
I Think We're Alone Now

Dead Malls and the Queerly Unconsummated

ABSTRACT This article examines YouTube videos (primarily distributed by a user named Cecil Robert) that document so-called dead malls: unpopulated, unproductive, but not necessarily demolished consumerist sites that have proliferated in the wake of the 2008 recession. These works link digital images of mall interiors with pop-song remixes so as to re-create the experience of hearing a track while standing within the empty space; manipulating the songs' audio frequencies heightens echo effects and fosters an impression of ghostly dislocation. This article argues that these videos locate a potentiality in abandoned mall spaces for the exploration of queer (non)relations. It suggests that the videos' emphasis on lonely, unconsummated intimacies questions circuitous visions of the public sphere, participatory dynamics online, and the presumably conservative biopolitics (both at its height and in its memorialization) of mall architecture. **KEYWORDS** dead malls, Freddie Mercury, queer, spectrality, YouTube

Traditionally speaking, the US shopping mall is possibly one of the least queer places imaginable. Emerging in the aftermath of World War II, its existence was inseparable from the construction of suburban housing projects, and with them, a strain of social conservatism intent on privatizing shared space, promoting racial segregation, preventing illegitimate sociability, and sacralizing the nuclear family. As Margaret Crawford notes, "Initially, shopping-mall design reinforced the domestic values and physical order of suburbia. Like the suburban house, which rejected the sociability of front porches and sidewalks for private backyards, the malls looked inward, turning their back on the public street."¹ Anne Friedberg goes even further, declaring that malls were designed to expel "urban blights" (homelessness, refuse, crime, traffic, weather) and to hide their mechanisms of security or production in a manner analogous to prison construction or panoptic authoritarianism.² Margaret Kohn, for her part, claims that malls are indicative of the decline of civic participation and intersubjective communion writ large, suggesting that

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they elaborate a fantasy wherein “the home is imagined as a place where the unfamiliar is absent and compromise unnecessary.”³ In the shopping mall’s solidification of racial and class privileges, in its desire to render all public exchange commercial, in its architectural isolation of human activity from less controllable ecologies, it is seemingly inextricable from the failure of a communitarian, cosmopolitan sociality. It is an embodiment of economic privatization, and with it, the ossification of inequality.

A crucial part of these accounts of the mall’s ideological functions is that they all presume its cultural omnipresence: although the Reagan-Bush years have crystallized the mall’s place in popular memory, these structures align with an ongoing infrastructural conservatism in the United States that stretches from Eisenhower-era white flight to Nixonian stagflationist mall construction projects to the Bush Jr. corporate tax cuts. Moreover, despite liberal gaps between each of these eras, the capacity to chart such continuities suggests a certain resilience embedded in the social form of the mall: it inherently registers a vague past-ness amenable to restorative politics, the coalescing of agreed-upon order. Designed to expel the effects of progressive time, there is a certain amount of irony present in the now-evident circumscribed nature of shopping mall culture. The much-discussed Death of the Mall in the wake of several explanatory mechanisms (online shopping and the 2008 recession being the most frequent culprits) has finally provided it with a temporal situated-ness, a periodization traceable by its coincidence with heteronormative family intimacy.

Or has it? On the one hand, the proliferation of vacant, decaying mall structures (often remaining abandoned for several years due to the costs of demolition) across the US Midwest invites inquiry into how these spaces function when they have ceased to be operable, when they can no longer fulfill a vision of normative utopia. On the other hand, the afterlife of these mall spaces underscores a portrait of timelessness that has always imbued them, and suggests that their decay also possesses a long tail, despite the many eulogies their precarity has inspired. Absence and ahistoricity are therefore refigured in the paradoxical persistence of the dead mall. The oft-criticized atomistic effects of these structures in their heyday cease to be a pretext to familial reproductivity, but instead suggest a partial negation, a recognition of loneliness as itself a kind of intimacy.

Perhaps no other media work better captures these slippery dynamics than a series of YouTube videos, uploaded by a user named Cecil Robert, documenting “dead malls” as simultaneously literal and imagined spaces. Robert’s

videos pair still photographs of abandoned mall interiors with pop-song remixes that seek to re-create the experience of hearing a track in a large, empty space accompanied by no other human presence. These works are equally (if not more) invested in positing dead malls as a site for relational investigation as they are in representing an architectural phenomenon. Specifically, this article will argue that Robert's videos illuminate queerly unconsummated relations vis-à-vis dead malls—that they examine not just a connection between intimate and economic non-productivity, but that they illustrate an ambivalent reworking of the mall isolation so despised by progressive social critics.⁴ Put simply, the lonely position evoked by these abandoned mall videos is not in itself queer, but queerness can be glimpsed in their spectral displacement of personhood, of permanent embodiment, of replicative linkages, whether they be hetero-familial or communitarian. This is a queerness wrought through non-efficacious longing; a queerness explicated not so much through same-sex object choice as through questioning received understandings of kinship and erotic life; a queerness that suggests that the mall—a site of hetero-reproduction par excellence—inverts such fecundity and instant gratification at the moment of its obsolescence; a queerness that elaborates intimacies that are not actualizable, and asks how a rhetoric of consummation informs *both* the ideology of mall spaces and the arguments made against them.

This article will draw out several threads within Robert's videos that locate a potentiality in dead mall spaces for the exploration of queer (non)relations. First, the ghostly feeling of abandonment generated through audio distortion and visual stillness permits the spectator to reflect upon a cluster of temporal norms, including the self-evidence of death. Second, the videos' emphasis on lonely, unconsummated intimacies in their spectatorial address—crucially generated through the impersonal vessel of YouTube—questions a participatory public sphere without necessarily rearticulating mall atomization. And finally, the videos operate within a realm of vicariousness and distance that retains mall culture's political ambivalences while also illustrating nonreproductive bonds that are less indebted to consumerist logic. While the contemporary proliferation of abandoned malls has certainly inspired these videos, I will argue that the videos also stage an intervention into these structures that is not innately present in any media work featuring them, nor in the malls as material phenomena. In this sense, this article seeks to foster bonds between the biopolitics of dead mall architecture, the low-fi aesthetic of Robert's videos, and the supposed non-circularity of online video viewing.

elaborating a series of spectral effects that emerge from the videos' attention to withheld bonds, to desires that can never be "complete."

