

'Is that a pistol in your pocket...?': Corral Consciousness and the Performance of Enclosure and Concealment

Misha Myers

'Every time ... the United States acts forcefully abroad to protect its interests, you can bet the farm some pencil-neck in America or Europe will whip out the charge that America once more is acting like a "cowboy" ... that acting like a cowboy is about the most horrible thing one could do' (Thornton 2002: unpaginated).

Charging onward...

It's High Noon. A stranger comes to town. Searching. Speculating. [Close-up shot from ground level: dark figure in cowboy hat, bat-wing yoked shirt, boots and jeans fore grounded against a big blue sky with thunderclouds approaching in the distance. Theme song from *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*.]

For the exhibition he co-curated with Richard William Hill at Compton Verney, exploring the American West, Jimmie Durham wrote, 'This kit has an "understood" gun. The wearer and the public know that the gun is there. Every cowboy suit has a gun. (And a script, of course.)' (2005: 21). This here kit comes complete with the requisite firepower and master-narrative, but wait... there's a woman in that hat to boot. What is her role in the script? I will come back to her later, as there's another part I want to address first, that of the silent 'Indian', the Tonto or Queequag who 'is always a passive witness to the cowboy's action' (Durham, 1993: 176). How to intervene within the tightness of this script? In his essay 'Cowboys and ...' written in 1990, Durham recognised that America 'becomes more closed, but "kinder and gentler"' as it attempts to keep up the concomitant niceties of a democratic empire and to model Europe's forced and tokenised receptivity to interventions in its myths. This narrowing ideology, that I will call "corral consciousness", is what Durham proposed in 1990, as a 'potential weakness of the system', and that triggered his continued experiments (Durham, 1993: 186).

As the current narrative of threat to national and global security is reinforced globally, but in the United States more particularly, through the production of panic and fear, we see a corralling of codes and enactments of Manifest Destiny. This corralling delimits, erases, collapses and conceals positionalities and potentialities, while proliferating illegible, invisible, illegitimate and criminal identities within the unhomely homeland state of emergency and abroad on new frontiers of "Indian territory". The enemy is close to home both within and without. No, this scenario is not new to the US. And I'm wondering how do I avoid that part in the script that allows me in my liberal-mindedness to walk away into the distance with a knowing smile and hands washed clean of the whole scene? In the enclosure of corral consciousness, I am searching for the strategies to avoid distancing myself or silencing an active witness in this script.

In Durham's exhibition at Matt's Gallery in London, *Building a Nation* (2006), he strategically placed mirrors throughout the installation so that the viewer would see their own reflection as they read genocidal quotations by famous Americans, which were photocopied or transcribed and pinned to walls or on top of objects. In the booklet accompanying the exhibition, Richard William Hill suggests that these quotations are a kind of evidence of the violence towards indigenous peoples that underlies, but is hidden within, the foundations of the United States. During a series of performances held throughout the exhibition, Durham would work on the exhibition and then speak about ideas related to it, read quotations and sing songs. Hill writes that 'nation building is an intimate affair, completed one mind at a time in the "privacy" of your home as you do the things you most enjoy, often in a state of childish innocence' (Hill, 2006: unpaginated), such as dressing up like a cowboy, or an 'Indian', or a 'cowboy-as-Indian', or singing, as Durham did at some point in *Building a Nation*, 'He's an Indian, you're an Indian, I'm an Indian too! A Sioux-oo-oo!' (Irving Berlin, lyrics from *Annie Get Your Gun!*, in Durham, 2006: unpaginated). As Hill suggests, 'There are nations that need un-building' (Hill 2006: unpaginated). Durham is a carpenter that un-builds with tools such as those Gerald Vizenor refers to as 'practices of survivance' of native peoples, the refusal of domination and annihilation of their cultures and their sovereignty through their active and resilient presence in their stories, traditions, customs and narrative resistance (Vizenor, 2008: 11).

