

Epistemology of the Locker Room: A Queer Glance at the Physical Culture Archive

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Abstract

The physical culture movement began in Europe and America the nineteenth century and was a precursor to today's forms of fitness and exercise. It also encompassed a mediascape that included popular theatre, magazines, collectible photos, and advertisements. According to many traditional historical accounts, this scene of mainly male-identified embodied practice is 'closeted'. The practice of muscle building and bodily cultivation constructs a heteronormative and hegemonic masculine ideal while at the same time serving as a hidden or secret site for gay desire.

I argue that the concept of the closet (encompassing notions of *hiding* and *outing*) obscures the ways in which physical culture has challenged and queered rigid binaries of gender and sexuality from its origin. Through this trope, the locker room is re-framed as a public site of male homosociality and a closeted site of male homosexuality. In contrast, this article takes the 'epistemology of the locker room' – a site of semi-public exposure, relationality, competition, and shame – as an approach to the twentieth century archive of physical culture, a problematic set of documents in which physical culturists perform a heightened, theatrical self-presentation. How might such a conceptual shift to 'partial exposure' enable us to re-read the lacunae in the archive that have often been considered 'secretly' queer? 'Outing' archives, here, is an action that marks the way in which the embodied practice of physical culture was not a secret but openly queer history, in which exceptional and extraordinary performing bodies invented new modes of sociality.

(Prologue) *Tom Cruise takes a shower*

A room of naked bodies, dirty and clean, the locker room is the most obvious site of the homoeroticism of sport, as illustrated in a scene from *Top Gun* (1986), directed by Tony Scott. The scene opens in the locker room after a training sortie wherein Maverick (Tom Cruise) has made a fatal error. The sound of falling water suggests an offscreen shower, and several men stand, stretch, or sit on benches, clad only in small white towels around the

waist. Maverick stands with his back against a pillar, awaiting punishment, the position recalling a gladiator about to be whipped in a sword-and-sandals epic. The instructor, Jester, (Michael Ironside), enters and reprimands Maverick: 'You never, ever leave your wingman'. As Jester leaves, Iceman (Val Kilmer) enters, wet from the shower, taking up Maverick's position against the pillar. Maverick moves over to the bench where his friend Goose (Anthony Edwards) is sitting, legs spread. His refusal to meet Iceman's gaze forces him into a strange position; his foot on the bench, naked torso hovering inches from Goose's face, his buttocks thrust outwards towards both the room, and Iceman. As Iceman launches into a paean of bromantic responsibility ('You may not like the guys flying with you, they may not like you, but whose side are you on?') his gaze is directed entirely towards Maverick's ass. The only meeting of eyes is the close of the scene, where Goose gives Maverick a little encouragement, stands up, and gives him a gentle touch on the shoulder.

In this scene, homoerotic desire is performed in the choreography of male bodies and the male gaze that Scott and cinematographer Jeffrey L. Kimball create. The gaze is really a glance, directed at the body of the other, furtive and yet public. Iceman can look longingly at Maverick's ass, because Maverick does not look back. The public performance of discipline, reprimanding Maverick for his failure to meet the demands of homosociality ('never, ever leave your wingman') is made both awkward and erotic not only because Jester is clothed and Maverick is not, but because in the space of the lockerroom, a direct look – a 'gaze' – is forbidden. One might say, to risk a psychoanalytic slip, that 'gays' are forbidden. In other words, the indirect organization of Maverick and Iceman's glances serves to index the film's homosocial and homoerotic desire. The direct gaze that Goose and Iceman share, at the scene's close, is in fact the least erotic thing of all, even though there is physical contact. The hand that Goose touches to Maverick's shoulder, seems to sport not one, but two comically large wedding rings.

Top Gun's homoerotic subtext was supposedly unknown to the filmmakers, though it has been widely discussed.¹ As subtext, discussions of *Top Gun*'s gayness adhere to a logic of the 'closet', in other words, a logic of concealment, revelation, and 'outing'. Yet, the locker room scene, I argue, suggests another kind of logic, one of indeterminacy, ambivalence, and partial and deniable exposure. Locker rooms are both erotic and functional. They permit men to look at other men's naked bodies while simultaneously forbidding such looks. This indeterminate logic is not contained by discussions of gay 'subtext', that is,

¹ Nico Lang, 'Top Gun and the End of the Homoerotic Action Movie', *Consequence of Sound*, 14 May 2016, <https://consequenceofsound.net/2016/05/top-gun-and-the-end-of-the-homoerotic-action-movie/>.

whether the characters of Maverick and Iceman are ‘actually’ gay. The locker room performs a different organization of desire that queers identity categories of gay and straight. A locker room is not a closet, nor is it a bedroom, even though, as in both, it’s where clothes are taken off.

Epistemology of the Locker Room

This article conceptualises what I call the ‘epistemology of the locker room’ as a methodological approach to archival practice and queer historiography. The object of my historical research is the physical culture movement, which began in Europe and America in the nineteenth century and was a precursor to today’s forms of fitness and exercise. Promoted by a huge international range of bodybuilders, wrestlers, strongmen, weightlifters, and gymnasts (‘physical culturists’), physical culture also encompassed a mediascape that included popular theatre, magazines, collectible photos, and advertisements. According to many historical accounts, this scene of mainly male-identified embodied practice is ‘closeted’. The practice of muscle building and bodily cultivation outwardly constructs a heteronormative and hegemonic masculine ideal while at the same time serving as a hidden or secret site for gay desire and sociality. Like sport more generally, physical culture is purportedly defined by a simultaneous cultivation of homoeroticism and disavowal or rejection of homosexuality.

The concept of the closet (encompassing notions of hiding and outing) obscures the ways in which physical culture has challenged and queered rigid binaries of gender and sexuality from its origin. Via the logic of the closet, the locker room becomes structured in a binary way: a public site of male homosociality and a closeted site of male homosexuality. Such framing extends to research on both historical and contemporary physical culture and sport, with the gay/straight binary animating discussions of issues from body image among gay men to sex work (‘hustling’) in male bodybuilding. While this critical perspective has importantly illuminated queer lacunae in physical culture history, it also has a tendency to confirm straight narratives of physical culture and sport as masculine disciplinary technologies. In other words, from the perspective of the closet, whether inside or outside, the *primary* motivation of physical culture and fitness was and is to produce heteronormative masculinity, and any minoritarian sexual *uses* of physical culture are by definition excluded from the mainstream narrative as subversive or resistant.

