

Queer Listening: On Love, Danger and Affect

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Abstract

This article started with a curiosity about the intersections of sound, listening and queerness, though not even queer theory at that point. I started to explore it through devising and performing an intimate one-to-one performance piece, which tried to tease out what it could mean to think about “queer” sounds and “queer” listening. As often happens in my practice, the performance became a space where I could bring various unformed and tentative ideas and topics together to work out if and/or how they related to each other. What I found, both through the performance of the piece and the subsequent analysis of its various aspects, were several interesting overlaps, similarities and intersections of sound, listening and queer theory. This text outlines the overlaps between the following areas: queer theory and sounds, queer world-building and sonic world-building, and queer listening. At this stage, I am merely sketching out these intersections and similarities. In the process of mapping out each overlap, I am finding them to be rich and full of further possible exploration and development for both creative work and research. As a starting point, I will outline what I mean when I talk about “queer theory”, and where I think I can sense an overlap with our experiences and understanding of sound and listening.

Queer Theory and Sound

I make no claim to being able to pinpoint an absolute definition of what queer theory is in relation to sounds and listening or otherwise. In fact, as Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan contend in *Queer Theory Now* (2020), queer theory is not one thing it cannot even be said to belong to any one discipline. Queer theory is, they posit, “a lens that emphasises the slipperiness of meaning and the transgression of boundaries and categories.”^[1] It could be argued that queer theory is not something that should be defined and pinned down that any attempt at a definition is in direct opposition to queer theory’s “radical potential [...] to challenge, interrogate, destabilise and subvert.”^[2] Queer theory is something that is constantly moving, shifting, and challenging set ideas, definitions and values. It is, as Patrick Dilley suggests, “mercurial”.^[3] It is exactly in this quality, of queer theory as something that is “troubling fixed notions”, where I can sense an overlap between queer theory and our experiences of sound and listening.^[4]

Like queer theory, sounds are also difficult to pin down. It is hard, if not impossible to contain sounds within walls or in space, as anyone who has ever lived in an apartment with thin walls can testify. In his work *Walled/Unwalled* (2018) artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan explores this particular quality of sound. The video and sound installation, “comprises an interlinking series of narratives derived from legal cases that revolved around evidence that was heard or experienced through walls”.^[5] In the installation, Hamdan tells us of the debate in court with regards to Reeva Steenkamp’s death could the sound of her screams really travel through the closed bathroom door through which she was shot? He examines radio transmissions sent from both sides of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War travelling across physical, political and symbolic walls and he discusses how sound and its ability to travel through walls was used as both weapon and torture technique in the Sednaya prison in Syria. *Walled/Unwalled* highlights how sound is rarely contained within physical structures such as walls structures often built by humans to keep things in, or out. Sounds easily transgress these boundaries, and in doing so they start to challenge ideas and categories such as inner and outer, privacy and exposure calling into question our perceived control of the physical world around us.

In his book *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener* (2011), author and sound artist David Toop writes that sound is “a presence whose location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is transitory. The intangibility of sound is uncanny a phenomenal presence both in the head, at its point of source, and all around”.^[6] Here, Toop touches on the same thing Abu Hamdan explores in *Walled/Unwalled*; that sound is not easily contained within a physical space. He also notes that the same holds true for us sounds travel with the same ease in and out of us our bodies, our minds as it travels through walls. Toop equates the sonic environment to “the world that surrounds us and flows through us, in all its uncertainty.”^[7] Abu Hamdan and Toop show us sounds’ ability to transgress and destabilise. Sound travels through spatial borders and obstacles, and it also travels through *us* moving between the “outside” and our “inside” body and mind with ease, and beyond our control.

In her essay “Falling” (*Unsound/Undead*, 2019) Elana Ikoniadou writes about the song of the Sirens. The Sirens, in Greek myths, are female creatures whose terrible and beautiful songs lure sailors to their death. Ikoniadou uses the sounds/songs of the Sirens to show how sounds can transgress more than just walls, our ears and our inner space.