At the same time, I also wish to suspend the continuity of these connections: while the following proposes linkages between queer theories of embodiment and the space of the abandoned mall, it more precisely intends to illustrate a state of unconsummated wandering that has both benefited capitalist replication and provided the means for its interruption. Ghostliness inhabits this space in the gap of window displays, in a plane of existence that is neither refusal nor incorporation—that illuminates not just the exclusions of places like malls, but also the flickers of ambivalent longing that interrogate images of either the mall's ruins or its renewal. I will suggest that the videos reverberate with allusions to what could be called a politics of abandonment. They obliquely demonstrate how a space is never vacated by accident—how all ghosts are themselves markers not of individual lives that have ceased to be, but of visions of collective life that have been left unconsidered.

This article does not suggest that there is inherently anything queer (or feminist) about its objects. However, I think part of the work these videos do is to emphasize *separation* from a scene of intimate satisfaction. They transform an empty mall from a zone of incipient removal/revitalization into a place of suspension—an arena capable of articulating the blocked desire of a marginalized subject. In particular, this article is focused on the imbrication of sexual belonging within gendered and racialized conceptualizations of public space: it therefore understands eroticism never as a category that can be analyzed unto itself, but as an expression that is inseparable from other (often contradictory) modes of embodiment and communality. Hence, I see the article's objects as illustrating structural isolations (but also desires and ecstasies) that are necessarily partial, ephemeral, and compromised, reflecting precarious corporeal conditions and therefore interrupting the decisiveness of normatively masculine embodiment, politics, and history making. Despite the ambivalences of the videos and articles this article describes, this investment in the dissonances and ephemerality that haunt any attempt at static totality is a feminist and queer historical project. This article traces bonds that emerge in the wake of structural vulnerability—the lonely intimacies that are often imperceptible precisely because they question a gendered discourse of evidence.

In keeping with these commitments, this article turns to an example that I feel ties these queer theoretical strands to a specific architectural space—the Rolling Acres Mall in Akron, Ohio—and a specific configuration of queer

vocal relations—the Queen and David Bowie collaboration “Under Pressure” (1982). Although the aesthetic threads of Robert’s videos remain consistent across various examples, with most making use of relatively similar music genres (1970s and 1980s Anglo-American pop and alt-rock) and many mobilizing images of Rolling Acres, I will argue that this particular combination of image and song animates the dead mall space in a manner that exemplifies the videos’ relational dynamics. In other words, this duet filled with contradictions and negations—which I will explore in the article’s third section—reevaluates what counts as a proper, fulfilling intimacy, and extrapolates this mode of inquiry onto a space presumed empty and nonfunctioning. In the juxtaposition of the video’s contradictory, ecstatic song (wrung through frequency manipulation to sound like ambient sound) and its accompanying image’s crisp, HD document of ruins, one can glimpse an ambivalent set of political and spectatorial postures that neither fetishize death nor promise restoration. Instead it all seems to invite a consideration of queerness through paradox and the irresolvable. In this sense, a theoretical and historical figuration of ghostliness simultaneously permits an understanding of the dead mall as an arena that enacts consumerism’s circuitry (the afterlife of such structures often appearing on platforms like YouTube that have replaced it) and as a site for reimagining what it means to be intimate sideways to heteronormativity’s imperatives.⁵

SPECTRAL RELATIONS

Queer spectrality is not a new concept, and there is a rich tradition of queer historiography that mobilizes “the ghost” in political memorialization of trauma to evoke the ways in which non-heteronormative temporalities refute self-evident materialism and its teleological ends. Carla Freccero’s version of this paradigm draws directly upon Jacques Derrida’s spectrality, which she describes as “a mode of historical attentiveness that the living might have to what is not present but somehow appears as a figure or a voice, a ‘non-living present in the living present’ that is no longer or not yet with us.” For Freccero, this way of doing history corresponds to an ethical project that centers residual traces and the continual effects of encounters with the past, rather than attempting to harness them for masterful or commemorating gestures. She also suggests that contending with spectrality can contest discourses of fixed embodiment and revelation that typically accompany efforts to make history legible, useful, or regulated. In her account, the ghost is

a “material immateriality,” less a utopian non-being than a projection whose presence stains all who come near it, in spite of—or perhaps because of—its invisibility. To understand ghostliness, then, is to present “an approach to history—and to justice—that would neither ‘forget the dead’ nor ‘successfully’ mourn them.”⁶ For queer historians, such a rejoinder is especially relevant because of archival barrenness, the rhetorical effects of closeting, and a general suspicion regarding the political boundaries of what could be called a meaningful life, never mind one successfully mourned. The queer historian thus comes upon somewhat of a double bind: How do we ensure that disregarded lives have historical resonance, while not succumbing to temporal paradigms that have been inhospitable to queer ways of life?

One historiographical solution would involve addressing the ways in which bodies are normatively oriented toward progressive fulfilment, while also considering how the writing of history need not be assimilable to such narratives. According to Elizabeth Freeman, such chrono-normativity describes the process by which “the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change. These are teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals.”⁷ Through Freeman’s counter-historiography, ghosts can be understood as bodies that question the self-evidence of corporeal life, but also as figures that establish the political addenda to a biological condition called “death.” In other words, rather than being the final boundary that encloses established selfhood, the queer ghost elaborates the possibility of recurrence, transcendence, or latency as effective historical devices, and it also requires acknowledgment of the linguistic structures that guarantee (or deny) “successful” embodiment.

How, then, can we say that the dead mall is queer? Following from Freeman, one could argue that its queer resonances emerge from its lack of deference toward productive and reproductive temporalities: it has been dethroned from its position as the anchor of commodified relationality and its proxy, the white nuclear family. But this seems overly reductive of both queer historiography and Cecil Robert’s videos: just because an architecture fails to achieve its original purpose does not mean that it becomes politically radical or registers much of an interruption in the field of heterosexual capitalism writ large. Instead of merely indexing a social phenomenon, I argue that these videos inculcate a spectatorial posture that allegorizes loneliness: in this context, queer spectrality is positioned against a historiography of public



FIGURE 1. Johnny Joo, *Rolling Acres Mall*, shot summer 2015.

space that is excessively linear and self-evidently legible. The videos place their spectator in a position outside of time.