In contrast, this article proposes the epistemology of the locker room as an approach to the twentieth century archive of physical culture, which is already a problematic set of documents in which physical culturists perform a heightened, theatrical self-presentation, exposing their bodies while performing and constructing certain gendered roles and expectations. The spatial metaphor of the locker room constitutes a conceptual shift that understands the intention of historical actors (i.e. the nature of one's desire) to be never fully knowable. This enables us to re-read absences and indeterminacies in the archive in a new way, not searching for proof, but possibility. In this way, I intend the concept as a contribution to other research in queer historiography that disrupt the disciplinary procedures of historical method. José Esteban Muñoz's provocation, 'ephemera as evidence' sets out the problem of queer historiography as a problem for performance studies.² The search for 'proof', he argues, is incompatible with queerness, which 'has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.'³ Contemporary queer identities thus rarely fit into 'a single pre-established archive of evidence.'⁴ Rejecting the way queer history's detective work aligns with '19th and 20th-century disciplines of identification and classification', Simon Ofield proposes 'cruising' as a research methodology, a practice of diversion that refuses 'secure knowledge' and instead is motivated by the 'expectant pleasure of coming across what I do not set out to find'.⁵ Cruising, is a fitting conceptual frame for the epistemology of the locker room. After all, that is where a lot of cruising happens.

The epistemology of the locker room further problematizes the nature of the physical culture 'archive'. Fitness culture is today ubiquitous but official archiving has been limited – organizations like the International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB) or International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) are primarily interested in saving official documents and competition results. Thus, historians of physical culture have relied on personal collections brought together by Professor Jan Todd and her late husband, Professor Terry Todd, at the University of Texas at Austin. Jan and Terry were themselves major figures of physical culture as champion powerlifters, and Jan continues to be a key voice in the industry through her organization of the annual Arnold Strongman Classic. With the institutional support of

² José Esteban Muñoz, 'Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts', *Women and Performance*, 8: 2 (1996), pp. 5-16.

³ Muñoz, 'Ephemera as Evidence', 6.

⁴ Muñoz, 'Ephemera as Evidence', 9.

⁵ Simon Ofield, 'Cruising the Archive', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4: 3 (2005), pp. 351–64 (p. 362 and 353).

the UT, in 2010 the Todds established the H.J. Lucher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, providing an official archival home for the many personal collections of dearly departed friends and acquaintances from the Iron Game they'd collected over the years. In a conversation while looking through the George Hackenschmidt Papers in 2017, Jan said to me, 'I know that it isn't very fashionable to not use theory, but my aim is really just to tell the story of what really happened'. Hence, I believe, the sheer amount of material in the Stark Center archives, which can often be repetitive in nature. In this glut of evidence, the historian can establish the movement and encounters of those extraordinary bodies that invented what was called physical culture and what has become ubiquitous as fitness. However, the intervention performance studies can make, if sometimes only in a speculative way, is to establish not only what happened, but what these encounters felt like; in other words, not just evidence of meetings, conversations, and correspondence, but *affects*. In the case of this article, desire and pleasure. Therefore, the epistemology of the locker room is an archival practice of glancing across sources, outside of official categorization. Here, this takes the form of a memoir by an extremely famous bodybuilder, a pulp novel cashing in on the bodybuilding craze, a fitness pamphlet from years earlier, and a set of personal photo albums. The archival research that informs this article is thus as much actual archival work as it is a speculative and lateral construction of an archive.

In contrast to Jan Todd's intention of establishing the factual, my project carries with the speculative, subjunctive, and conditional. Thus, though it may seem to focus on an archive of majoritarian bodies (white, male, normative), the queer method of the locker room is aligned to historical projects that focus on minoritarian subjects, such as Melissa Blanco Borelli's *She is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body* and Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. These scholars explore the potentiality of the speculative in these works as a means of 'materializing subaltern subjects.'⁶ Blanco Borelli suggests that the history of the *mulata*, a figure marginalized from the official history of the Cuban nation, requires the historian to work with rumour and gossip; forms of discourse that do not neatly fit into existing categories of evidence. Lowe, in a different way, theorizes 'past conditional temporality', 'a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science and also the matters absent, entangled, and unavailable by its methods.'⁷ Prompted by such projects, I see the epistemology of the locker room as a performance

⁶ Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), p. 27.

⁷ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 40-41.

studies intervention into archival method, complementary to the larger project of physical culture historiography. My assembled archive thus consists in large part of memoir and autobiographical writing, attending to gaps and silences. What if, like a glance in the locker room, we were to speculate that such silences were not lacking but full of potentiality, pleasure, and desire?

This article first compares the spatial logics of the closet and the locker room, drawing on research into the locker room as a homosocial (and homophobic) space, as well as a space of gay desire. I then demonstrate how the history of physical culture has been conceived of largely via the logic of the closet, before ‘cruising’ through a series of examples from the archive to argue that the indeterminacy of desire in the locker rooms enables us to think about the way exceptional and extraordinary performing bodies invented new modes of queer sociality, pleasure, and relation.

Spatializing Sexuality

The locker room, like the closet, is both a material space and a psychic/metaphorical one. In her book, *Epistemology of the Closet* (from which this article obviously draws its title), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls closeted-ness ‘a speech act initiated by a performance of silence’.⁸ The closet exists as a rhetorical marker of the intersection of what Foucault called ‘power/knowledge’, in other words, the hiding/silencing of homosexual desire, marks, for Sedgwick, the process by which the gender of subject’s sexual object choice emerged as ‘the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of “sexual orientation.”’⁹ In her analysis of a set of literary texts from the nineteenth century Sedgwick argues that the homosexual/heterosexual binary, extending through other binaries of private/public and secrecy/disclosure, comes to constitute ‘modern cultural organization’ through other pairings including masculine/feminine, majority/minority, and art/kitsch.¹⁰ Thus, it is not only gay lives for which being in or out of closet, as an evidentiary marker of one’s sexual object choice, is a structuring feature. Geographer Michael P. Brown extends Sedgwick’s analysis to consider the spatiality of the closet; not just its function as metaphor of power/knowledge but the ‘social relations by which that power/knowledge gets materialised in the world’.¹¹ In

⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 3.

⁹ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 8, emphasis in original.

¹⁰ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 72.

