cannot pay full-time living wages to all members—these and other concerns pose substantial challenges. In many respects, as Collins argues, letting go of the imperative of the permanent ensemble gives the group greater potential to operate sustainably. Of course, this requires a definition of "group" as a revolving door whose only consistency is, perhaps, its leader and his approach. In some ways, this institutionalizes the chaos of collective creation, forging an organizational model that becomes itself through constant change. Collins embraces this model freely, championing it as a cornerstone to Elevator Repair Service's identity, one that is perhaps shared with other long-term performance-making companies. He notes at the end of his essay on Elevator Repair

Service and the Wooster Group that "longevity may be best achieved through embracing a paradox: the most enduring ensembles are always falling apart" (ibid., 249). Here, Collins offers a parallel between "longevity" and "enduring ensembles." Elevator Repair Service has become, since its founding in 1991, a prolific and established company. Far from its roots as a group that first presented work in New York in a tiny space at midnight on the Lower East Side, the group was, for example, welcomed as a contributor to the Public Theater's main season with *Measure for Measure* in 2017.[4] By opposing the rock band "utopian community" approach with "hierarchical corporate entity," as Collins does above, one infers that ERS's functioning runs closer to the latter. Considering the length of time the company has operated under the guidance of its director, this model is demonstrably effective for achieving longevity through flexible adaptation to constant change.

However, there remains space to consider endurance as a characteristic both distinct and aesthetic. Goat Island reminds us, with their final piece, *The Lastmaker*, of the importance and creative potential of language. This piece investigates lastness, which juxtaposes the theoretical and the prosaic. Lastness might be, for example, a quest into the impossible task of making performance that somehow resists disappearance, an attempt that "always engages in the process of making and remaking, forever creating newness and possibility" (Anderson 2008, 667). It might explore a more concrete manifestation of lastness; for example, a "last" is also a solid foot-shaped form used by shoemakers. Piles of shoes also figure prominently in the piece. Through these avenues and others, Goat Island's investigation of lastness reveals values, rooted in performance, that move away from longevity as an ideal. If longevity is a lodestar, utopias are anathema, and Goat Island is rigorously committed to exploring impossibilities. The ethics of the TEAM, however, seem less invested in impossible ideals and branding and more invested in working through and developing ethics that require pragmatic and emotional perseverance. Collins suggests that the TEAM defines itself rigidly. If so, the group's rigid definition gives way to vigorous commitments to collaboration throughout performance-making processes, which are inscribed with high levels of flexibility, mutual respect, and problem solving in the face of antagonism.

Paulette Douglas's documentary film *The TEAM Makes a Play* chronicles the making of *Mission Drift* through a series of moments distilled from a multiyear process. Mission drift, levied as an economic term, names the phenomenon of an organization gradually moving away from its mission statement, usually in service of following the money. In many respects, the TEAM's making of the play processually enacts the group's own mission drift, as they move from an initial idea along a circuitous and sometimes traumatic route marked out by feasibility to the opening of the final version of the show. The text and performance of the TEAM's *Mission Drift* are the outcome of an often tenuous, disrupted, and enormously fraught process, one

that challenged the group's commitment to collective creation. Paz Hilfinger-Pardo, who participated as a dramaturge on *Mission Drift*, writes succinctly of the vicissitudes the group experienced over the course of developing and performing the piece: "By 10 June 2010, two of the five company performers who had begun work on the show had stepped away from the project; before the piece's premiere four of the five would be gone" (Hilfinger-Pardo 2013, 230). Douglas's documentary stitches together instances of profound disappointment and confusion on the part of ensemble members, throughout a process that seemingly came close to driving the group into the ground. Through a combination of interviews and footage from rehearsals, performances, and company meetings, the tensions and obstacles that accompanied the making of this particular piece are starkly clear in Douglas's film. Some of these are accidental and logistical. For example, Rachel Chavkin was injured while the piece was in development in Las Vegas. As composer and performer Heather Christian remarks in *The TEAM Makes a Play*, this shook the stability that Chavkin, despite challenges and setbacks, had been able to consistently provide the group: "It sort of felt like the captain of the ship was a little lost. But of course she was lost, she was on oxycontin" (Douglas 2013). Additionally, funding partners were forced to pull financial support for the project at different points, scheduling conflicts provoked rehearsal and performance delays, and group members struggled to remain adaptive to shifting logistics. In the film, performer Kristin Sieh comments on the difficulties posed by developing the piece in stages, and particularly by workshop periods that took place in different states as well as countries: "I'm just a little annoyed that it's like, all this scattershot little places, that are making it hard for everybody to have jobs, and we have to raise all this money . . . and we're hardly paying ourselves" (ibid.).