While Durham's mirrors address the viewer and invite them to actively witness and question the US's ideological foundations, there is also an allusion to the 'funhouse mirror' of Hollywood (Hill, 2005: 163) that replicates the iconic image of the cowboy over and over again, instructing Americans how to be cowboys 'in a cycle of anticipation and mimicry': 'it's all one reflection after another, regressing back to nothing. All the genuine complexity and diversity of American experience disappears in the process' (Hill, 2005: 163). With the development of the 'cowboy-and-Indian' stories of the 'dime novels' and the 'Wild West Shows' into the Western film, this image and the ideology of Manifest Destiny went global for worldwide consumption at a time when the survival of native peoples was most vulnerable. Laura Mulvey likens this thickening of this mythological plot as 'a huge smoke screen' (Mulvey, 1995: 66). Jean Fisher warns, 'To base an identity and ideology on nostalgic myths is to be doomed to repetition, incapable of seeing and responding to the political realities of the present' (Fisher, 2005: 42).

After reading Durham's 'Cowboys and ...' I wondered what would happen if the American origin myth was deported or evicted back to that land from which the particular European brand of this narrative was first exported. So I put on my boots and spurs to stage a cross-dressing and un-dressing of this master-narrative. In 2004 as part of a month-long series of performances, and an installation commissioned by Spacex Gallery and Relational for their public art exhibition *Homeland*, I re-staged and re-branded a version of *The Wild West Show*. The show was complete with newly improved dimensions, added features of imaginary savages and tribal barbarians in the guise of extremist terrorists and the contemporary grade A brand of democratizin' and colonizin' currently being waged within the circling wagon train of corral consciousness.

It's High Noon. Enter the cowgirl, a wandering cowgirl of dubious authenticity and origin, presenting a stonewashed, tired-out remnant of that legendary Wild West action show upholding the values of an urban society chasing a ghost of a chance called Manifest Destiny. The cowgirl led a round-up, transforming Exeter's old Roman walls into a rodeo corral with renegade rodeo pageantry. A posse of the city's very own line dancers, *Montgomery Mavericks*, followed along. The steps of their dances around the walls echoed those of Exeter's forsaken ritual—the annual 'Mural Walk'. Along this past circum-ambulation, transgressors of the security and prestige the walls once upheld were named and shamed. In this more recent promenade, the cowgirl sang yodels and cowboy ballads of hangings, prison breaks, wandering, homesteading and land grabbing, with the lyrics replaced with geographical and historical details specific to Exeter's past and present. Back at the ranch in the Local History Room of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, another cowgirl tracked the progress of the posse over a Victorian model of the city as cattle calls came in from the range reporting their latest coordinates and inviting all hands to join the round-up. In a daring feat guaranteed to knock your boots off, a familiar site of English heritage was displaced with a Hollywood film set of the mythological Wild West and the forgotten rituals of beating the bounds of the city were transformed into rodeo pageantry.

As part of the *Homelands* exhibition, I also transformed a vacant city centre shop into a boarded up saloon or barn-like space fronted with replicas of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show* billboards, and a painting of a familiar Dartmoor landscape transformed into that of the American West, with lavender and green hues replaced with burnt sienna and a few stones added to the top of a tor. Inside, hay bales encircled a miniature corral containing a mechanised bull playground ride. The walls were adorned with roughly painted wooden signs advertising side show acts, ephemera associated with the performance of *Yodel Rodeo* and a projection of the video work, *Pain Town*, in which the seaside town of Paignton was re-imagined as a Wild West town. In the video, the cowgirl walks down a particular street where amusement arcades are fronted by a covered promenade bearing an uncanny resemblance to a Western film set, that symbolic, mythological and placeless place of the American dream, the ghost town that exists at the frontier. Her face is never visible; she is a stranger passing through in spirit-like fashion. Uncannily, apparitions of the Wild West appear everywhere along the street and are gathered by the camera: a shop called 'Come West'; figurines in a window display of 'Indian' dancers in Plains headdresses and cowboy wranglers; children's mechanized rides of a horse and stage coach playing Western theme tunes.

At the culmination of *Homeland*, the contextual and durational diorama side show *Lonesome Long Gone* was performed in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, in a glass case between an exhibition of Shell Motor Oil's original publicity posters and a buffalo exhibit in the museum's Natural History room. Over a three-hour period the cowgirl performed sharp shooting demonstrations, reenactments of dying scenes from Western films, melancholic line dances to Western theme tunes, cowboy ballads while strumming an out of tune guitar, balderdash from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show billboards, and readings of the original Victorian dime novel and penny dreadful version of the 'Adventures of Buffalo Bill' with her presence and contemporary events in the Middle East inserted into the embellished accounts.