¹¹ Michael P. Brown, *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 2-3.

other words, the concrete spatiality of the closet (confining, hiding) ‘is a material production of heterosexism’.¹² From a different perspective, Danielle Bobker traces the material space of the closet to early modern England. In elite houses, the closet was ‘generally the last and only locked room in an elite apartment designed in an enfilade—a sequence of connected rooms’, and thus ‘a unique space of guaranteed privacy’.¹³ In this way, the connection of the early modern closet as a space of private knowledge can be connected to the twentieth century spatial metaphor of ‘queer secrecy.’¹⁴ The closet’s spatial logic arouses a mode of reading akin to that of the detective’s work; as Ofield writes, ‘[h]istorians, theorists, and psychoanalysts collect evidence, interpret clues, make inferences and work toward a *clear and explicit* view of what is only suspected’.¹⁵ We might call this, following Sedgwick, a form of ‘paranoid reading’, a critical stance that ‘places its faith in exposure’ as if ‘its work would be truly accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known’.¹⁶ The paranoid reading is about making visible what was hitherto concealed, and while ‘outing’ typically has violent connotations, in historical work we might see this kind of focus on visibility in what Danielle Clarke calls the method of LGBT+ historical ‘recovery’, that is, ‘the process of locating and positioning those subjects that had traditionally been excluded from the purview of traditional history, literary, or otherwise, both by the cultural assumptions governing the creation of the archive and by discourses of history as laid down in the 19th century’.¹⁷

If the closet is spatially defined by enclosure, restriction, and privacy, the locker room’s spatial qualities are very different. Placed at the end far end of gymnasiums, locker rooms are public spaces segregated by gender. They are open spaces internally regulated by benches and walls of lockers for personal belongings. They are divided between ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ areas, with the showers (either private cubicles or open) and sauna/steam room separated from the changing area. What we might call the locker room proper, the changing area, is the liminal space between the nudity of the shower and the clothed space of the gym floor. As metaphorical space, the locker room’s single-gendered space of partial public exposure indexes both homosociality and homoeroticism.

¹² Brown, *Closet Space*, 56.

¹³ Danielle Bobker, ‘Coming Out: Closet Rhetoric and Media Publics’, *History of the Present*, 5: 1 (2015), pp. 31-64 (p. 34).

¹⁴ Bobker, ‘Coming Out’, 38.

¹⁵ Ofield, ‘Cruising the Archive’, 362.

¹⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 138.

¹⁷ Danielle Clarke, ‘Finding the Subject: Queering the Archive’, *Feminist Theory*, 5: 1 (2004), pp. 79–83 (p. 79).

The homosociality of the locker room is accompanied by misogyny and homophobia. Take for example, the rhetorical dismissal of the then presidential candidate Donald Trump's misogynistic comments ('Grab them by the pussy') as 'locker room talk', which emerged a few months before the 2016 US election.¹⁸ The idea of 'locker room talk' as sexist and homophobic discourse and behaviour is confirmed by a number of empirical studies in the sociology of sport, which find that the competitive nature of male bonding in such spaces promoted conversations that 'affirmed a traditional masculinity'.¹⁹ Timothy Jon Curry notes that while locker room talk was by no means ubiquitous, in his study of two major Division 1 universities 'no one ever publicly challenged the dominant sexism and homophobia of the locker room'.²⁰ As in Sedgwick's theorization of the eighteenth and nineteenth century English novel, in which she argues that we see desire between men performed 'in and through the bodies of females', which is to say, homosocial desire is re-routed through heterosexuality, one might argue that misogynistic and homophobic male bonding in the locker room is an attempt to disavow the overt homoeroticism of the space. Meredith Worthen, for instance, finds 'homophobic masculinity' is 'pervasive in contexts where men share close proximity with other men and feel the need to prove that they are heterosexual, as in the case of both male athletes and fraternity members.'²¹ Gay athletes often stay in the closet throughout their active careers, sometimes citing the perception of the 'myth that links homosexuality to predatory sexual behaviour' and the awkwardness this might prompt in the locker room.²² The possibility of sex turns the locker room into a closet.

However, it is also true that the locker room is also a space of male-male sexual encounter, both in fantasy and reality. Brian Pronger notes that in gay pornography with the very common athletic or sports theme, the allure is based on the reversal of the mythic gender

¹⁸ Daniel Victor, "'Access Hollywood' Reminds Trump: "The Tape is Very Real'", *New York Times*, 28 November 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/28/us/politics/donald-trump-tape.html>.

¹⁹ Timothy Jon Curry, 'Fraternal Bonding in the Locker Room: A Profeminist Analysis of Talk about Competition and Women', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 8: 2 (1991), pp. 119-135 (p. 133), see also Elizabeth Cavalier, 'Men at Sport: Gay Men's Experiences of the Sport Workplace', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58: 5 (2011), pp. 626-646; Donn Short, 'The Informal Regulation of Gender: Fear and Loathing in the Locker Room', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 16:2 (2007), pp. 183-186; M.R. Gregory, 'Inside the locker room: male homosociability in the advertising industry', *Gender Work and Organization*, 16: 3 (2009), pp. 323-47; and Gordon Waitt, 'Gay Games: Performing 'community' out from the closet of the locker room', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 4:2 (2003), pp. 167-183.

²⁰ Curry, 'Fraternal Bonding', 133.

²¹ Meredith G.F. Worthen, 'Blaming the Jocks and the Greeks?: Exploring Collegiate Athletes' and Fraternity/Sorority Members' Attitudes Toward LGBT Individuals', *Journal of College Student Development*, 55: 2 (2014), pp. 168-195 (p. 185), see also Gordon Waitt, 'Gay Games: Performing 'community' out from the closet of the locker room', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 4:2 (2003), pp. 167-183.

²² Cavalier, 'Men at Sport', 639.

role of the active (penetrating) subject, in other words, that the desiring subject might himself be made the object of desire.²³ In such films, where an ostensibly straight situation turns out to be gay', the locker room is a kind of public closet where gay desires can be 'outed'.²⁴ 'This fantasy', he writes, 'reflects in many ways the ironic experience of coming out; until that revelation, one seems to be straight'.²⁵ The allure of the locker room for gay men is that, publicly at least, it is meant to be 'straight' space, which is confirmed by the uses of mainstream locker rooms as spaces for cruising activities, as well as the scenographic replication of the quotidian and functional space of the locker room in the erotically functional space of the gay bathhouse.²⁶ As John Donald Gustav-Wrathall argues in his queer history of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the ostensibly innocent purpose of the Y's gyms, pools, and locker rooms meant that the all-male organizations were free from staff and police supervision, and therefore became magnets for same-sex relations.²⁷

These readings of the locker room, to some degree, rely on closet logic. That is, the homosocial desire of the locker room signals *either* (a) heterosexual male bonding reliant upon the commodification of women and verbal or physical violence towards homosexual, non-hegemonically masculine men, *or* (b) a place of secret sexual fantasy where purported straightness hides the desire for physical contact with other men. That both readings can be true at the same time does not mitigate the either/or binary of the closet reliant upon the confirmation or assignation of homo- or hetero-sexuality. But another way of thinking about the sexual spatiality of the locker room is to turn away from genital sexual contact and to consider the performance of *desire*. There is no doubt that actual sex happens in locker rooms, but unlike the fantasy, this is usually in rooms away from the public arena – lockable shower cubicles, the steam room, the sauna, in other words, the closets adjacent to the locker room's homosocial agora. Within the *public* space of the locker room, another form of sexual choreography takes place, not unlike the choreography of glances in *Top Gun*. As Alvarez

²³ Brian Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 145.