Perhaps even more challenging were the artistic differences and the lack of confidence that sometimes exploded across different moments of the development process. Early on in the process of development, when *Mission Drift* was still tentatively titled *The American Capitalism Project*, TEAM member Frank Boyd describes his disinterest in the project's general direction: "I feel really doubtful and hesitant about, the whole idea behind this project right now" (ibid.). Over the course of Douglas's documentary, most collaborators involved in the project articulated feelings of doubt, of tension, of confusion. These voices, each of which proposed possibilities as well as preferences, contributed to the sheer vastness of the material the group wrote and developed. Heather Christian, for example, indicates that she wrote nearly forty songs for *Mission Drift*, only seven of which were eventually used in the piece. Shaping, editing, and rehearsing the quantity of material became its own impossible task, and in an extreme effort Rachel Chavkin brought in playwright Sarah Gancher in hopes of aiding script development. This proved to be a highly controversial choice. Chavkin notes that this decision nearly derailed the project entirely and even threatened the stability of the group

as a whole (Douglas 2013). Extraordinarily, after a fraught and sometimes uncertain process, *Mission Drift* was performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2011 and won the Scotsman Fringe First Award that year. Following this experience, the TEAM invested in their collective communication. They were offered space at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, where they organized a company retreat that, the group indicates, "included bringing up two therapists focused on group dynamics and healthy workplace collaboration to do some skill-building with us" (The TEAM 2018).

Following the development of *Mission Drift*, the TEAM has continued to make work together, to expand and evolve as a cohesive ensemble. Glimpses of that process, however, offer markers that outline parts of the group's distinct identity. Paz Hilfinger-Pardo refers to the TEAM's resilience and reliance on collective intelligence, and describes what she calls "the mundane magic of the TEAM's process: not the magic of a sudden lightning bolt of genius, but the magic of a group of people plodding through a painful process of crossed desires, miscommunication, and compromise until one or two extraordinary moments finally arise" (Hilfinger-Pardo 2013, 229). Hilfinger-Pardo interprets *Mission Drift*, in its final iteration, as a performance of mourning, "a eulogy for the failure of the American dream, processing the company's disappointment at its own failure to build utopia" (ibid.). However, perhaps this process is something other than an experience of failed ideals. It also reveals itself as a revelatory exercise in asserting the topology of the ensemble. This process makes clear, for example, that the TEAM can accommodate its own version of revolving doors. While the group itself embraces a clear and fixed permanent ensemble, *Mission Drift* serves as an example of a project that allows the group to quite literally remake itself, to step out one by one, without breaking the whole. On a small scale, this project adopts some principles that organize ERS, at least in terms of the consistency of the director and ensemble-oriented development processes. That stability enables the revolving door to swing both ways. Jake Margolin, for example, who originally contributed writing and performance to the piece, rejoined *Mission Drift* later in the project to assist with choreography. Traces of all the individuals who worked on the project remain in subsequent performances, in the fragments of movement, character, and language developed and reintroduced throughout different parts of the process. Hilfinger-Pardo reads this as a kind of repurposed nostalgia, a processing of failure: "The builders are not onstage with their words; every night, dances created by those who left animate the bodies of those who stayed" (ibid., 233). This also, however, invigorates another extreme possibility of collective creation, one that functions in direct opposition to the Las Vegas appetite for ever-present pleasure. Hilfinger-Pardo's description reads almost like a foray into the supernatural, in which the tongues and limbs of performers are "animated" by those who are absent. Years before *Mission Drift* premiered, Rachel Chavkin writes of her work with the TEAM, "we are always trying to determine what we have

FIGURE 4.3. The TEAM's *Mission Drift*. Pictured: The TEAM ensemble. Photo copyright © Nick Vaughan.

lost, whether it is for better or worse, and who we are even as we march onward. We are always telling a ghost story" (Chavkin 2010, 108). This may be, perhaps, another anticipatory footprint along the group's charting of its own identity.