To follow the Sirens song is to disappear into the abyss. The abyss is at the same time silent and the source of all sound; deathtrap and delight; real yet utterly unattainable. It points to the beyond of music and sound, to that which is inaudible and unknowable and which exists as the hither side of the real. [...] The inhuman sound serves as the overpass between the world of the dead, and the world of the living.^[8]

Ikoniadou's Sirens have weaponised the transgressive and fluid properties of sound. The sound of the Sirens shatters every barrier, transgresses every boundary even the one between the dead and the living. The Sirens' song challenges definitions and destabilises concepts it is both "silent and the source of all sound; deathtrap and delight".^[9] The sound of the Sirens shows us how sound easily bleeds between our neat and tidy categories and definitions. The Sirens' song, argues Ikoniadou, even manages to encompass that which is "inaudible and unknowable".^[10] The story of Odysseus also shows us how powerless we are in the face of the uncontrollable sound of the Sirens the only way to escape is to prop your ears full of beeswax (as Odysseus's crew does) or physically restrain yourself (like Odysseus does by having himself tied to the mast of the ship).^[11]

I have traced here three different contexts that highlight sound's ability to transgress through Abu Hamdan's work, where sounds easily transgress walls and physical obstacles; Toops's *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener*, in which our inner self is just another porous boundary that sounds easily penetrate; and Ikoniadou's Sirens, whose sounds shatter ever boundary, taking us to the abyss and beyond. It is here, in the unruly and transgressive nature of sounds, that I find an overlap between sounds and queer theory. Sounds, like queer theory, also have "radical potential [...] to challenge, interrogate, destabilise and subvert."^[12]

The Thing with Feathers

In this essay, I will discuss my one-to-one interactive performance piece *the thing with feathers* (2023). Through an analysis of various aspects of the piece, I will tease out a few more interesting overlaps and similarities of sounds, listening and queer theory.

the thing with feathers

Performed at Riga Performance Festival (2023)

I am standing in the middle of the room. People sit or stand around the walls of the room, talking quietly, unsure about what is going to happen. Behind me are two old and worn-down armchairs, side-by-side.

I look around the room. I start walking towards you. I look at you and hold out my hand. "Can I tell you a secret?" I ask.

You nod and hesitantly take my hand. You are led towards the chairs, and you sit down. You are very aware of everyone watching. You see two books on the floor: bell hooks's *all about love* and Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West's *Love Letters*.

I sit down in the other chair and lean towards you. I quietly start talking.

Can I tell you a secret?

It is such a lovely secret were it not for the Others, it might be filled to the brim with lovemaking unbelievable, indiscretions incredible. Instead, nothing shall be said but what the Others can safely hear.

Here occurs a terrific gulf millions of things I want to say can't be said. You know why.

Very well. We'll skip all that.

I pause.

Do you know that the blue tit is her favourite bird? they mate for life, you know...

It's all about her, really the lust for her flesh and the lure of her mind... there's this kind of shimmer to reality when she is about.

I smile.

You smile back.

Sailors believe that if they die at sea, a blue tit can carry their soul to heaven. She makes me think of that.

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I can't get her out of my mind; the corner of the room is haunted by her presence; the whole place seems full of her.

If you see a blue tit, it means love is coming to your life, do you know that?

Anyway. Thank you for listening to me.

Pause. I look at you.

Can I show you something else?

You nod.

I hold out my hands, cupped together, and turn my head to listen towards them.

Curious, you lean in and do the same. Suddenly, you can hear birdsong. Very quietly emanating from my cupped hands. So quiet no one else can hear.

But you and me, we hear it clearly.

You smile. There is a little moment of what feels like magic listening to the birdsong coming from someone's hands. It is a shared moment, a collective listening.

You think of the blue tits and the sailors.

The birdsong ends.

I thank you and stand up.

As you start to leave, I slip a small piece of paper into your hand.

You wait to read it until you are back by the wall, when no one is watching. It reads:

"The practice of love offers no place of safety. We risk loss, hurt, pain. We risk being acted upon by forces outside our control."