Perhaps the most obvious way Robert's videos illuminate these queer historiographical principles is in the fact that they are barely videos at all. Although a multitude of moving-image documents of abandoned malls proliferate on YouTube (and I will examine their spectatorial construction later in this piece), Robert's contributions are composed entirely of still photographs taken by others. These images (especially those by Ohio-based abandoned-places photographers like Johnny Joo and Seph Lawless) are typically staged as grand landscape shots without human subjects (fig. 1). Crisply digital, yet also dependent upon sunlight leaking through crannies in broken roofs and a disarray of detritus, they simultaneously attest to a non-implicated, safe distance *and* messy intimacy, the hierarchical presumptions of mall spaces being leveled and rearranged. They present these environments not as ruins per se, but as sites of leakage and metamorphosis; they illuminate a liveliness that can only emerge after the ceding of the mall's use value. For example, in a photo essay on Rolling Acres, Joo captures how the weight of snow on weakened skylights had caused parts of the mall's ceiling to collapse, resulting in the tranquil displacement of the structure's boundaries, and thereby also its efficacy for human-centered exchange.⁸

I argue that Robert's videos continue this process of reconfiguring elegy and decay, further creating realms of paradoxically distanced togetherness. First, they elaborate spectrality sonically, fostering an imagined space that is evoked by the photographs, but also a specifically aural contradiction of intimacy and separation. Second, they give the photographs duration. In being videos without movement, they elaborate a position of temporal suspension and undecidability. Moreover, not only do the videos elaborate uncoupled intimacies in the spaces between song and photograph or moving and still image, they suggest a kind of ambient authorship. In other words, the videos represent not the complete ceding of individuality, but a kind of non-mutual collaboration among the photographers, the mall space, and Robert.⁹ It is not necessarily easy to track the attribution of these photographs, as Robert's image credits (embedded in the video descriptions) do not always lead directly to the source, but sometimes to listicles or other online repositories. For instance, the provenance of the photograph in the "Under Pressure" video is a still from a *Vice* documentary, but Robert's attached link leads to an article on the Australian entertainment network SBS's website (where the show aired in that country).¹⁰ The photograph's aesthetic choices (which will be examined later in this article) seemingly point to Lawless's or Joo's work, and yet no such credit seems to exist (although Lawless appears in the documentary). These tangled—yet also distant and to some degree unconscious—interactions between creators are foundational to the videos' formal character and accompanying politics. The videos are disinterested in self-evident formulations of what togetherness entails.

The relation between sound and image in the videos is thus neither solely concerned with juxtaposition (fostering deliberate contrast or fragmentation) nor with an attempt to illuminate a quasi-mystical, reparative reading of the empty mall. Instead, I argue that Robert's "abandoned mall" sound—produced on cheap sound editing software like GarageBand by cutting the low frequencies of a track, raising the midrange frequencies, and adding a delay—relies upon several non-coincident levels of mediation that rematerialize sonic intimacy, while also never valorizing traditional ideas regarding collective space.¹¹ In a way, the videos seem to draw upon and attenuate Rick Altman's theories regarding the layered, material quality of sonic events, a factor that is often diminished when sound is assigned to objects, notes, or recordings rather than a complex relay of spatial and temporal conditions: "Musical notation assumes that each sound is single,

discrete, uniform, and unidimensional. Stressing the formal concerns of music's internal, self-referential aspect, musical notation diverts attention from sound's discursive dimensions, concealing the fact that sound is in reality multiple, complex, heterogeneous, and three-dimensional."¹² While Altman only alludes to ideological processes of making these latter elements invisible, the fact that he understands sound as relational and site-specific mirrors the abandoned mall videos' investment in politicizing a *gap* between sonic productions and perceptions—in hyperbolizing rather than minimizing the imperfection of sound events occurring in ordinary space (rather than the idealized non-space of the studio, or the spectacular spontaneity of live performance).

Of course, they also differ from how Altman understood sonic materiality in the fact that the spatiality of sound is not “real,” but meant to invoke an imagined, impossible condition that is also—paradoxically—evocative of material abandonment. This mediation of indexical and spectral registers is echoed in the videos' visual spaces, which are illustrated through still photographs emptied of human representation. Regardless of whether it presents neon, tacky exaggerations of malls past (similar to the style used by the micro-genre vaporwave), absurdly plain iterations of operating malls, or a postapocalyptic atmosphere, this photograph is unchanging throughout the video's three- to five-minute run time.¹³ In some ways, the videos' brevity enshrines networked shareability: posted to a YouTube account with several million viewers, they are entwined in a consumption model that simultaneously embodies bootleg culture and remains fixated on a blank representation of popular culture, viewing itself being actualized into labor for data aggregates. This latter tendency is made evident by the fact that these videos' formula is incredibly easy to copy, and Robert is by no means the only purveyor of the vicarious listening song-vid on YouTube. It would be difficult, then, to argue that these videos fit comfortably into any avant-garde tradition; nor are they explicitly critical of the social forces that have produced these images.

On the other hand, the immobility of the videos can work to foster an impression of suspended time. Because they do not involve any editing, nor any instrumentalization of the image toward narrative ends (outside of those inherent in the song), they more convincingly express a condition of isolation. The ambivalence of these formal factors is perhaps summed up best by a comment on the most popular of Robert's videos (set to Toto's “Africa,” which had 2.8 million views as of October 2019): “This fills me with some

type of feeling. It's some timeless feeling, impossible to describe."¹⁴ "Timeless" suggests ahistorical transcendence—a refusal to examine context—but it can also imply the draining-out of time, and with it, traditional modes of intimate relation or textual reception that reply on progressive historical principles. The videos' stillness thus also recalls Jean-François Lyotard's proposition that if sutured cinematic movement corresponds to genital sexuality, excessive diversion and extreme immobility both invite the specter of Freudian perversion: an eroticism without natalist ends. Normative image making "is composed like a unified and propagating body, a fecund and assembled whole transmitting instead of losing what it carries."¹⁵ Although I would continue to caution against situating Robert's videos as oppositional or anti-normative (and I do not necessarily think the videos would be more compelling if they were), his acinematic paradigm usefully draws a parallel between sexual sterility and immobile images, suggesting that both interrupt narratives of reproductive continuance. Moreover, Lyotard's understanding of sexuality helps illuminate how videos that contain no clearly erotic elements (or, indeed, any human beings of any gender) can possess queer resonances: queerness is present not just in the violation of heterosexual kinship, but in the position of loneliness—in that which loses the linear chain not because of unrestricted associations, but because it frustrates any connected exchange.