One might imagine that the TEAM is not a rock band but an enduring ghost story: animating in time and space not only the histories and myths of America, but also the histories and myths of the group's own creative communion. Unlike ERS, an ensemble Collins describes as "always falling apart," the TEAM occupies another territory, a territory that renews and shares dense layers of experience and creative contributions, an ensemble that stretches and bends, but—like the stories and characters of their pieces—bleeds into itself. Theirs is not a utopia but a relentless plodding forward that, as Hilfinger-Pardo suggests, is its own (sometimes painful, sometimes violent) magic. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the group continues to unhinge itself; some group members, including founding members, live in different corners of the country. This will, inevitably, shape and shift the way the TEAM develops work, as the group has already begun to discuss and explore. Given the group members' changing lifestyles, careers, and geography, another *Mission Drift* would likely be a practical impossibility. That process, however, establishes the TEAM as consummate travelers moving along creative roads of their own making, picking up and shedding

partners as they go, even when at cross-purposes, toward collective possibility together.

Gendered Highways

In their introduction to *Women, Collective Creation, and Devised Performance*, Syssoyeva and Proudfit provocatively suggest possible links between gender and ways of working, and articulate under-historicized examples of women's contributions to ongoing histories of collective creation. They write, "The history of modern theatre is a history of collaborative methods and the history of collaborative methods is a women's history" (Syssoyeva and Proudfit 2016, 5). That history, they argue, arcs across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and stakes women's contribution to modern theater into its very foundations: process. In "Devising Downtown: Collective Creation and Female Leadership in Contemporary New York," I note ways in which sex and gender align with artistic leadership generally in contemporary New York, but more precisely with particular *kinds* of leadership. Specifically, self-identified women directors are more likely to head devising or collective creation companies than to direct on or off Broadway. This does not simply result from the greater numbers of devising and collective creation companies, but is due to greater percentages of women directors heading groups that adopt group-oriented methodologies. Consequently, "this creates a bottom-heavy model in terms of female representation, in which most women artists in New York are working at the fringes of funding" (Anderson-Rabern 2016, 273). Goat Island, Nature Theater of Oklahoma, and the TEAM all have self-identified women artists in leadership positions. Elevator Repair Service is the only one of this book's case studies headed by a solo man in the role of artistic director. While none of these companies can be said to be working on the very fringes of funding, at least not as compared to some of their younger or lesser-known artistic counterparts, it is interesting to note ways in which explicit engagement with gender shows up, or doesn't, in some of the work that emerges from these groups. The TEAM, whose core membership includes queer collaborators as well as people of color, most explicitly—and sometimes controversially—engages with race, gender, and sexuality through their storytelling.[5] This is part of the America that moves under their feet, a topology that influences ways in which the group experiences, reimagines, and stages gender politics. Like the TEAM, Elevator Repair Service liberally draws upon twentieth-century Americana, implicitly suggesting (or problematizing) histories.

In the 2000s, ERS gravitates repeatedly toward personas, literature, and institutional constructions that undergird strands of American cultural and political identity: William Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury*), Jack Kerouac (*No Great Society*), the U.S. Supreme Court (*Arguendo*), Ernest Hemingway

FIGURE 4.4. Elevator Repair Service's *The Sound and the Fury*, Public Theater, 2015. *Left to right*, Susie Sokol, Vin Knight. Photo copyright © Paula Court.

(*The Select [The Sun Also Rises]*), F. Scott Fitzgerald (*Gatz*). Three of ERS's literary-inspired pieces respond directly to novels written by white men in the 1920s.[6] While there are many possible patterns to extract or interpret from the collection of *Gatz*, *The Select (The Sun Also Rises)*, and *The Sound and the Fury*, one perceptible echo across the pieces is their ambivalent representations of gender and sexuality. Each of these three pieces, complex undertakings that take canonical American literature as a generative obstacle (or performance partner), presents the literal or figurative castration of characters supplying the central perspective. In *The Select*, the primary narrative figure, Jake Barnes (played by Mike Iveson), is an impotent veteran (Marks 2017). In *The Sound and the Fury*, the fractured and disjointed perspective of Benjy is embodied in a convulsive, bird-like portrayal by female company member Susie Sokol. It's not the cross-gender casting that is unusual within this production; character, race, gender, and sexuality are fluidly picked up and put down by actors inhabiting multiple roles throughout *The Sound and the Fury*. Rather, it is the relative consistency of Susie Sokol as Benjy, even as performer Aaron Landsman also occasionally steps into the role. Though a long-sleeved, red-striped polo shirt indicates the character of Benjy, it is Sokol, an actor who presents as female, who most recognizably inhabits the role. Her portrayal gestures to the histories of theater and performance as exposures of nonbinary potential, of uneasy collisions between boyhood and feminine gender.