²⁴ Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity*, 146.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Erick Alvarez, *Muscle Boys: Gay Gym Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 247-274; Michael Reece and Brian Dodge, 'Exploring the physical, mental and social well-being of gay and bisexual men who cruise for sex on a college campus', *Journal of Homosexuality* 46, no. 1-2 (2004), pp. 111-136; Michael Reece and Brian Dodge, 'Exploring indicators of sexual compulsivity among men who cruise for sex on campus', *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 11, no. 3 (2004), pp. 87-113; Brett Beemyn, 'The Geography of Same-Sex Desire: Cruising Men in Washington, DC in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *Left History* 9:2 (2004), pp. 141-159.

²⁷ John Donald Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand: Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 15.

notes, the majority of sexual acts in locker rooms are voyeurism and exhibitionism (the dynamic of ‘watching-and-being-watched’).²⁸ These sexual acts, according to his informants, tip-toed over lines of sexual identity; two percent (over 100 individuals) of Alvarez’s survey informants who had engaged in some form of sexual voyeurism and exhibitionism with other men identified as heterosexual. But in another sense, the sexual ambiguity of the glance defines the locker room’s epistemology. In plainer terms, it is difficult to confirm the *intention* of the glance, whether the desire indexed by the glance is for homosocial bonding or something more, without the confirmation of physical contact. But physical contact alone, as in the history of sex between straight-identified white men documented by Jane Ward, does not confirm the nature or intention of a man’s desire, let alone, his sexual identity, and the absence of physical contact confirms nothing.²⁹ One might, as Pronger does, point to erections as ‘a prominent testament to one’s desires’.³⁰ However, as professional wrestler John Cena says, a hard-on is just ‘what the body does’.³¹ This is not to say that the hard-on is stupid, though it is certainly non-verbal, or at least speaks to another, affective form of knowledge *qua* arousal, a point I will develop later, in a different way, in my analysis of photos of Muscle Beach. A hard-on might confirm the body’s desires, but it says little about how the subject conceptualises such arousal. The erect penis signifies multiply – as taboo, site of shame, or seductive come-on – it is a corporeal fact, but not a piece of evidence. The epistemology of the locker room might therefore be defined as the in-between space between public identity and private acts.

The locker room has never been an innocent space. The epistemology of the locker room suggests the co-constitution of queer desire and normative heterosexuality. Extended to historical research on physical culture and sport, the epistemology of the locker room restores queer desire to the archive, not as its subtext, but as intention and possibility.

Queer Archives and Physical Culture History

Considering its stock-in-trade was the bared male body onstage and in print, sex is surprisingly closeted in physical culture history. I have previously explored the direct link between the Victorian fascination with classical Greek and Roman statuary (particularly after

²⁸ Alvarez, *Muscle Boys*, 260.

²⁹ Jane Ward, *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men* (New York: NYU Press, 2015).

³⁰ Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity*, 199.

³¹ Gary Stonehouse, ‘Hustle, Loyalty, Erect: WWE superstar John Cena confesses he got an “accidental boner” while wrestling’, *The Sun*, 17 June 2019, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/wwe/9289540/wwe-john-cena-erection/>.

the display of plaster casts of these works at the Crystal Palace, Sydenham, London in 1854) and the adoption of classical poses in the *tableaux vivants* of physical culturists such as Eugen Sandow.³² The presentation of physical culturists' bared bodies enabled a vaguely scientific contemplation of their muscular development, at the same time as said development was being marked as desirable as well as achievable (so long as one purchased the mail-order physical culture programmes from the man onstage). But as I have already noted, the intention of desire can be ambiguous, and the line between desiring to *be* the body onstage (or in the photograph) and to *have* that body is blurry. According to Michael Anton Budd, physical culture media and performance 'encouraged the growth of a male community that could both enjoy viewing male bodies and improve their own physiques', which meant that even in the nineteenth century there was a 'cultural disavowal' of erotic desire.³³

Homoeroticism and its disavowal have characterised the historiography of physical culture ever since. Mainstream sport history relegates sexuality to a footnote. John D. Fair's comprehensive history of male bodybuilding, *Mr. America*, mentions sexuality five times across 457 pages: first, in a discussion of the sexual practices of Ancient Greece and their influence on the muscular physical ideal; each subsequent time in relation to accusations of morality related to the internal politics of the sport.³⁴ A similar framing is present in Dimitris Liokaftos's *A Genealogy of Male Bodybuilding*, where sexuality appears in the archive only in accusations of 'indecenty'.³⁵ Both Fair and Liokaftos note how physical culture media invited the possibility of gay readings. However, the actual subject of queer desire is absent. Bodybuilder Bob Paris, the first professional athlete in any sport to come out as openly gay, is mentioned several times across Fair's book, but his sexuality is never referenced. This coyness conceals physical culture's queer history in the closet of plausible deniability; in a sense, Fair and Liokaftos's historical focus on the truth claims of the sport itself, that is, the late-nineteenth century appropriation of the Classical Greek virtue of *arete*, reproduce the public disavowals from physical culture institutions that performances of display and unveiling could have anything to do with sex. As with such disavowals in the nineteenth century, though, the insistence on purity 'itself demonstrate[s] some knowledge or belief in

³² Broderick D.V. Chow, 'Sculpting Masculinities in 19th- and 20th-Century Physical Culture: The Practiced Life of Stanley Rothwell', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 63: 2 (2019), pp. 34-56 (p. 39).

³³ Michael Anton Budd, *The Sculpture Machine: Physical Culture and Body Politics in the Age of Empire* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), p. 77.

³⁴ John D. Fair, *Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), pp. 9-10, 25-27, 129, 136.

³⁵ Dimitris Liokaftos, *A Genealogy of Male Bodybuilding: From Classical to Freaky* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 74-77.