In contrast, Paul Allen Anderson has described how digital streaming platforms like Spotify and Pandora seek to categorize and mechanize positive psychological capital: "Among their other uses, the new user-interface online services are tools for building permeable microclimates or microspheres of mood within which individual users attempt to manage their diverse portfolios of resilience, hope, optimism, and self-efficacy."¹⁶ Although I would hesitate to position Robert's videos as entirely opposing this model of affective economics, they do not easily assimilate themselves to Anderson's paradigm of "neo-Muzak," wherein music functions less as an entertainment medium unto itself and more as a lubricant to productive labor and consumerist exchange. Robert's videos do neither: music becomes neither a thing to be passively consumed nor a motivator to individualized success. If nothing else, they alert their perceiver to the social function of ambient music, namely the negativities and frustrations it is designed to mask.

In this sense, rather than either ironic delight in entropy *or* fuzzy memorialization, the juxtaposition of song and image in these videos produces what Jia Tolentino has called the dissonant feeling of "longing and consolation together, extended into emptiness, a shot of warmth coming out of a void."¹⁷

In other words, the videos understand the abandoned mall as a site for contradictory mediation: they elucidate an impression of being alone together, of unrequited fulfillment existing alongside comfort, of tactile contact that is elicited, but never resolved or unified. Digital frequency manipulation is used to make the listener-viewer *more* aware of their division from the scene, rather than lessening the effect through the reproduction and fidelity of a sonic code. Tolentino situates the appeal of the “abandoned mall” vids within contemporary auditory norms, where listening to music is often placeless and atomized: unlike the smooth, HD encounters of contemporary streaming, these videos inscribe an impression of hearing music bounce off walls, albeit alongside the darker feeling of being removed from the scene of action. Unlike vinyl nostalgia, which similarly relies upon a fascination with imperfection and agedness, the appeal of these videos is that the songs are made to sound “bad”: distant, low-quality, lacking crackling warmth and accessibility, piped in like elevator music, extremely digitally altered, depth and resonance washed out.

The videos’ impoverished sound could permit their perceiver to recognize architectural necropolitics: not only do they un-conceal a specific apparatus of capitalist absorption (ambient music in shopping malls), they also insist that ghostliness is *not* equivalent to disembodiment.¹⁸ Even as they erase human presence from the frame and draw barriers to communal identification, they reflect upon structural immobility, and ask who is provided the capacity to move invisibly through mall spaces—then or now—and who encounters them with apprehension and the fear of retributive surveillance. In this sense, the ghost suggests not a bond with place that has been elided—as in, for instance, Samuel R. Delany’s critique of Times Square gentrification—but one that was never permitted to exist in the first place.¹⁹ By extension, ghosts describe a kind of historical method. In Avery Gordon’s words, they indicate how “something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us.”²⁰ In Gordon’s paradigm, ghosts stand in for the lives history has denied, the ephemerality that occasionally cross into official records, but they also represent a less agentic process of writing history, the surprise generated by unusual apparitions. Ghosts thus not only invite anti-canonical analysis, but also suggest a figure of attunement. They urge the viewer to examine the familiar in a manner that is new, but not benign. The queer ghost exerts a material imprint onto the mall, and thereby questions “invisible” circuits of exchange and blasé togetherness that guaranteed its existence in the past, while also asking its perceiver what would it mean to alter the terrain of

productive relationality not just on the basis of sexual identity, but in terms of what we consider a relation at all.

THE UNCONSUMMATED AND YOUTUBE SPECTATORSHIP

In this sense, while I have been suggesting thus far that these videos enable a queer spectral consciousness, this is a queerness that I understand to be nonsexual and unconsummated. Unlike the productiveness of neoliberal, capitalist relations or even the anti-reproductive rhetoric of gay promiscuity, Robert's videos elaborate desire that is sparse and starved, lacking a mirrored vitality. From this viewpoint, nonsexual eroticism and abandoned malls have something in common: their inability to function in appropriately fecund ways renders them outside normative realms of fruitfulness, whether this is thought of in terms of market circuitry, useful relations, or the cultivation of healthy, balanced selfhood (perhaps these are all one and the same). Of course, these specters of negative interiority, immobility, untouched bodies, or sterility also imbue conceptualizations of online engagement, especially when it is not properly communal, interactive, or used to foster elective networks. In this sense, Robert's videos both draw associations between malls and ubiquitous streaming, and question the proposition that sufficient relations require mutual, circuitous, or dialogic intimacies. Here, the ghost becomes an impasse, a figure used to imagine an arena between participation and complicity, a thing that subtends the decisive attribution of either capitalist incorporation or anti-normative relationality.

Just as it is difficult to discuss the mall's heyday without referring to anxieties regarding consumerist encroachment on the public sphere, there is a genre of scholarly work on YouTube that primarily understands the website as a referendum on participation and the possibility of democratic exchange online. For instance, Alexandra Juhasz proposes that "YouTube functions best as a postmodern television set facilitating the isolated, aimless viewing practices of individuals while expertly delivering eyeballs to advertisers. YouTube's corporate ownership limits the form and content of its videos, further curtailing the democratic promises touted for Web 2.0."²¹ Here, Juhasz seems to be rehearsing a theorization of attention economy, wherein currency-for-goods networks (including viewing methods like movie theaters or cable TV) have been replaced by seemingly free, user-generated spaces that rely upon the labor of watching itself in order to generate revenue. Therefore, Web 2.0—a media moment premised in

a categorical collapse between producers and consumers—is articulated as a promise that fails to actualize, with capitalist control not lessened but instead rendered in decreasingly tangible avenues. Mark Andrejevic has echoed these concerns, suggesting that intellectual property skirmishes between Viacom and Google over YouTube’s posting of copyrighted material were not necessarily concerned with fair use, but rather with ways to monetize content that was less amenable to traditional advertising mechanisms: “One of the advantages of an interactive platform for the delivery of commercial content is that it enables the capture of increasingly detailed information about patterns of user behavior and response.”²² In other words, all activity on YouTube is eventually subsumed into a kind of immaterial exploitation, a cataloguing of preferences and behaviors masked by a veneer of intervention and choice. Is YouTube—the platform used to host and distribute Robert’s videos—really just a shopping mall by different means, with peripatetic wandering rather than in-store purchases being mobilized to maximize corporate profits?