Queer/Sonic World Building

Do you know that the blue tit is her favourite bird? they mate for life, you know...

The first thing I want to focus on is that in this piece I am engaging in some subjective and quite personal (queer) world-building. In my monologue, I reference blue tits, connecting them to the story of same sex love/lust I am telling the audience member about. At the end, when I play them a snippet of bird song, we both very briefly exist in a world where the sound of birds blue tits have taken on a second meaning. The sound becomes, however briefly, a symbol of queer love.

This is not the only reference in the work to a “hidden” world of queer love and queer lives. The work takes as its inspiration for the monologue letters between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West a relationship between two women that is still routinely referred to as a “friendship” but which most likely was something different, something queer.^[13] The piece references Emily Dickinson and her poem “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” in its title again a woman whose relationships with other women are always referred to as “friendships”.^[14] Bluetits are, in fact, also a queer reference it is one of many bird species whose “homosexual behaviours” have been recorded.^[15]

In their essay “Sex in Public” (1998) Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe queer culture and queer world building in the following way: “Queer culture has found it necessary to develop [...] in drag, youth culture, music, dance, parades, flaunting, and cruising [...] in dance halls, tea rooms and softball leagues; existing, by necessity, hidden yet parasitic, within the dominant heteronormative culture.”^[16]

The performance, with all these ambiguous references to possible queerness, tries to create a fleeting world that exists as something “hidden, yet parasitic” hiding in plain sight within the “dominant heteronormative culture.”^[17] It does this by taking two famous authors with an ambiguous relationship who might or might not be queer, a famous poet who also may or may not be queer, a small species of bird that might have some queer behaviours, all tied precariously together by a short, half-whispered story of female queer lust, or maybe love. The sketchy fleeting world the work traces out sits somewhere between the real and the imaginary, nested within current dominant heteronormative culture.

In her book *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound* (2021), Salomé Voegelin discusses Chris Watson's piece *Whispering in the Leaves* (2010). In this sound installation Watson played the recorded soundscape of the Amazon rainforest on speakers in the Palm House in London's Kew Gardens, a greenhouse that houses plants from the rainforest. Voegelin notes of the experience of listening to Watson's installation that "it is a possible world that opens the idea of space and time to produce places whose actuality wanders and changes, and that depends on the listener to make them real in their plural complexity."^[18] Voegelin's description of experiencing Watson's sound installation highlights how the sound of the Amazon, played over the speakers, does not take over the Palm House, but neither does it get drowned out by the "real" environment of the space. Instead, she notices how it creates another, "possible world", a space where the rainforest and the Palm House co-mingle and create a multitude of ambiguous, fluid spaces alternative worlds *within* the world we are inhabiting.

Voegelin calls these possible sonic worlds "slices" of reality, where the sonic does not open a new world, nor does it negate our "current" reality.^[19] Instead, sound and listening "illuminates the plurality of the world".^[20] It is in these multiple possible "slices" that I sense an overlap with queer theory. A sonic possible world, existing, much like Berlant's and Warner's queer worlds "hidden yet parasitic"^[21] not instead of, or overriding, the dominant reality (visual, sonic and/or heteronormative), but existing within, underneath, alongside. The birdsong in *the thing with feathers* also does not override reality bluetits are still bluetits, and birdsong is still birdsong but for a moment the piece opens up to an alternative sonic/queer "slice" of reality. Like Voegelin points out, it depends on the listener(s) to momentarily make this particular slice of the world real.

Queer/Listening

Curious, you lean in and do the same. Suddenly, you can hear birdsong. Very quietly emanating from my cupped hands. So quiet no one else can hear.

At the end of the performance of *the thing with feathers* I hold out my hands, and, using a hidden speaker, I play some birdsong that I and the audience member listen to together. This moment, I argue, is where a queer listening experience happens in the performance. There are two aspects of this listening experience that I believe make it a "queer" listening.

Firstly, through the preceding monologue of the performance, bluetits, and consequently their song, have taken on a different, queer quality. Both in the sense of queer/same sex love, but also in a broader sense of destabilising and subverting there are now hidden layers and meanings where there was previously just birdsong. As I have already outlined, it is a brief moment of queer and sonic world-building.