[the nude male body's] potentially impure reception'.³⁶ Because this 'straight' history of physical culture has little proof of queer sexuality, the built body is automatically associated with heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity, and interpretations of the practice of building the body often read it as a technology for producing compliance to gendered norms.³⁷

A second historical approach typically located outside of sport and physical culture history, in disciplines such as gay and lesbian studies, media studies, and visual sociology, makes centres sexuality and attempts to make visible gay life and lives in the archive.³⁸ Such research points to an almost symbiotic relationship between avowedly straight (or non-sexual) physical culture media and gay photographers such as Lon of New York and Bob Mizer, founder of *Athletic Model Guild* and *Physique Pictorial*, as well as gay audiences. F. Valentine Hooven III writes, 'Without presenting anything overtly homosexual, each issue [of *Physical Culture*] was so clearly designed by and for gay men it was obvious to even the youngest and most inexperienced of them'.³⁹ This historical method is akin to detective work, searching for clues in the literal back pages of physical culture magazines.⁴⁰

These historical tendencies both problematically leave the homo/heterosexual definition firmly in place. This has significant implications for the study of physical culture and sport in the present. Whether we consider the mainstream narrative of physical culture as strictly embodied practice or a site for the formation and circulation of gay desire, physical culture is marked *first* as a straight discipline or practice, and its association with queerness, specifically male homosexuality, the exception. This is correlative to Sedgwick's deconstruction of the homo/heterosexual binary, which, she argues, is not a 'symmetrical binary opposition' at all, because 'the ontologically valorized term [heterosexuality] actually depends on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of [homosexuality]'.⁴¹ Such historical closet-logic, I argue, forms a barrier to fully understanding the practice because its homoerotics are *a priori* considered a contradiction, or to use Pronger's term, a paradox.

³⁶ Budd, *The Sculpture Machine*, 71.

³⁷ See Jennifer Smith Maguire, *Fit for Consumption: Sociology and the Business of Fitness* (London: Routledge, 2007); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: OUP, 2011).

³⁸ Tim Benzie (2000): 'Judy Garland at the Gym—gay magazines and gay bodybuilding', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* (2000), 14:2, pp. 159-170; David K. Johnson, 'Physique Pioneers: the Politics of 1960s Gay Consumer Culture', *Journal of Social History*, 43: 4 (2010), pp. 867-892; David K. Johnson, *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

³⁹ F. Valentine Hooven, *Beefcake* (Cologne: Taschen, 2002), p. 72.

⁴⁰ Kenneth R. Krauss, *Male Beauty: Postwar Masculinity in Theater, Film, and Physique Magazines* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), p. 210-213.

⁴¹ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 9.

For example, we might consider the long-standing historical connection between the practice of bodybuilding and sex work. It has long been an open secret that many bodybuilders are also sex workers, a practice which can be traced back to Eugen Sandow's 'private exhibitions' for both men and women in the early twentieth century.⁴² The only study of the sport to treat the phenomenon in depth is Alan M. Klein's ethnography, *Little Big Men*. Klein's interlocutors call it 'hustling', and while most note the economic rationale, others note that it serves 'psychological needs', a satisfaction of feeling 'appreciated.'⁴³ Klein analyses the data to diagnose bodybuilders who engage in sex work as 'narcissistic', and notes that the contradiction between the public performance of hypermasculinity (*a priori* marked as straight) and private acts of homosexual contact creates a pathological psychology. Klein's use of Freudian theories of gender and sexuality and spatial psychological metaphors (compartmentalization) to analyse the data reinforces the logic of the closet. Like a closet door, the social-psychological reading forecloses other readings by focusing on the intentions of the actors involved and seeking to concretize a schema of identity accordingly.

In contrast, we might look at how sex work, hustling, or sponsorship appears in what might superficially appear to be an extremely unreliable piece of evidence, bodybuilder, actor, and politician Arnold Schwarzenegger's early memoir *Education of a Bodybuilder*. Schwarzenegger describes being invited to Munich by one of the judges of the Mr. Europe Junior contest, which Schwarzenegger had won in 1965. The judge, whom he calls Schneck, offers Schwarzenegger work managing a gym, enabling him to train for the Mr. Universe contest in London. It soon transpires that Schneck has other intentions. He invites Schwarzenegger to stay in his home, where the bodybuilder is given his own room. The room does not have a bed, but Schneck promises that one has been ordered. 'It never arrived, of course,' Schwarzenegger writes, 'and he finally suggested that I should sleep in his bedroom. I got the message. It went up my spine like a sudden chill.'⁴⁴ As Schwarzenegger packs his things and leaves the house, Schneck tells him that he has sponsored other bodybuilders, who now own their own gymnasiums, and promises him that he will finance him while he trains, sending him to America to train with the greats. Schwarzenegger comes back inside with Schneck: 'I thought about it. I actually considered it, which was not so astonishing. Schneck

⁴² See John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), p. 57.

⁴³ Alan M. Klein, *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), p. 197; p. 202.

⁴⁴ Arnold Schwarzenegger with Douglas Kent Hall, *Arnold: The Education of a Bodybuilder* (London: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 41.

was a pro. He knew how to manipulate young guys with their heads full of dreams.’⁴⁵ Eventually he rejects the offer. ‘I realized I would get everything he promised eventually if I just kept pushing myself. I wanted to do it with dignity.’⁴⁶

In many ways, Schwarzenegger’s account of Schneck is the same picture of straight, masculine bodybuilders and parasitic gay men that Klein’s interlocutors paint. Ellexis Boyle argues that the account of Schneck and rejection of his offer is in line with such self-presentation, enabling Schwarzenegger to position himself as hyper-heterosexual within a marginal, homoerotic sport and create a self-made persona in line with broader ideas of American masculinity.⁴⁷ At the same time, the reader might be struck by the brief, glanced over fact that Schwarzenegger and Schneck continued working together for many years, until Schneck sells the gym to his protege. While it is at first ‘a strain’, Schwarzenegger adds that ‘we did finally become friends much later, when I no longer needed him for anything.’⁴⁸ The nature of this friendship, or how it arises, is merely glanced over, but the absent detail provokes new questions. If bodybuilding, according to the analyses of Klein and Boyle is de facto the *rejection* of non-orthodox traits of masculinity (i.e., homosexuality), which often manifests as homophobia, what accounts for the friendship between Schneck and Schwarzenegger, even after the rejected advance? We cannot *know*, with any certainty. But the fact that Schwarzenegger has left in such a detail in his narrative self-construction suggests alternative possibilities. What is *glanced over* is itself a form of evidence, but not proof. My point, therefore, is not to *imply* anything about Schwarzenegger’s veracity in recalling this encounter, his sexuality, his gender identity. Rather, the queer glance at the archive – like an eye cast over a dropping towel in the locker room – enables a possible reading of male-male sex work as a queer practice outside or perhaps adjacent to pre-existing categories of sexuality. Indeed, while hustling may be a contradictory practice driven by economic need that causes considerable anxiety for participants, its long history in the archive from Sandow onwards, might be read instead as encounters of bodies that complicate both the nature of orthodox heterosexual masculinity and its association with the muscular male body. The logic of the closet obscures an alternative relationality, the ambiguous knowledge of the locker room in looking, being looked at, and sometimes touching.