Even before ERS's performance begins, F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby* already controversially signify queer literature. In *Gatz*, Scott Shepherd, the actor who speaks aloud the words from Fitzgerald's text as he circumnavigates the office, splices together representations of Fitzgerald the writer, Nick, the novel's narrator and narrative participant, and Shepherd himself as self-conscious performer. Scholar Maggie Froehlich notes that "over the last thirty years, readers have come, to a greater or lesser extent, to accept Nick's homosexuality." Yet, she also reminds us that "anyone familiar with the biography is well aware that, throughout his life, Fitzgerald was terrified of being identified as homosexual and uneasy about his sexuality and sexual performance." She then posits that, while not explicitly explored in *The Great Gatsby*, worlds open up if we "recognize sexual transgression as *the* open secret of the novel" (Froehlick 2010, 82). These worlds are, perhaps unintentionally, underscored by Shepherd's performance in *Gatz*. He overlays images of Nick and Fitzgerald; the latter's image is impossible to discard throughout Shepherd's utterances, initially stilted as he performs his way into audible comfort with Fitzgerald's prose. Completing the triad, Shepherd himself is a recognizable figure to audiences of contemporary, experimental performance, someone director Richard Maxwell calls "an iconic presence on stages in New York and Europe" (Maxwell 2011). Shepherd is also a palpably masculine presence, with a reputation for virtuosity in performance—as, for example, through his technically complex work on the title role in the Wooster Group's *Hamlet*, which opened in 2007. Shepherd also, following a physical disagreement with actress and romantic partner Marin Ireland during their work on the Wooster Group's *Troilus and Cressida*, represents for some a problematic, violent, and gendered power dynamic in the experimental theater community.[7] In *Gatz*, Shepherd conjures the "open secret" of the novel's treatment of sexual transgression, embodying Nick and Fitzgerald at once, while also communicating and marking his own personal/professional status and reputation.

While Shepherd, as the voice recounting the novel, might represent multiple layerings of gendered representation and presentation throughout *Gatz*, the TEAM takes such multifaceted exploration further in their project *RoosevElvis*, which premiered in 2013. A two-person piece, *RoosevElvis* is a mashup of cultural icons Elvis Presley and Theodore Roosevelt, who sometimes yield to or take over the identities of the project's two central characters, Ann and Brenda, a queer twosome negotiating a fledgling relationship and a road trip. Played respectively by Libby King and Kristen Sieh, masculine icons Elvis and Teddy Roosevelt also give way to a host of other characters-inside-moments-inside-characters: waitresses, airline recordings, film sequences, dancers, John Muir, family members. In *RoosevElvis*, the TEAM interrogates archetypes of hypermasculinity as well as contemporary queer culture, by turns undercutting and testing the performativity in each.

FIGURE 4.5. The TEAM's *RoosevElvis*. Pictured: Kristen Sieh. Photo copyright © Sue Kessler.

In one exchange, Ann and Brenda, who have met and arranged a visit via an online meetup, discover they are not as compatible as they first assumed:

> BRENDA: I really thought from your profile that we would be . . .
> ANN: What.
> BRENDA: Nevermind.
> ANN: What.
> BRENDA: I guess it was the "Reach for greatness, accept nothing less" bit.
> ANN: Oh . . . That's just something me and Dale say. It's about karaoke cuz we both suck at it . . .
> BRENDA: You. Are remarkably unbrave. (The TEAM 2015, 30)