While I would not necessarily disagree with these statements regarding the political economy of YouTube, there is a way in which these models over-valuate a “real” interactivity that would be capable of dismantling the infrastructure of e-commerce. Of course Juhasz is correct that YouTube will never be an appropriate conduit for punk collectivism or sustained dialogue, but what assumptions undergird the idealization of such recognizable, discursive operations? What would it mean to instead explore the political ambiguities of what she dismisses as isolated, aimless viewing? Put differently, I argue that Robert’s videos initiate a choreography of viewing that is informed neither entirely by anti-democratic data mining nor by the perfectible circle of participation, but by a recognition of loneliness and relational negativity. While I do not wish to redeem YouTube as a corporate entity, Juhasz and Andrejevic’s arguments seemingly settle in advance the site’s relational dynamics, determining how its videos might circulate based on grounds of economic reflectionism and intentionality that can only understand publics and intimacies if they appear in already-existent (or at least already theorized) forms. They remain fixated on what I would call consummated relations, on interactions whose effects are provable, productive, and consequential rather than ethereal, sterile, or ambivalent. It is this second series of spectatorial bonds that Robert’s videos explicate, in a realm that frustrates schematics—either radical or capitalist—of engagement, and that thereby calls for a viewing position between immediacy and passivity

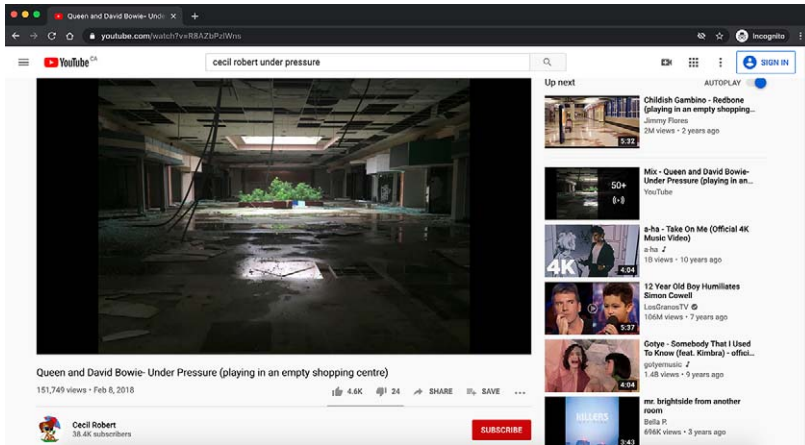


FIGURE 2. Author screenshot of YouTube interface featuring Cecil Robert’s “Queen and David Bowie – Under Pressure (Playing in an Empty Shopping Centre),” posted February 8, 2018, captured July 17, 2020.

that expresses a hollow, vacant desire inassimilable to the codes of spectacle or oppositional art.

Performing a visual analysis of Robert’s videos that depends entirely on the reused photographs is thus to some degree misguided, or at least presumes that the spectator experiences them only through YouTube’s full-screen feature. To watch videos on YouTube is to be surrounded by not only the obvious menu of future options (recommendations listed in thumbnail images on the right-hand side), but also statistics for likes, dislikes, and views, a site-encompassing search bar, the date the video was published, and numerous drop-down menus or clickable elements (like “subscribe” buttons) (fig. 2). Moreover, this hardly enumerative list only addresses characteristics that are humanly visible; it does not include the imperceptible levels of coding, network connectivity, or off-site servers that permit such videos to be readily accessible. In this sense, while these factors certainly contain all kinds of biopolitical or material effects, they occur too fast and too constantly to be experienced through normative human vision. While this is a field of political aesthetics too complex to examine in this article, the fact that these depictions of abandoned malls mostly exist on platforms like YouTube needs to be considered as part of their relational matrix, one in which levels of human-to-human communication always contain ghosts of other intimate ties the user may be barely conscious of.²³ Acknowledging this fact is especially relevant

because Robert's videos do not easily lend themselves to some common academic tropes in regard to YouTube content: they are not vlogs (or other celebrity-based content), they are not tutorials, they are not video essays, and they are especially not attractions.

The empty mall videos are thus also opposed to accounts such as Carol Vernallis's, whose examples of YouTube content focus on short works of repeated intensities, graphic fungibility, trans-mediation, and relatively undefined or porous diegetic environments.²⁴ Contrary to Vernallis's emphasis on brevity, hyperstimulation, and a lack of realist aesthetic codes, Robert's videos fixate on immobility, reverie, loneliness. Animation of all kinds is accentuated in Vernallis, whereas Robert's work embraces stillness. While this may seem like a primarily aesthetic disjunction, it is also a relational and a methodological one. Vernallis proposes that YouTube's reiterative framework reflects an era in which "the pace and demands of business and leisure time have been accelerating and the number of inputs continue to proliferate. Experiences are based on quick, overlapping hookups. . . . A fast pulse helps put it all on a gridded timeline."²⁵ In this sense, she seems to suggest that YouTube's attractions-like form is mirrored in an increasing speed and simultaneity of contemporary interactivity, which is in turn indicative of a late industrial economy of overwhelming ubiquity and proliferating options.

At the same time, it can be difficult in her account to ascertain how YouTube differs from much earlier accounts of urban space that illustrated its mediation of diverting shocks and Fordist apportioning of efficiency. While it may be true that a state of "always being online" hyperbolizes these embodied experiences and calls for ever-magnifying scheduling and ever-shortening entertainment options, has it also not produced its opposite: the stream, the multi-hour playlist, the binge watch, the recognition of online saturation as ordinary rather than spectacular? This latter state seems much closer to the viewing posture embodied by Robert's videos: although they are quite short, they do not invoke the dynamics of surprise or temporary alertness described by Vernallis. They would easily fit into vaporwave compilations that are not meant to be watched at all, but to reverberate as auditory reminiscences. They demonstrate flow not as a parade of distractions, but as disturbing, ever-present abeyance. Most of all, unlike Vernallis's meme-heavy clips and virally forwarded content, Robert's videos thematize a spectatorship of paradoxically isolated intimacy: not of communing in material space, in debate, or in touch, but of being present to the same political-affective dimension of abandonment.