⁴⁵ Schwarzenegger, *Education*, 42.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Ellexis Boyle, ‘Marketing muscular masculinity in *Arnold: the education of a bodybuilder*’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 19:2 (2010), pp. 153-166.

⁴⁸ Schwarzenegger, *Education*, 42.

Cruising the Archival Locker Room

I now turn to some further examples from the physical culture archive to demonstrate the epistemology of the locker room as method. I have written about all these examples previously and I now revisit them in a different way, weaving a story about absences, relations, and possibility. All of these examples date from the late-nineteenth century to the immediate post-war period, but I do not consider them chronologically, instead glancing across them like the camera's gaze in *Top Gun*'s locker room.

Let's start at the end, chronologically speaking, with the mid-century pulp novel *Muscle Boy* (1958), by Bud Clifton, the *nom de plume* of American writer David Stacton. *Muscle Boy*, on first glance, would seem to be a salacious exposé of the culture of sponsorship, hustling, gay photographer/pornographers, and 'straight' athletes that I have described in the previous section. In the novel, a bodybuilding teen, Jerry, meets a notorious photographer named Ray, and his crew of bodybuilders, clients, girlfriends, and other 'strange characters'.⁴⁹ The novel takes place in Oakland, California, but specifically references Muscle Beach ('Of course Muscle Beach is just a strip of white sand in Santa Monica, but it's also a country of its own, and while the folklore may not be printable, there's a lot of it').⁵⁰ Ray is a thinly disguised stand-in for Bob Mizer and his mail order business of photographs – just suggestive and explicit enough to get around censorship laws – parallels Mizer's Athletic Model Guild (AMG). As Jerry gets more and more involved with Ray and his crew, he discovers that they are involved in sadomasochistic performances that are filmed and sold. During one such performance, a client of Ray's, the painter Reveille, is accidentally killed. To stop Jerry from going to the police, the bodybuilders remind him of the photos and film Ray has taken of him (the nature of these images is never revealed). In the end, various members of the crew are arrested, and Jerry goes back to wholesome relationship with his girlfriend Sally, while continuing bodybuilding and 'posing for a little cash now and then'.⁵¹

What is interesting from a locker room reading is not merely the content of the novel but the literary aesthetics of the open secret. Though the back cover proclaims 'What you've heard about in whispers is frankly, startlingly revealed in *Muscle Boy*, a novel that bares the naked truth about the Beefcake Kings', this is not true.⁵² Clifton merely alludes to sexuality, winking at it, averting his eye at the crucial moment. The sordid nature of Ray's business is

⁴⁹ Bud Clifton, *Muscle Boy* (New York: Ace Books), Kindle Edition, back cover.

⁵⁰ Clifton, *Muscle Boy*, loc. 1086.

⁵¹ Clifton, *Muscle Boy*, loc. 2088.

⁵² Clifton, *Muscle Boy*, back cover.

only partially revealed: '[Ray] specialized in the real young ones. These days they sold better. Of course they were in the *racket* because they got a *funny kick out of it*. But pretending they were in it strictly for the cash gave them an excuse and made them feel better'.⁵³ The term 'racket' implies an illicit enterprise, which the reader infers because of the genre and nature of the pulp novel. But the word 'funny' here works its way across a network of synonyms from strange to abnormal to finally land on queer; suggesting a kind of queer pleasure that is not fully understood by the participants. This is reinforced by Jerry's own feelings about bodybuilding and weightlifting: 'It was something he liked to do. Sometimes he didn't understand why any better than his parents did'.⁵⁴ While the reader has presumed throughout that Ray produces pornographic images, it is only confirmed later in the novel. Even here, the sexuality of the pornography is shrouded by what Richard T. Kelly calls Clifton's fondness for 'authorial apercu':⁵⁵ 'It was a straight sex film, and the sexes weren't mixed'.⁵⁶ Clifton's wordplay forefronts the queer desire of the reader, their own desire for confirmation of the (sexual) intent of the other. This desire will ultimately be frustrated: the only genital sexual contact in the novel is a heterosexual scene between Jerry and the girlfriend of one of Ray's bodybuilders, Sheila, and is (non)described in efficient, hard-boiled prose that leaves the act disembodied, empty.

The novel concludes with the crew performing a physical culture exhibition at a local auditorium, while dealing with the fallout from the accidental death of Reveille. Here, Clifton alludes to two audiences, or two ways of watching the show: 'It was [Jerry's] first big appearance, and the mags had built him up quite an audience. Ray's faked negatives had built him up still another one'.⁵⁷ In a similar way, the novel as a whole presumes two ways of reading – innocent or complicit – but only works as a text by presuming complicit knowledge on the part of the reader. If, as Johnson suggests, physical culture was *not* a closeted space in the twentieth century, but one where the place of queer desire was being actively debated (and, by the mainstream, actively refuted), then the reader's desire begins to mimic the queer glances in the locker room, curiously seeking intention, even if it may never be confirmed.⁵⁸ At the same time, the *performance* of queer desire in the novel seeks an audience whose knowledge or intention, by definition, cannot be confirmed.

⁵³ Clifton, *Muscle Boy*, loc. 363, emphasis added.

⁵⁴ Clifton, *Muscle Boy*, loc. 38.

⁵⁵ Richard T. Kelly, 'David Stacton: The Method Man', *The Guardian*, 26 January 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/26/david-stacton-method-man>.

⁵⁶ Clifton, *Muscle Boy*, loc. 962.

⁵⁷ Clifton, *Muscle Boy*, loc. 1827.

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Buying Gay*.

Across the gap of history, the epistemology of the locker room might seek these absences, where intention is neither confirmed nor denied, as rich sites of knowledge. One example of this is a ‘primal scene’ in the biography of Estonian-born wrestler, strongman, and physical culturist George Hackenschmidt (1877-1968), his training in the St. Petersburg mansion of wealthy bachelor Dr Vladislav von Krajewski. Hackenschmidt writes about this in his unpublished autobiography, *The Russian Lion*, as well as his training manual *The Way to Live in Health and Physical Fitness* (1908). At the age of 17, Hackenschmidt goes with his friend Kalde to visit Krajewski, who was known for organizing ‘a private club of men of fashion who came to him weekly and worked hard with weights and dumb-bells and practiced wrestling’.⁵⁹ Krajewski asks Hackenschmidt to strip and ‘examines’ him. He is impressed. ‘I can offer you a room and meals but no money’, he tells Hackenschmidt. ‘If you care to accept this, in three months time you’ll be the strongest man in the world’.⁶⁰