[Read with the theme song of *The Magnificent Seven*]

STEP RIGHT UP BUCKEROOS
FOR ONE DAY ONLY
FROM HIGH NOON TO HIGH TEA
IN OUR GRAND ARENA
A PROUDLY PRE-EMINENT EXHIBITION
OF UNIVERSAL INTEREST
WITH NEWLY ADDED FEATURES
THIS YEAR SURPASSING ITS STUPENDOUS SELF
WHIP CRACKIN, SHARP SHOOTIN, TRICK RIDIN,
GAME HUNTIN, BRONC BUSTIN AND OTHER DARIN FEATS
GREAT GRAND AND HEROIC
WITH MORE THAN ENOUGH
RUGGED ROUGH RIDERS OF THE WORLD
A GATHERING OF EXTRAORDINARY CONSEQUENCE
FITTINGLY ILLUSTRATING ALL THAT
VIRILE MUSCULAR HEROIC MANHOOD
HAS AND CAN ENDURE
PRESENTING THE GIGANTIC MILITARY SPECTACLE OF
ENDURING FREEDOM
AND OTHER ACTUAL SCENES
OF AMBUSH, STAKEOUT, HIDEOUT, SHOOT OUT
COME ONE COME ALL
IT'S A BLAZE OF GLORY BLOW OUT
THE AWFULEST BEATENEST SHOW ON EARTH



Performance Re-enactment Society, Hugo Glendinning and Misha Myers. Title: Untitled 05 (After Jimmie Durham, Building a Nation)

As a method of researching Durham's strategies of interruption for this essay, I staged a re-enactment of a moment of *Building a Nation* for a Performance Re-enactment Society (PRS) photo shoot. It is a kind of research that I do through the doing of a thing. I took a crooked tree branch from my log pile at home, put on my partner's work shirt and tied a black cloth around my head. I transcribed the following quotation from President Theodore Roosevelt (1886) onto a piece of paper: 'I don't go as far to think that "the only good Indians are dead Indians", but I believe nine out of ten are, and I shouldn't like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth' (Roosevelt in Durham, 2006: unpaginated). I pinned the page to the branch and attached the branch to a timber with black gaffer tape. Then I posed for a camera while smelling the branch.

After Hugo Glendinning finished taking the shot, another member of PRS, Tom Marshman, asked me what was going on in my life and the world when I saw this work. I confessed that I never saw the exhibition or performances in person, but only 'experienced' it 'second hand' through Durham's writings, documentation and others' accounts of their experiences of the work. Marshman reassured me that this is within the rules of PRS. I was somewhat relieved, but not entirely convinced. There is something so deeply unsatisfying about not having been there, and even more so when trying to write about it 'third hand'. So I was attempting to bring myself there through this doing, to create some kind of dialogue with the work and experience of it. I'm interested in the doing and how the thing is done. This is one of the things about Durham's work that impresses or has left an imprint on me - the way he generates discourse in his installations, performances, writings, etc., between the objects/words and the viewer/reader. Put differently, it is to do with the way he integrates the work and his process of making it within the installations or objects he creates, both as a method of making art and as political discourse.

I told Marshman that what was going on in my life while researching this work was the disassembling of my home as I prepared to move my family with my job, and what was going on in the wider world at that moment with Obama's missed deadline for dismantling Guantanamo. Having said this aloud, I did pause to reflect on what connections there might be between all of this, if any. And then Marshman asked me what I was thinking about while I was posing for the camera. I told him that I was wondering what Durham must have been thinking about when he sniffed the branch gathered from Victoria Park in Hackney. I smelled the dried red Devon mud on my own stick that I had picked up on one of my regular walks near my home. I liked the shape of it and had put it on my log pile, but didn't really want it to go in the fire. This led me to think about the work *Untitled, 1992*, included in Durham's exhibition *Original Re-Runs* at the ICA London (1994), a glass fish-eye attached to a stick painted red accompanied by a text 'An Open Letter to the Public to Whom it May Concern'. In the text Durham narrates a process of making the object and a problem with the concept of representation, which progresses from a premeditated idea for the work that doesn't work out to an extemporaneous combining of found materials; he happened to have a glass fish-eye and was walking in the woods and saw the stick, which he notes did not remind him of a fish and had dog faeces on it (Durham in Mulvey, 1995: 49). I was also thinking about a description I had read of this moment I was attempting to re-enact from *Building a Nation* that suggested Durham 'paused to smell the cut limb of the branch as if to ascertain its provenance' (Quayle, 2007: 237). And I was thinking about the power of primitivism, how this gesture of sniffing a stick, that could have been off the cuff or could have been premeditated (we will never know unless we ask him and even then what he will tell us may raise further questions about concepts of time, artistic creation and representation), is relegated to an iconic or symbolic image as the subject of anthropological and scientific interpretation and dissection. Durham has said of his work:

When I try to make art I don't want to be in a studio and think about a piece of art I want to make, I want to be with a group of people not knowing what I might make. I want a discourse, not an invention.' (Durham, 2005b: unpaginated)

This process of finding out what something was, is, or what it can become through dynamic and discursive relationships is what I was attempting to examine in making this photograph. I tried hanging up a mirror as part of my re-enactment. I wanted to catch an image of the camera and the photographer, but this didn't work out the way I thought it would. When

the final photo was hung up to dry, people commented that it didn't look like me. It doesn't look like Durham either. I wasn't trying to be Jimmie Durham or myself. I didn't want to pin either of us up or down. I wanted to create a discourse by putting together these 'second hand' memories of a Jimmie Durham performance. Now, that's a long and roundabout way of telling what I was thinking while I was doing it, but it also tells you what I'm trying to do here right now.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch...

In Durham's essay 'Savage Attacks on White Women, As Usual' he offers a confession: he was once a cowboy, but didn't enjoy it. He said, he 'only did it for the money' and another cowboy warned him, 'You're an Indian and a cowboy? Be careful you don't kill yourself' (Durham, 1993: 122).

Confession: When I was younger I wanted to be a cowboy. Suspicious of my cowboy tendencies, my mother never bought me the boots and hat that I pleaded for. But I was a cowboy for a while. White go-go boots worn with red, white and blue jeans were a makeshift supplement for the real thing and I did ride in the girls' lead line of the Holmes County Rodeo in Mississippi circa 1975. I must admit that I did enjoy it and later on (not that long ago) I did it for the money, too, but I fear, and this keeps me awake at night, that I really can't ever escape my cowboy tendencies. The wagon train always seems to reappear circling in. Even when I try to displace or double-cross it, it comes back with bigger guns.

[Spoken with the Theme song of 'Fist Full of Dollars']

Sharp Shootin with the Girl Dead Shot: Lesson # 1 'The Problem of the Master Eye'

It is best to keep both eyes open when using a shotgun, you can see the target better and also judge distance and speed more accurately. Having both eyes open introduces the problem of the 'master eye'. A right-handed shooter with a right 'master eye' will have no difficulty in pointing the gun correctly. However, if the left eye is master, a right-handed shooter will have difficulties because the gun will actually be pointing to the left of the objects aimed at. Once you have resolved the problem of the master eye, it won't be long before you'll be shootin sharp like the Girl Dead Shot. So, tune in for the next instalment of Sharp Shootin Lessons with the Girl Dead Shot, brought to you by Homeland Insecurities Inc.

There's a snare built into my liberation. As Durham has pointed out, the US makes adjustments to its self-image 'without admitting any new images' (Durham, 1993: 183). Indeed, in her online blog, *Virginian Postrel*, attributes Sarah Palin's appeal to this persistence: 'She may have wrangled fish, but she shares the cowgirl tradition' (Postrel 2008: unpaginated). And Alex Massie observes that it is significant that Palin, dressed up as the 'cowgirl-turned-Sheriff', wouldn't have had the same impact if she had come from Alabama or Ohio, because 'The *idea* of the west trumps all other considerations' (Massie, 2008: unpaginated).

A cowgirl once told me that the cowgirl legend was inspired by the many women who abandoned the civilised life of the East to live on that 'vacant' and 'affordable' land (read: stolen through genocide and removal of Indigenous people), known as the 'Cherokee Strip', the territory offered to pioneering families and unmarried individuals for ownership with the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887. [1] In the West the cowgirl had to cowboy up and prove herself through the same 'strange rituals of showing dominance over cattle' (Durham, 2005: 12) and demonstrate her prowess in a saddle, with a gun or something else that shoots from the hip. While it was considered a mental illness in the East at the time to want to wear trousers, women in the West rode astride in split skirts, and it was through these acts that she was taken seriously enough to gain suffrage, legal rights to her own

incomes and lands, and to take up positions as political representatives with the first women's vote legislated in Wyoming. From there, many a cowgirl 'came looking for a chance to ride astride and to vote' (Savage, 1996: 17).