To some degree, such a relation rhymes with Kris Cohen's description of networked collectivity functioning through parallelism, wherein all individualized action online is always shadowed by the automatic generation of population data—by an aggregate image that renders one part of a group whether one recognizes it or not. While Cohen's theory may invoke a paranoid register recalling Juhasz or Andrejevic, he instead proposes that these alignments are profoundly ordinary: "The drama of these processes isn't about whether or not they exist; it's about how little our awareness of them (or lack of awareness) seems to matter."²⁶ Here, Cohen is grappling with the imperceptibility and nonreciprocity of most network operations, but I think he is also suggesting a subtle rebuttal to much of the discourse on Web 2.0: not that YouTube functions like a Habermasian public sphere, but that even the most seemingly isolated, monadic, niche investment also has an intimate kernel, a banal ghostliness that persists even when those involved remain unconscious of this attachment. On the one hand, this means there is no escaping commodity forms, but on the other, it also provides a means for producing relationality without coupled pairs or communal identifications.

"WHY CAN'T WE GIVE LOVE ONE MORE CHANCE?"

Consider, for instance, the image of Rolling Acres Mall used in Robert's "Under Pressure" video (fig. 3).²⁷ The camera is centered at the end of a hallway, its ostensible star (an arrangement of green shrubs, spotlighted by sunlight pouring in from an open roof) depicted far in the distance. Framing the shot are a series of now-vacant storefronts that are comparably deposed from their position of importance, surrounded by missing roof tiles, dangling wire cables, broken glass, and wet splotches from incidental rain. The photograph at first seems to center obvious features of architectural decay: the mall's electric lighting has been stripped, its skylight has been wrought open by weather (leaving puddles of water scattered throughout), its stores no longer possess logos and commodities. Yet among all this detritus, some shrubbery (whether "real" or "fake") is thriving and has taken center stage: the broken roof has given what was once scene-setting, unacknowledged foliage a kind of absurd majesty. The image challenges traditional portraits of fecundity as well as the sublime romanticism underpinning most landscape art, not just in the fact that it elaborates human-engineered artificiality and "the natural world" as intimate (not opposites on a scale of authenticity), but also through its presentation of a tinny yet still jubilant



FIGURE 3. Rolling Acres Mall as pictured in the “Ghost Mall,” *Abandoned* (Picture Shack Entertainment, March 2016). A still from this episode is the image in Cecil Robert’s “Queen and David Bowie – Under Pressure (Playing in an Empty Shopping Centre),” pictured in figure 2.

echo of a pop song alongside an image that could be frightening or despairing. While the “Under Pressure” video contains no representations of human figures, it does not pose nothingness, desolation, the unknowable void in their absence. Instead, it asks its viewer to fundamentally understand this “empty shopping center” as possessing life askew, as a locus of pleasure and release, *because* of its structural precarity. If the video calls on its perceiver to recognize radical vulnerability within an anti-anthropocentric landscape, it does so through a revision of intimacy rather than images of creeping existential foreclosure.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of how it performs this work is through the mobilization of the song itself. “Under Pressure” is the last track on Queen’s 1982 album *Hot Space*, a record considered somewhat of a bad object among the band’s rock fan base: explicitly because it features synthesizers and is influenced by dance music, and implicitly because it represents a series of encounters with racialized queerness that are heralded by the band’s lead singer, Freddie Mercury.²⁸ As Tavia Nyong’o suggests, the backlash against

disco “seemed to result from the music industry’s determination to force an unwilling contact between the underground and mainstream . . . [one which] succeeded in crossing out the flavors most valued by those in the know, while failing to rid itself entirely of that odor most noxious to outsiders: the pungency of gender, racial, and sexual difference.”²⁹ In this sense, while Queen was (queerly?) late to the party (the infamous Disco Demolition Night had occurred almost three years prior to its release), the album is notable because it is viewed—in a primarily negative register—as Mercury’s attempt to replicate the sound he had been accustomed to hearing in gay clubs.³⁰ It therefore stages Nyong’o’s conflictual encounter between gendered genres of music, socio-sexual contexts, and levels of mainstream appeal within a single album, and debatably within a single artist.

In Richard Dyer’s writing on the genre, he suggests that although rock and disco both draw upon a racialized sensuality, “rock’s eroticism is thrusting, grinding—it is not whole body, but phallic . . . [whereas] the importance of disco in scene culture indicates an openness to sexuality that is not defined in terms of cock.”³¹ In this sense, while Dyer makes no claim as to gay men’s inherent preference for non-phallic sexuality (quite the contrary), and while he also provides the inevitable caveats of any popular music’s commodity origins, he does suggest that disco opens up a relational realm that is non-penetrative, ephemeral, shimmering, joyful. Coming from a rock scene where his queerness and his racialization were often made invisible, Mercury belatedly performing in a disco register brings forth not just these identitarian anxieties, but also Dyer’s portrait of intimacy drained of productive end-pleasure. This image is pushed even further in Walter Hughes’s depiction of the genre as a site for the loss of will, for the cyborgian conflation of listener and electronic beats, and for the ceding of authoritative meaning to “the unmediated power to stimulate dancing.”³² The risk of disco, then, is not in its exaltation of inauthenticity or consumer imperatives, but in its delight in passivity, in its belief that the music’s ecstatic gestures are haunted by structural confinements, in its elaboration of the surface or the impersonal over depth and expressiveness. Not talking, just dancing.

Although such an exploration is beyond the scope of this article, it bears speculation as to what resonances within Mercury’s voice would become apparent if he was to be understood as someone who was rendered doubly lonely: both as a closeted (yet still incandescently flamboyant, witty, flirtatious) queer man and as a white-passing Indian Parsi during a period of intense anti-Asian racial violence in the UK. Think, for instance, of all the

shimmering layers of defiance and shame that would cause Farrokh Bulsara to rechristen himself in such an Anglicized, swishly mythological aura: half Arthur Rackham and half Liza Minnelli, illuminated by a voice that was so bombastic, participatory, and elegantly confident, but that was often used to articulate (especially in his own compositions) profound loneliness. I suggested earlier in this article that loneliness is akin to mediation: it is a condition of between-ness, of being without transparent access to identity forms. I think loneliness can also potentially articulate the experience of possessing multiple discriminated attributes as *negating*, rather than *conjunctive*. In other words, loneliness emerges not just through the racism and homophobia of everyday life, or even in their intersection, but rather in the incommensurability of being racialized and queer, of understanding dueling closets not as reflective mirrors but as siphoning barriers. Mercury's loneliness rings even more poignantly when one considers that *Hot Space's* evocation of queer nightlife, impersonal intimacies, and camp-funk delight was rejected against a backdrop where those performing the disavowal likely understood Mercury to be white and straight.