At this point, in both *The Way to Live* and *The Russian Lion*, details of what transpires in the mansion are scant. We know that Hackenschmidt and Krajewski would bathe together daily, after which they would ‘practice ... weight lifting till we got dry’.⁶¹ We know that in the evenings sometimes strongmen and wrestlers would perform private ‘exhibitions of their art’ while being ‘carefully examined, measured, and weighed’.⁶² And we know that by the time Hackenschmidt left, his strength and muscularity were such that he was undefeated as a wrestler until his match with the American Frank Gotch in 1908. The closeted scene raises the spectre of ‘trade’, that is, the term derived from the English gay argot *Polari*, meaning a straight-identified man who will have sex with a gay man for money or other compensation. Like the relationship between Schwarzenegger and Schneck, the gap in social and economic status between the millionaire doctor and the working-class Hackenschmidt prompts the reader to search for confirmable *intention*, to reduce the relation between the two men to genital sexuality or its absence. But unlike *Muscle Boy*, whose framing as scandalous pulp fiction presumes the complicit knowledge of the reader, or Schwarzenegger’s account of Schneck’s intentions and his own refusal, Hackenschmidt’s presentation of this encounter lingers in a queer ambivalence. The absence of detail does not function as innuendo. But the presence of this gap in what is known, and knowable, in the midst of a text that is

⁵⁹ George Hackenschmidt, *The Way of Live in Health and Physical Fitness* (London: Athletic Publications, 1908), p. 108.

⁶⁰ George Hackenschmidt, *The Russian Lion* (Unpublished Manuscript), The George Hackenschmidt Collection, H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, University of Texas at Austin.

⁶¹ Hackenschmidt, *The Way to Live*, 116.

⁶² Hackenschmidt, *The Way to Live*, 109.

characterised by a surfeit of detail, signals a kind of queer knowledge of the body that cannot be expressed in text.⁶³

Absence signals another form of queer relation in the archive of physical culture, the transformation of the body and the relation between trainer and the trained. In her essay ‘Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body’, experimental novelist and theorist Kathy Acker reflects on her own bodybuilding practice. ‘[W]hen I am in the gym’, she writes, ‘my experience is that I am in a complex and rich world’, and yet, she struggles to put (ordinary) language to bodybuilding.⁶⁴ She suggests that ‘bodybuilding (a language of the body) rejects ordinary language and yet itself constitutes a language, a method for understanding and controlling the physical which in this case is also the self’.⁶⁵ It is therefore not that bodybuilding is without meaning, but rather that its meaning is to ‘meet that which cannot be finally controlled and known: the body’.⁶⁶ Like the hard-on, the pumped bicep, tricep, quadricep is full of meaning but does not speak. Decades before Acker struggled with the language of the body, physical culturists were encountering the same difficulty in putting into words their own transformations. While the stripped, bared male physique was *proof* of physical culture’s efficacy, the transformation narrative was a way of convincing audiences and readers that such results were achievable and desirable, both on stage and in print.⁶⁷ Yet words (or ‘ordinary language’) alone never seem to capture the embodied nature of the training and practice that is the physical culturist’s transformation.

Because the embodied process of transforming, shaping, and sculpting the body seems to resist exposure or explanation, the relationship between trainer and trained becomes a remarkably intimate one, like the keeping of a secret. In addition to Hackenschmidt and Krajewski, relations of mentorship and training run through the physical culture archive. While physical culture history has often focused on the building of the self in relation to industrial transformations (i.e., self-making), a different glance at the archive reveals the importance of these other relations of mentor/mentee, training partner, gym bros, and so on. I argue that these relations are pedagogic but *also* queer, because they resist identification with

⁶³ In my 2015 article, ‘A Professional Body: Remembering, Repeating, and Working Out Masculinities in Fin-de-Siècle Physical Culture’, *Performance Research* 20, no. 5 (2015), pp. 30-41, I note that *The Way to Live* is full of repetitive, quantitative data—recordings of Hackenschmidt’s weight, measurements, and matches fought.

⁶⁴ Kathy Acker, “Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body”, in Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker (eds). *The Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), pp. 20-28 (p. 22).

⁶⁵ Acker, ‘Against Ordinary Language’, 25

⁶⁶ Acker, ‘Against Ordinary Language’, 26.

⁶⁷ I expand at length on the ‘Bodybuilder’s Journey’ narrative in ‘Sculpting Masculinities’ (2019).

normative relations of hetero- and homosexual filiation. They are not marriage, nor parenting, and while they might be marked as friendship, sometimes money also changes hands. They are queer before the possibility of genital sexuality.

The queer relationality of the physical culture archive is demonstrated most obviously by the papers of Abbye ‘Pudgy’ Stockton and her husband Les, two of the founding members of the original Muscle Beach in Santa Monica, California.⁶⁸ From 1934-58, Muscle Beach was home to a large group of male and female athletes who passed their time training in weightlifting, gymnastics, and high-flying adagio and hand-balancing. I argue that Muscle Beach was an experiment in new ways of living, a temporary utopian space with the character of summer holiday, but which nonetheless was sustained for 24 years, persisting in the face of economic depression and the Second World War. Muscle Beach was a queer space because it resisted both economic production (the training of the athletes was spectacle for large audiences on the Santa Monica pier but this was never remunerated in any way, unlike street performance) and heteronormative reproduction (its filiations go beyond marriage and family). It rejected what Elizabeth Freeman calls ‘chrononormative’ temporality, that is, the time of factory and family, and was a space sustained by desire, pleasure, and love.⁶⁹

As I hope will be apparent, my queer glance at Muscle Beach is different in kind from projects that attempt to out the repressed sexual history of the space – like Bud Clifton’s *Muscle Boy*. Throughout the beach’s history, it had been subject to such detective work by journalists and the Santa Monica city council. A 1959 editorial in the *Evening Outlook* dubbed the bodybuilders, weightlifters, and gymnasts ‘sexual athletes and queers’.⁷⁰ Indeed, gay photographer/pornographer Bob Mizer had a studio in Santa Monica and photographed many of Muscle Beach’s regulars, including Ed Holovchik, George Eiferman, and Steve Reeves. Some form of ‘sponsorship’ of the athletes (i.e. sex work) probably did take place. When the gymnastics platform and equipment was finally bulldozed by the city council in 1958, it was a sex crime that motivated the decision: five members of the American Olympic Weightlifting team were accused of statutory rape.⁷¹ Beneath the squeaky-clean, all-American image presented in the images of healthy bodies engaged in spectacular gymnastic displays, a closeted history of sex throbs. Reading the archive via the epistemology of the

⁶⁸ Primary sources in this final section are drawn from the Abbye ‘Pudgy’ and Les Stockton Papers, H.J. Lucher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, University of Texas at Austin.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁷⁰ *Evening Outlook*, June 12, 1959, qtd. in Tolga Ozyurtcu, “Flex Marks the Spot: Histories of Muscle Beach”, PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2014, p. 62.