While Annie Oakley's name appears in a list of TV Westerns entitled 'Suggested Further Research' in *The American West* (Durham, 2005a: 170), cowgirls didn't appear in the exhibition and I wonder about this gap in the spirit of questioning that it inspires. I wonder about the 'The Whoopee Girl', Texas Guinan. Born in Texas just before the Allotment Act, she went *East* to make her fortune as a show girl. She was best known for her 'Wild West patter'; like an illusionist she distracted the attention of the 'Butter and Egg men', as she referred to her wealthy patrons, while she magically emptied their load. 'Hello Suckers ... Give the little ladies a great big hand'.

[Spoken with Ennio Morricone's 'Almost Dead']

Sharp Shootin with the Girl Dead Shot: Lesson # 2 'Gun Mounting'

Assuming the gun fits you, before you even considering firing it you should spend a considerable time practising gun mounting. Stand in front of a mirror with the gun in the ready position. Push slightly forward with your left hand, and with your right hand raise the stock to your cheek and the butt into your shoulder. Make sure that the butt of your gun travels in a direct line upwards; avoid thrusting forward and then drawing back. Practice this movement until you can bring your gun up in a smooth, swift action, always making sure that it ends with your cheek tight on the stock and the right eye in the correct position.

Practice this until you do it automatically and it won't be long before you'll be shootin sharp like the Girl Dead Shot, so tune in for the next instalment of Sharp Shootin Lessons with the Girl Dead Shot, brought to you by Homeland Insecurities Inc.

Durham proposes that the division between 'Indians' and settlers is the hidden operant for all American narratives, a

discourse of enclosure and concealment [that] is not a product of US imperialism but its instructor. The concealment and its methods have served to take away from 'Indians' a reality in the world, and therefore our voices in the world. (Durham, 1993: 181)

This operational core 'has not (cannot be) changed. It has broadened. It has been broadcast' (Durham, 1993: 173-174). It is this narrative of the ever-expanding horizon of the frontier and the negation of 'Indians' which maintains and instructs the ideological operation of US state-ism and imperialism and is continuously re-employed and re-circulated in the language of US businessmen who speak of "scalping" and "circling the wagon train". (Durham, 1993: 186). Indeed, the *Wall Street Journal* ran an advertisement, with no irony intended, on March 30, 2005, announcing a Las Vegas Land Auction which read

'In May 1905, a group of visionary investors travelled for days and camped on the desert floor... on May 4th, 2005, history repeats itself... only this time the stakes are even higher.'

[In Exeter's shopping area of the town centre, the cowgirl brushes elbows with an anti-war demonstration and the Town Crier, and shouts her own cry, a dedication.]

For all the shoppers of High Street and their restless desires

At the East Gate junction of Virgin Megastore territory

[Then, the cowgirl sings a version of the 'Railroad Corral']

The sun circles upward, the steers as they plod
Are pounding the pavement of the hot city sod
It seems when the smog makes you dizzy and sick
That we'll never reach tea time or the cool River Exe

Oh slow down, dogies, quit your roving 'round
you've wandered and trampled all over the ground.
oh graze along, dogies, and feed kinda slow
and don't be forever on the go,
move slow, dogies, move slow.

The role of the cowboy as Indian must be played again and again to reassure a sense of belonging. To reveal this narrative for what it is, is to recognize the contradictory unsettledness of the settler, the stranger that has never been alone (on the endless prairies of virgin territory that actually were inhabited by native peoples) or at home (in what was perceived as a wilderness full of savages). Such a pathological homeland insecurity necessitates the maintenance of a corral consciousness as any intervention revealing the falsity of the underlying master-narrative will unleash an unfathomable eviction. The lie of the land must be protected abroad-at-home at all costs. And its lasso must be a-broadly cast to extend and fortify its ground. 'The genre finally gives way to imperialistic adventures enacted in the "Indian territories" of Philippines-Vietnam-Grenada-Mogadishu-Iraq, or "cowboys and Indians" in space" (as the author of *Star Trek* described the series)' (Fisher, 2005: 40). With the enactments of domestic control and identity lock down legitimized by this recirculation of this operational core in the current persistent state of emergency, are such dimensions and identities of the unknown domesticated or secured or is the possible terrain of confrontation proliferated and made more visible? Is this a show down or a show up?