Secondly, we are listening to this “queered” birdsong *together* a brief moment of openness, connection and solidarity. In his text *Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres* (2010) Yvon Bonenfant outlines what a queer listening could be: “Queer listening listens out for, reaches toward, the disoriented or differently oriented other [...] Queer is always listening out through the static produced by not-queer emanations of vocalic bodies.”^[22]

Here, queer listening is a listening that listens out *against* the dominant heteronormative soundscape, towards other sounds, other worlds. A listening towards what exists within, underneath and in addition to the dominant (sonic) reality. Through a discussion of Voegelin’s writing on sonic possible worlds, I have already outlined how sound opens up a multitude of possible co-existing realities. Listening, I suggest, becomes queer listening through “listening out for” and “reaching towards” the queer sounds and sonic slices which exist within and underneath the heteronormative noise of the everyday.^[23] Some of these queer sonic worlds we may be able to hear, and some may be as of yet silent and inaccessible to us. Voegelin outlines how sound contains the possibility of multiple alternative slices of reality, both sounding and silent, “the inaudible as the possible impossible, which is what once sounded and still has consequences, which is what sounds now, but we cannot and do not want to hear, but which one day, when we know how to inhabit its environment, becomes the possible and the actual.”^[24]

In her book *Deep Listening: A Composers Sound Practice* (2005), sound artist and composer Pauline Oliveros highlights how listening is something we can cultivate,^[25] a skill that constantly changes and evolves, where “[t]here are many ways of listening to be discovered and explored”.^[26] In my view, queer listening is exactly this a developing, changing listening, a sensitivity we can cultivate. Attuning ourselves to a queer way of listening might mean that what we are unable to hear now, may, with careful attention and training of our sensitivity, change from the unheard to “the possible and the actual”.^[27]

Voegelin contextualises and discusses the sonic “possible impossible” through discussing the sound of unicorns. Unicorns are imaginary, mythical creatures yet we all have a similar idea of what they are and what they look like. We could, therefore, also imagine they have/make a sound although what that sound is would be open for debate. The imaginary sound of unicorns “triggers an imagination. It sounds at the critical edge of audibility, hinting at an inexhaustible depth of inaudibility beneath and behind everything we hear”.^[28] A queer listening allows us to listen out for the sound of unicorns, listen towards the “inexhaustible depth of inaudibility”.^[29]

Queer listening is a listening we can develop and hone over time. It is a listening where we constantly listen out for the inaudible, the impossible, the silent. It is a listening that stays open to the multitude of possible (sonic) “slices” of the world. It is a listening that pays particular attention to the unruly sounds the ones who transgress boundaries, sounds with the “radical potential [...] to challenge, interrogate, destabilise and subvert.”^[30] I sense, in this queer listening, the possibility to listen for other, perhaps as of yet unheard, possible queer pasts, presents and futures.

Queer Sounds, Listening and Affect Theory

“a shared moment, a collective listening”

In this article, I have tried to describe a number of interesting overlaps between queer theory and our experiences of sound and listening through an analysis of my intimate performance piece *the thing with feathers*. Starting by highlighting that sound, just like queer theory, can be thought of as both radical and subversive, identifying overlaps between queer and sonic world-building, and finally, considering what a queer listening could be. In this last section of the article, I will outline some potential future areas where this consideration of queer sound and listening might take us.

I have already briefly sketched out how sounds can be both unruly and transgressive. They are slippery and hard to pin down, in space as well as in language. They move through walls, in and out of spaces, in and out of our bodies, our minds. We cannot really control where they go, what they do, or even what we hear. Toop writes in *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener* that “[h]earing allows us access to a less stable world, omni-directional, always in a state

of becoming and receding, known and unknown. This is the world that surrounds us and flows through us, in all its uncertainty.”^[31]