This exchange heralds just one of many disappointments the two encounter as they move back and forth between filmed and live interaction, romantic hopefulness and disillusionment. Ultimately, Ann and Brenda's "big gay RV adventure" to Mount Rushmore is a bust, but their alter egos Teddy and Elvis connect more successfully. Whereas Ann and Brenda are limited by the known confines of time-space reality, Teddy and Elvis have no such restrictions. Teddy and Elvis can appear, disappear, transform, and confess at will. They share a language of excess, archetypal physicality that enables them to compete, to perform ostentatiously for the audience according to mutually

agreed-upon conventions. In one such exchange, Teddy boxes while Elvis demonstrates karate. The two try to outdo one another with their tales of physical exploits, punctuated by demonstrations intended to dominate the other. They climb, jump rope, tell tall tales. The TEAM presents them as characters that revel in the exaggerated performance of gender, of drag, finding utter delight in vying for the right to monologue, the right to articulate superiority, the right to settle it all with a physical brawl:

> TEDDY: You want to take this outside?
> ELVIS: Sure, COWBOY.
> TEDDY: You "cowboy" yourself.
> ELVIS: Come on.
> *They take it outside. Sounds of wild animals.* (Ibid., 57)

Through these snapshots of hyperbolic masculinity, *RoosevElvis* underscores the multivocal identities made up of many such performances, intersecting and vivisecting one another within single individuals. By focusing attention on the surface contours of pompadours, whiskers, blue suede shoes, guns, beer, *RoosevElvis* assembles a series of gendered objects the show, not just the characters, can put on and take off at will. By rendering these archetypes

FIGURE 4.6. The TEAM's *RoosevElvis*. *Left to right*, Kristen Sieh, Libby King. Photo copyright © Sue Kessler.

within a queer not-love story, the group supplies a context that emphasizes not only the performance of gender, but also the performance of history and one's Americanness. Ann's deepest yearnings are for well-trod monuments to white masculinity: Graceland, Mount Rushmore. Yet the show does not suggest her, or Brenda, as assimilationist. Brenda scolds Ann for her cowardice at one point, declaring, "America's changing, Ann, it's like 'out.' You don't have to be so scared" (ibid., 60). Rather, the TEAM's *RoosevElvis* explores gendered performance in their spectacular multiplicities, unearthing icons from the past through performance that acknowledges gendered histories while at the same time queering them in the present.

Conclusion

These mythologies, and the groups' distinct responses to them, circle back to naming rituals, articulations of identity as assumed by groups. Three of this book's four case studies adopt language palpably connected to American landscape. The TEAM locates their overarching project as directly engaged with the thorny space-time of their country's becoming. Nature Theater of Oklahoma names a state, an island in the midst of a landsea near the geographical center of the United States, and the only state to solo title a Broadway musical (Burgess 2014).[8] "Oklahoma," then, references a theatrical mythology—from Kafka to Rodgers and Hammerstein—as much as an American one, a collision of imagined past, immigrant fantasy, and the perversity of frontierism. Almost as though responding to the violent excess of manifest destiny, one of Goat Island's geographic parallels is a small island in the Niagara River, perched between the Canadian Horseshoe Falls and the U.S. Bridal Veil Falls. It is a modest borderland in the midst of the sublime Niagara Falls, made memorable by international treaties and tourism traffic. Interestingly, Goat Island also hearkens back to Homer's *Odyssey*, a modern name for the goat-laden island of the Cyclopes that excites, as Jonathan Burgess discusses, Odysseus's colonialist reveries (Burgess 2014, 23). The performance group Goat Island is like an embodiment of a balanced oasis that functions primarily as a seeing-place, from which one can face toward or away from American soil, toward or away from capitalist imperatives. It is possible to conceptualize the group, especially given their bounded history as a cohesive ensemble, as one storied landscape encountered in the midst of an epic journey. The group itself function(ed) as an impermanent home that foreshadowed the ongoing peripatetic artistic journeys of its members.

These possible metaphors gesture toward ways of conceptualizing components of these groups' identities, anchored in the topography of landscape by their uses of naming language. If two (Goat Island and Nature Theater) announce themselves through intertextuality, the third (the TEAM) perhaps

most self-consciously identifies themselves as architects of American "fractal, spatial storytelling," seeking out connections between real and imagined Americas, real and imagined processes. In terms of group identity, the topology of ensemble, the TEAM functions as a living container that is itself fractal-like, focused deeply into the infinite detail that is American geography and histories, formed by the enduring multivocal antagonism of collective authorship (McGinley 2010, 13).