⁷¹ Ozyurtcu, “Flex Marks the Spot”, 53.

locker room, however, enables us to read what is queer in what we can see – an arousing spectacle of pleasure and invention in bodies in training. Before the question of bodies fitting together in the bedroom, the athletes of Muscle Beach were inventing new ways for bodies to fit together in public.

The same editorial in the *Evening Outlook* continues: ‘The Evening Outlook believes that our beaches should be kept for the use of decent people and not turned over to gymnastic exhibitions which might better be held in private gymnasiums’.⁷² The display of physical culture itself, in other words, seemed abnormal by the mid-century. One reason, potentially, is that the spectacle of the training on the beach seemed already private, in other words, it wasn’t really *for* the gaze of the audience (which, in a sense, was really a glance). As Harold Zinkin writes in his memoir of the beach, ‘The tricks we learned, invented and dreamed about would be tried over and over again until we were able to hold a position for maybe a few seconds, maybe a minute. [...] If we got a few claps we figured it was a good trick. But the applause wasn’t our motivation’.⁷³ Zinkin notes the way the gymnastic practice created a spirit of invention, which felt like a negation of the individual body in favour of collective arousal: ‘I remember how, magically, as participants, we became as close as one body, each of us giving up any independent role we originally felt’.⁷⁴ Pudgy Stockton, in a 1998 videotaped interview, describes performing a trick with a visiting vaudeville artist: ‘He did a handstand, in a high hand to hand on me, and I tell ya, it was just like... [*pause, tuts*] I can’t describe it. It was just like, it was [*pause*] *part of me*’.⁷⁵ As Pudgy says this, a smile crosses her face and her hands reach into the air. We see a pulse of energy as she gropes for the remembered lock-out of the arms, the weight of supporting this man in the air, nearly sixty years earlier. The interviewer, Jan Todd, asks Pudgy if she remembers his name. Pudgy replies: ‘Oh no, I don’t... I don’t remember any of those names’.⁷⁶ Through the fog of memory, Pudgy recalls the embodied experience with clarity and liveliness, even as the formal identities of the participants have long faded. The physical training on the beach, then, might be seen as a practice in which the body becomes open to the presence of multiple others, outside of essentialist categories of (gendered) identity or normative lines of filiation. What the images of Muscle Beach document is a kind of heightened arousal to other bodies:

⁷² *Evening Outlook*, qtd. in Ozyurtcu, “Flex Marks the Spot”, 62.

⁷³ Harold Zinkin (with Bonnie Hearn), *Remembering Muscle Beach* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 1999), p. 33.

⁷⁴ Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*, 14.

⁷⁵ Pudgy Stockton, recorded interview. Courtesy of Stark Center.

⁷⁶ Stockton, interview.

muscles contracting, veins engorging and filling with blood, bodies building new temporary structures upon the support of others. Like a hard-on, the whole production is precarious, and sustained by pleasure and desire.

The queer nature of this embodied practice – like the space between *before* and *after* – resists traditional historiographical practices of evidencing or capture. But it may be glanced at, laterally. We see it in the traces of Pudgy’s own amateur archival work in the collection that has been processed and catalogued by the Stark Center. The photo binders are the original ones that Pudgy used to organize her photos and mementos before her death. Her spidery hand or typewritten captions run across pages, giving the impression of a family album. But the kinship that Pudgy has chosen to preserve goes far beyond her husband Les and her daughter Laura Jeanne. We see image after image of Les Stockton and Bruce Connors, with whom Les had formed a hand-balancing act at UCLA. Two men, supporting each other. And then Les, Bruce, and Pudgy, in multiple combinations – at this point the two-man balancing act had become ‘The Three Aces’.⁷⁷ Three expands into five, as Glenn Sundby and Wayne Long joined, and it became ‘Pudgy and her Boys’.⁷⁸ Just like the bodies organize themselves into a multiplicity of combinations and formations beyond the hetero- or homo-normative couple, so do the names, in the captions that appear in her photo binders: *Pudgy and Les; Pudgy, Bruce, and Les; Les, Bruce, and Pudgy, Les, Bruce and Wayne; Wayne, Bruce, and Pudgy holding Glen; Pudgy, Relna, and Russ*. Or simply, ‘Our gang—about 1946’. The captions perform a kind of affirmative ‘and...and...’ that Félix Guattari has identified as transversality, the cutting-across of category and identity that allows for the emergence of new subjectivities, formations, and assemblages.⁷⁹ Indeed, the Muscle Beach gang has the dynamic of a chosen family, a structure that has a long history in queer communities.⁸⁰

This is not to imply anything about the sexuality of any of the participants of Muscle Beach, even though we have enough evidence that sex probably happened, in various combinations. Rather, I use the archive of Muscle Beach as an example of the potentiality of the epistemology of the locker room. The queer glance as archival practice understands the non-confirmability of the intentions of the other not as a lack of knowledge but as possibility.

⁷⁷ Jan Todd, “The Legacy of Pudgy Stockton”, *Iron Game History*, 2: 1 (1992), pp. 5-7 (p. 6).

⁷⁸ Todd, “Pudgy Stockton”, 6.

⁷⁹ Anja Kanngieser, “. . . And . . . and . . . and . . . The Transversal Politics of Performative Encounters”, *Deleuze Studies*, 6:2 (2012), pp. 265-290.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

In other words, the superficial normativity of the ‘facts’ of physical culture become less important than the feeling of other possibilities. The past thus becomes a repository for queerness as an ideal for the future.

In this article I have attempted to conceptualize the epistemology of the locker room as an alternative approach to queer historical research. In contrast to approaches that attempt to ‘out’ queerness from the closet of history, the locker room’s space of semi-public exposure provides a different way of conceiving sexuality in the archive, because it understands the intention of the other is never fully knowable. Thus, like the glance between two men in towels, a gap in the evidence is refashioned as a, to quote Muñoz, ‘the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality’.⁸¹ This offers a way out of the bind in which queer desire, in physical culture history, is either discounted for lack of proof or read as closeted. The project of queer historiography, in physical culture studies, is important for imagining the future of physical culture, or, in its contemporary term, fitness. As I have argued, the ‘straight history’ of the gym positions queerness in the margins, which understandably leads to the association of men’s fitness with hegemonic and toxic expressions of masculinity. But at its core, fitness is an embodied practice, and the historical and contemporary gym is a site where people can and do form relations, friendships, and bonds with others outside of identitarian categories, through the sharing of this embodied practice. Archival research in physical culture can therefore model an inclusive and just future through a little queering of the past, by acknowledging the gym (and the locker room) as a site of pleasure and desire.

⁸¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The There and Then of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), p. 1.