[Read with the theme song of *Bonanza*]

COME ONE COME ALL
ITS ABSOLUTIN ROOTIN LOOTIN TOOTIN
ONE HUNDRED PERCENT BONAFIDE
YOU TOO CAN JOIN THE OUTFIT
INVEST NOW
WITH MONEY YOU CAN AFFORD TO LOSE
YOU JUST MIGHT GET A LIL' LIVER FOR YOUR PUP
GRAVEL FOR YOUR GOOSE
WHILE HAVIN SOME GOOD CLEAN FAMILY FUN
STEP RIGHT UP FOLKS
JOIN THE RANKS
CHASE THAT GHOST OF A CHANCE
WE BELIEVE IN SEQUELS AND EXCESS SPENDING
HIT THE BIG BONANZA
DON'T MISS THE GRAVY TRAIN ROLLIN IN AND ROLLIN OUT SOON
JUST KEEP MOVIN ON
WHEN PLANS GO WRONG
THEY OFFER UP ANOTHER CHANCE
JOIN OUR POSSE OF HIGH PLAINS DRIFTERS
SITTIN HIGH IN THE SADDLE ON A WILD RIDE
BLAZIN A COMET'S TRAIL
BE ANOTHER WANDR'IN STAR FALLIN THROUGH INFINITE SKIES
PROSPECTS ARE ALWAYS LOOKIN UP
THERE'S A SHIMMERIN OASIS TO BE FOUND
BEYOND THE HORIZON
ALWAYS LOOKIN UP LOOKIN OUT
CAMPING ON TWO PLANETS FROM PRAIRIE TO PALACE TO PLUTO
THE GLORIOUS GRAND RULER OF THE AMUSEMENT COSMOS
PRESENTS
ALIEN VILLAGES, AUTHENTIC CUSTOMS, GENUINE CHARACTERS
OF LIFE AT THE GALAXY'S FRONTIER
A PROUDLY PRE-EMINENT EXHIBITION OF UNIVERSAL INTEREST
BLASTIN OFF IN A BLAZE OF GLORY
THERE'S JUST NO PLACE LIKE HOME ANYMORE

My cowgirl performs the ghostly figure of the lonesome, unsettled and unsettling settler, attempting to show up those rituals of concealment and erasure, which founded and continue founding the unique brand of empire made in the US. This fantasy of return is, of course, an impossibility; any authenticated source of origin after all is just another untruth along the lost highway. There is no land to which the state of 'America' can or needs to return with its ideological and political narrative base. The law of the land is the lie of the land. Hill instructs:

Picture a Cowboy: Try not to situate him anywhere or otherwise complicate the image. Go for something distilled and iconic - whatever comes to mind without self-conscious reflection... The exercise is to understand his symbolic, spatial relationship to the world. (2005: 148)

Perhaps I have overcomplicated the picture.

The US's mythic narrative of 'home' as synonymous with 'nation' is never actually located in the land. Durham recognizes this strangeness in the differences of the landscapes of Europe and the Americas. Europe was transported to the Americas by the European settlers, who were 'always and obviously never at home here' (Durham, 1993: 180). If you look in the summer homes of the 'robber barons' in Newport, Rhode Island, you'll find the inner walls and doorways of European chateaus that were removed and shipped across the Atlantic.

[Between the alleyway, Maddock's Row, decorated in graffiti, and the loading bay at the back of the home furnishings store Habitat, a sign reads 'Habitat Loading Bay Keep clear'. The cowgirl makes a dedication under the watchful eye of a Habitat security guard.]

For those searching for a home made by Habitat

For those searching for any place, some place to call home

For those dreams of bluer skies won at any expense

[The cowgirl sings a version of 'Home on the Range']

'Home, home on Maddock's Row,
Oh give me a home where the graffitero roam,
Where skate boards and spray cans play,
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the sky is not cloudy all day.'

In this perambulation around the old city walls of Exeter, the cowgirl risks falling outside or remaining deeper within the circumscribed. She wants to shift the frame to disclose and

divulge divergent paths, roles, unscripted identities. In her multi-referential role of signification and interpretation, different places and times and cultural locations are superimposed on one another so that both times and places must be read through and within one another simultaneously. Moving in and out of the thresholds, doorways, crossroads and town gates of what remains of these narratives and architectonics of corral consciousness, she is seeking a more dynamic space of signification through movement and relations with others. This space is formed through an interweaving and juxtaposing of times and places to emancipate new imaginative constructs of identity from the arresting powers and erasures of corral consciousness.