Even so, the huge commercial hit "Under Pressure" is typically spared the scorn heaped on the rest of the album. This is likely due to the fact that it is more stylistically consistent with Queen's earlier, guitar-based sound, it features a musician with art-rock credibility, and it does not so easily thematize cruising culture and its attendant queer relationalities. Yet I would argue that it maintains *Hot Space's* investments in a more covert register, starting with the fact that it subtly interrogates the form of the pop duet. In this sense, while it is operating within the discourse of couples, it asks its listener to understand the song as a dissonant encounter rather than a univocal expression. Mercury and Bowie rarely sing with each other, or even in a grammatical form that makes it appear they are in dialogue. Mercury's playful scatting and flowering, operatic pain frequently interrupts, baits, flirts, or otherwise exists in tension with Bowie's taciturn, bluntly romantic style; they often seem like they are making separate aesthetic statements that the song barely sutures together. Allegorically speaking, it is possible to see in the disparity of their voices contradictory relationships to the closet (just one year later, Bowie would confess in *Rolling Stone* that coming out as bisexual was "the biggest mistake [he] ever made"), to codes of musical authenticity, to the voice as an instrument.³³ In an article on the category confusion of 1981's popular music, on a moment when disco and punk had not yet ceded to MTV (or Reaganism), Lucas Hilderbrand goes as far as to suggest that Mercury and Bowie's

“contrasting pitches suggest a dichotomy of tops and bottoms. . . . Their duet is like a vocal dance, as they flip roles, riff off one another, and responsively penetrate each other until it is difficult to tell whose voice is whose.”³⁴ While Hilderbrand’s emphasis here is on multiple vectors of fluidity—alternating gender performance, ambiguously racialized musical structures, unresolved sexual identity, generic hybrids, eroticized exchanges (perhaps phallic or not) between androgynes and clones—what he also suggests throughout his survey of 1981 is that the year functioned as a precipice, as a context that in hindsight bridged the gay liberation politics of the 1970s and the homophobic biopolitics of the AIDS crisis.

It seems significant, then, that this is a song about love, and specifically love as mediated by implied economic and social strife, rather than love as a depoliticized matter of “personal life.” In the Thatcherite Britain in which it was composed, the eponymous “pressure” could refer to any number of violences, from the white supremacy of the National Front to state-sanctioned homophobia to punitive policies directed at workers and the rural poor.³⁵ However, perhaps what is more crucial to the song’s meaning than the particularity of the social constraints referenced in its lyrical content is the nature of its articulation of love. Despite the fact that its composition begins in binary form—two singers, two narratives of queer celebrity, two notes on John Deacon’s bass guitar, a simple keyboard chord also comprised of two notes—it is my assertion that love in “Under Pressure” is not invested in a dyadic relation.³⁶ Instead, the song suggests that a messier, more capacious impression of intimacy emerges when love ceases to be understood solely through romantic couples or nuclear family units, and that structural precarity requires attention to relational invention, not conservative consolidation. When Mercury pleads, “Why can’t we give love one more chance?” his ecstatic insistence seems directed at the listener, not at Bowie or an imagined romantic partner. His voice, that troubling agent that stains this album even at its “straightest” moments, suggests an echo into a void, a second-person address that aches with un-fulfillment. Yet in this sonic negotiation of joy and hurt, of openness and limitation, of two artists interacting but not necessarily *conversing* with each other, of oblique social commentary and pop integration, Mercury also seems to be asking—in line with *Hot Space’s* overall project—whether giving love “another chance” entails not a repetition of the same, but a reexamination of how relations are assigned value, of how love itself came to be so limited, so circumscribed, so unified.

Robert's video draws out these queer flickers in the song partially through the juxtapositions and aesthetic immobility I have already mentioned, but also through the manipulation of sound: the added delay exacerbates the hollowness of the track's opening chords, and also emphasizes an impression of distance (between Bowie and Mercury, as well as between both of them and the perceiver). In this sense, the video exaggerates the queer mediations of the song: the perceiver becomes aware of their separation from a scene of communal embrace. The video mimics the perspective of a socially abject person by presenting the track in a fashion that lacks transparency. At the same time, it does not necessarily deform or dismiss "Under Pressure." Instead, it performs the same dissonant relationship to togetherness that the song itself elucidates. It seems to ask whether it is possible to have pleasurable, socially conscious encounters with others that do not automatically reproduce established ideas of dyadic reconciliation. And yet Robert's video also takes this one step further, in that it seems to suggest that these intimacies are not just between people, but also have consequences for how we rhetorically construct relationships to ecological difference.

VICARIOUSNESS'S AMBIVALENCES

The three most common types of vicarious audio distortion videos are as follows: music playing outside a club, from another room, or within a large empty space. In all of these cases, the video's viewer-listener becomes attuned to existing within lonely sociality: barred from direct participation and the sutured, circular relations resulting from direct contact with other people (or the source of the music). Yet these videos also often attest to an animate, nonreproductive resonance, a reverberation of joy and longing that is no longer so rigorously determined by consumer imperatives. The "abandoned mall" videos illuminate the leakage of the "outside world" into the closed loop of space/shopper: both in terms of the photographs' documentation of formerly disavowed environmental mess, and in the videos' ambivalent flickerings between being present and absent from this scene.

In this sense, what I wish to explore in the space remaining is the sense that the ghostly affects engendered by these videos bring "dead" malls closer to possessing a relationship to larger ecological structures that is not purely about disavowal or conquest. At the same time, as I suggested earlier in regard to YouTube, the mall's death does not herald a funereal collapse of commodity capitalism, or even those structures' "failure" per se. Traditional mall

spaces are often repurposed for megachurches, storage units, “big box” isolated storefronts, or Amazon distribution centers; even when malls are left to abandon and decay, they do not necessarily index the breakdown of consumerism so much as its resilience, its renewal in tailored form.³⁷ The sites of shopping shift, but even as the architectural basis mutates, the economic ideologies the malls engender persist. To make a claim for the dead mall’s queerness is not the same as arguing for its status as capitalism’s death knell. Instead, it fosters awareness of missed or incomplete connections, suggesting a version of relationality that is simultaneously messy or infused with toxicity, and strangely abstinent or noninteractive.