Here I want to tentatively bring together this “less stable world” of listening, Bonenfant’s queer listening and some ideas of affect theory. In particular, I’m interested in what Lisa Blackman outlines as a more open and fluid state of self in her book *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment and Mediation* (2014), where she writes, “[t]he individual was not bounded, but opened out to others, through a more porous and permeable membrane, which might resonate or attune through a coming together of intensities.”^[32]

Instead of imagining us humans as closed-off entities with a solid boundary between our “inner” selves and the “outer” world, affect theory imagines a more fluid, open and porous state of being. Blackman goes on to outline how this openness can be contextualised within sound and listening: “Where hearing might be considered monological, listening is always dialogical and relational, directed towards the other. [...] The other directedness of listening is not simply about instilling or enacting the boundaries of a closed, singular psychological subject. Rather listening implies ‘communicational contact’ even when that contact remains elusive.”^[33]

Listening, considered within the context of the open and permeable state of self, identified within affect theory, becomes dialogical, something that reaches out, “directed towards the other”.^[34] I sense an overlap here with the queer listening outlined by Bonenfant a listening that “listens out for, reaches toward, the disoriented or differently oriented other.”^[35] Queer listening, therefore, is a state of listening where we choose to attune ourselves our open and permeable selves to what could be thought of as certain queer “intensities”. That could be the Other, as Bonenfant points out, but it could also be parasitic sonic queer worlds, and sonic queer pasts, presents and possible futures. Queer listening, imagined within the context of affect, imagines not only a self reaching out towards the Other. It makes possible an opened-up self, which in reaching out also opens up to radical and unruly sounds, the as of yet unheard and the imaginary.

To attune ourselves, through queer listening, to these sounds radical, subversive, and transgressive is not without risk. This risk is also present in the performance of *the thing with feathers*. There is a moment where the audience member reaches towards me the Other. Both physically, by leaning towards me, and through the

openness and the “communicational contact” of the act of listening.^[36] This is a moment of trust and openness, but that openness also raises the question of what I will do, and what will you hear.

This open, porous and dangerous state of (queer) listening brings me, finally, to love. bell hooks tell us that “[t]he practice of love offers no place of safety. We risk loss, hurt, pain. We risk being acted upon by forces outside our control.”^[37]

Listening, as Pauline Oliveros outlines it is something we have control over, something we can develop with practice.^[38] We, to a certain extent, choose who and what we listen to. It might be easier to choose not to open up our listening, to allow ourselves to be open, porous reaching out towards dangerous, radical and queer sounds.

And yet, we do. The audience participants in my piece lean in and open up their listening. We choose to enter into the “dialogical and relational” state of listening, reaching towards the Other.^[39] I would argue that we do so, at least partly, with and through love. In *all about love* (2001) hooks describe how love is a choice. To live according to the “ethics of love” is to extend the idea of love to all parts of our lives, and all the people (and other creatures) we interact with.^[40] Love, hooks points out, should be an action, not a feeling.

Love, just like queer listening, is an act of choice and a matter of practice. Living according to the ethics of love, hooks argues, “presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live life fully and well.”^[41] While there might be a thousand reasons as to why any one of us would choose to open ourselves up to queer our listening, we certainly can learn something about why we should do it through hooks’s practice of love.

Just like love, queer listening also offers no place of safety. A queer listening is a state where we might be “acted upon by forces outside our control”.^[42] We can, despite all the risks of dangerous and unruly (queer) sounds, take our cue from hooks, and learn to approach listening as a radical queer act of openness, generosity and love.

Conclusion

The sketching out of the overlaps and similarities of sound, listening and queer theory has turned out, for me, to be a rich and fruitful area, which I look forward to exploring further. This text acts as an initial mapping of the three areas I identified through an analysis of my performance *the thing with feathers*. Sound and queer theory are both unruly, radical and destabilising, sonic and queer world building which create alternative parasitic slices of the real, and queer listening, that open ourselves up to the Other, the imaginary and the unheard. At the end of this text, I speculatively look outwards, towards other intersections and possibilities. Affect theory adds interesting aspects to queer sound and listening of the interconnected body/mind/world worth exploring further. Oliveros's understanding of listening as a skill we develop, and hooks's exploration of love highlights the importance of agency in the listening process. I have only touched on these intersections in the briefest of outlines towards the end of this writing, but they all suggest areas well worth exploring in greater depth.