In one way, this inhabitation of place may be just another replication of the enactment of this master-narrative, another erasure of one official and dominant narrative displaced for another, repeating those rites of colonization, the superimposition, displacement and erasure of one signifying system for another. These rites may be a phoney recreation or re-enactment of a pre-existing past separated from the present, a nostalgic longing for better times or traditions when 'Indian's welcomed the innocent settlers as friends'. Or this intervention could be seen to comply with the trajectory of the commodification of place, the transformation of distinct local identities and places into Hollywood follies, further pits stops along the Lost Highway.

Perhaps I have overcomplicated the image. How do you un-build a nation?

[In the glass case in the Natural History room of Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum, under the gaze of the unblinking eyes of the immovable buffalo, the cowgirl repeatedly performs dying scenes. First there is the impact of a gunshot and then there is a theatricalised and sometimes prolonged collapse. Sometimes a staggering rise, pressed against the glass case. Sometimes there is a convulsion. The buffalo does not respond. The smoke screen has not cleared.]

Author

Originally, from Mississippi, Dr. Misha Myers is a live artist and Senior Lecturer in Theatre at University College Falmouth - incorporating Dartington College of Arts, UK. She has published articles on her work and that of other artists in various journals, including *Visual Studies*, *Performance Research Journal*, *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, *The International Journal of Arts and Society*, *Research in Drama Education* and in the book *Art in the Age of Terrorism* and some of her work is available at www.homingplace.org.

Endnotes

[1] The Dawes General Allotment Act was enacted in 1887 by U.S. Congress, and subsequently, was amended to divide tribally held lands into individually-owned parcels. This legislation imposed the assimilation of Native cultures to individual land ownership and other Western European values. In addition, lands that were deemed surplus were distributed for purchase and settlement by 'non-Indians' and the development of railroads.

References

Durham, Jimmie. *A certain lack of coherence: writings on art and cultural politics* (London: Kala, 1993).

-----‘Various Elements of Cowboy Life’, in Jean Fisher, Mark Diaper and John Leslie (eds.). *The American West* (Warwickshire, UK: Compton Verney, 2005): 10-22.

-----‘Suggested Further Research’ in Jean Fisher, Mark Diaper and John Leslie (eds.). *The American West* (Warwickshire, UK: Compton Verney, 2005a): 170.

-----‘In his own words’, *Heyoka Magazine*, 2 Fall (2005b) <http://www.heyokamagazine.com/HEYOKA.2.JIMMI%20DURHAM.htm>

-----*Building a Nation* [Exhibition booklet] (London: Matt’s Gallery, 2006).

Hill, Richard William Hill. ‘Cowboy Justice: An American Trip’ in Jean Fisher, Mark Diaper and John Leslie (eds.). *The American West* (Warwickshire, UK: Compton Verney, 2005): 147-168.

-----‘Building and Un-building’ in Jimmie Durham, *Building a Nation* [Exhibition booklet] (London: Matt’s Gallery, 2006).

Fisher, Jean. ‘Chronicle of a Myth Retold ...’, in in Jean Fisher, Mark Diaper and John Leslie (eds.). *The American West* (Warwickshire, UK: Compton Verney, 2005): 31-43.

Massie, Alex. ‘Cowgirl Sarah’, *Spectator* (2008) <http://www.spectator.co.uk/alexmassie/3246386/cowgirl-sarah.shtml>

Mulvey, Laura. ‘Survey: Canging Objects, Preserving Time’ in Laura Mulvey, Dirk Snauwaert and Mark Alice Durant (eds.). *Jimmie Durham* (London: Phaidon, 1995): 34-75.

Performance Re-enactment Society. (2010) <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=36004433478>

Postrel, Virginia. ‘Sarah Palin and Cowgirl Glamour’ (2008) http://www.deepglamour.net/deep_glamour/2008/09/sarah-palin-and-my-cowgirl-moment.html

Quayle, Cian. ‘Bad carpentry and other wilful misdemeanours’, *Visual Communication*, 6.2 (2007): 234-239.

Savage, Candace. *Cowgirls* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).

Thornton, Bruce. ‘The Cowboy Myth’, *Free Republic.com*, 12 April (2008) <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/664661/posts>

Vizenor, Gerald. *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).