I want to conclude with an acknowledgement and a pledge. Queer theory, especially in the context I am discussing it, can quickly become very theoretical. While there is nothing wrong with that, I am conscious to remind myself often that queer theory started as, and should remain, rooted in the many lived experiences and acts of resistance of queer people everywhere. To keep myself on track, I am ending with a quote from Heather Love: "It's just that it is hard for me to imagine a form of queerness that does not also maintain its ties to a specific form of sexual identity. Behind my work on affect, historiography and the social, there is a lesbian in bed crying."^[43]

Footnotes

1. McCann, Hannah and Monaghan, Whitney. *Queer Theory Now*. London: Red Globe Press. 2020. p. 2.
2. Ibid., p. 1.
3. Dille, Patrick. "Queer Theory: Under Construction". *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*. vol. 12. no. 5. p. 467.
4. McCann and Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p. 6.
5. Abu Hamdan, Lawrence. *Walled Unwalled*. 2018. Available at <http://lawrenceabuhamdan.com/#/walled->

unwalled/ (accessed 2024-03-24).

6. Toop, David. *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener*. London: Continuum. 2011. p. xv.
7. Ibid., p. 38.
8. Ikoniadou, Eleni. "Falling". In *Unsound: Undead*. Ed. Steve Goodman, Toby Heys and Eleni Ikoniadou. Falmouth: Urbanomic Publishers. 2019. p. 58.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. McCann and Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p. 1.
13. Bechdel, Alison. "Introduction". In Woolf, Virginia and Sackville-West, Vita. *Love Letters*. London: Penguin Random House. 2021. p. IX.
14. While I do acknowledge that making assumptions and statements about what might seem to us to be same sex relationships in historical settings can be problematic (see Halberstam, Jack. 1998. p. 45), I also think that if these would have been relationships between men and women, they would almost certainly have been assumed to be romantic. (See Dickinson, Emily. "Hope is a thing with feathers". 1951. Available at <https://poetrysociety.org/poetry-in-motion/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers> [accessed 2024-03-24]; and Morrow, Fiona. "The Secret, Daring, and Queer Life of Poet Emily Dickinson". *Montecristo Magazine*. 10 June 2019. Available at <https://montecristomagazine.com/arts/secret-daring-queer-poet-emily-dickinson> [accessed 2024-03-24]).
15. See "List of birds displaying homosexual behavior". Wikipedia. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_birds_displaying_homosexual_behavior (accessed 2024-03-24).
16. Berlant, Laurent and Warner, Michael. "Sex in Public". *Critical Enquiry*. vol. 24. no. 2. p. 561.
17. Ibid.
18. Voegelin, Salomé. *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound*. New York: Bloomsbury. 2021, p. 37.
19. Ibid., p. 58.
20. Ibid., p. 78.
21. Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public", p. 561.

22. Bonenfant, Yvon. "Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres". *Performance Research*. vol. 15. no. 3, p. 78. DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2010.5272102010.
23. Ibid.
24. Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, p. 274.
25. Oliveros, Pauline. *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*. New York: Deep Listening Publications. 2005, p. 1.
26. Ibid., p. 13.
27. Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, p. 274.
28. Ibid., p. 259.
29. Ibid.
30. McCann and Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p. 1.
31. Toop, *Sinister Resonance*, p. 38.
32. Blackman, Lisa. *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation*. London: Sage. 2014. p. 61.
33. Ibid., pp. 139–40.
34. Ibid.
35. Bonenfant, "Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres", p. 78.
36. Blackman, *Immaterial Bodies*, pp. 139–40.
37. hooks, bell. *all about love*. New York: HarperCollins. 2001, p. 153.
38. Oliveros, *Deep Listening*, p. 13.
39. Blackman, *Immaterial Bodies*, pp. 139–40.
40. hooks, *all about love*, p. 87.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., p. 153.
43. McCann and Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, p. 5.