In this sense, it is worth considering the stakes for the people who experience these environments *as* videos. While it is one thing to criticize straight ecology’s reproduction of models of “real” interactivity, it is another to foreclose examination of the touristic approach that can often be taken to these spaces (especially on YouTube). Perhaps consideration of this problem entails an understanding of the mall ghost as more politically ambivalent, as elaborating both the underside of mall capitalism and the nonimplication of an idealized spectatorial orientation. For instance, Rolling Acres Mall, the setting of the photograph for the “Under Pressure” video, has been a site of tremendous interest for “urban explorer” video makers who ethnographically document ruined or abandoned buildings. This fascination partially results from the mediation of nostalgic and apocalyptic affects that the mall embodied in the period between its closure and its demolition (roughly 2008 to 2017). Photographs and videos taken after its shuttering attest simultaneously to the remnants of its grandeur and its eerie, impersonal continuance.

A hallmark of mall proliferation in 1970s suburban United States, by its second decade Rolling Acres had grown to encompass 140 stores, a movie theater, and four “anchor” department stores. According to John Harper, it was an attraction unto itself in its heyday, featuring “a veritable indoor arboretum complete with lush trees and shrubberies and a water fountain exploding toward the mall’s soaring glass ceiling. Glass elevators, the first of their kind in Akron, took wide eyed patrons between two levels. Two levels! It was a big deal.”³⁸ These bucolic, techno-futurist presentations of awe continue to distinguish it in memorializations, suggesting that malls may not be as mindlessly reiterative as some critiques assume, and that dead malls index not just economic failure, but also the contradictions of commodity intimacy. They describe an attachment to space that may have had little or nothing to do with shopping, but also little or nothing to do with face-to-face

conversation or absorption in “real environments.” The continued investment in Rolling Acres as a place-to-be-overwhelmed extends into photographers’ portraits. The vaulted roofs, the sleek elevators, the lush plant arrangements remain objects of their attention. Although one might be tempted to see them as melancholic and degraded, they portray a similar desire to be alone and swallowed up by a place-outside-time.

Yet there are other reasons why Rolling Acres remains a figure of particular interest, and these are more prurient and less easy to recuperate within a purely aesthetic framework. Two deaths occurred on the property during its “abandoned period.” In 2011, Timothy Kern became a victim of the Craigslist killer, and was found buried in an adjacent forest. That same year an anonymous man was electrocuted while trying to gather copper when the switchbox exploded. The economic circumstances of both deaths are ultimately of less importance than the way in which they contribute to a macabre aura surrounding Rolling Acres. Here, the fate of the mall and its surrounding inhabitants are depoliticized in order to establish the proximity of morbidity to the video maker, the greatest threat to the author-uploader being his removal from the site by security guards.³⁹

As this cavalier approach to arrest suggests, urban explorers are often white and masculine-presenting, and their mobile cameras frequently note toxic hazards and the remnants of these spaces being used as residences (glasses, cups, sleeping bags), but always with the reminder that they can leave whenever they choose. However, for all the ways in which “urban explorer” connotes a colonial image of adventure and exploit—one where risk only operates to buttress heroic individualism—even these videos do not necessarily dissolve the ghostly intimacies that imbue these documents. I am hesitant to position urban explorer videos as bad objects in order to validate and disentangle Robert’s own approach to these spaces: Robert’s usage of a masculine, Anglo name certainly inflects their online presence, regardless of what their background may be IRL.⁴⁰ The emphasis in these videos on surreptitious filming, and the constant recognition of surveillance, entails a practice of production and reception (however many caveats I mention above) that is grounded in the elision and evasion of visibility, the desire not to be seen shifting from a macho, protective gesture into one espousing vulnerability, a fragility in line with the spaces themselves.

At the same time, I argue that Robert’s videos encourage reflection on deathliness as an ambient fact. Unlike the filmmaking practice described above, there is no first-person POV, comforting narration, or sense of an

“outside” to the space being depicted. The beholder is arguably not positioned as a person at all. What could be understood as the dead mall photographers’ ceding of responsibility (a purportedly unethical lack of human presence) in their image making becomes in “Under Pressure” a portrait of suspended co-implication. Here, I would argue, the spectator understands visual space not as an individual human gazing out into an abandoned space (although, on some level, we know this was how the images were produced), but as an ambient ghost of unfulfilled but also always-present, always-leaking relations.

In this sense, perhaps the collapse of normative mall culture provides a new means of sharing space, one disinterested in both the utopian imaginings of the public sphere *and* the suburban conservatism of shopping complexes. Perhaps the decline of this specific consumerist infrastructure can invite a new reflection upon what being together in space entails—whether it is possible to subsist upon a limited, partial conceptualization of community that confounds the separation between observation and participation and between ambient complicity and critique. Or, in another register, perhaps these moments of institutional crisis suggest that this is what relationality always was: a series of lonely, but also potentially pleasurable, encounters with ghosts. To return briefly to the “Under Pressure” video, Rolling Acres Mall becomes in Robert’s portrait both an index of economic collapse and necropolitical abandonment (perhaps analogous to the Thatcherite pressures Bowie and Mercury sang about in 1981) *and* a reimagining of intimate norms. In this sense, the video illustrates dead malls in the peculiarly beautiful sight of flourishing unnatural greenery: centered by surreptitious photographers among wreckage, preserved (at least for the moment) in the YouTube mall, and emboldened with the echoes of Mercury’s call to configure love anew. ■

ERIN NUNODA is a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto. Her research examines the intersection between sexual isolation, privatization, and media spectatorship, with a particular focus on the 1970s and 1980s. Her writing has been published in *Discourse* and *Velvet Light Trap*.

NOTES

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1. Margaret Crawford, “The World in a Shopping Mall,” in *Variations on a Theme Park: Scenes from the New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 21.

2. Anne Friedberg, “Les flâneurs/flâneuses du Mall,” in *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 109–56.

3. Margaret Kohn, “Introduction,” in *Brave New Neighbourhoods: The Privatization of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

4. Perhaps the most famous version of the “intimate and economic non-productivity” argument comes from Lee Edelman, who polemically proposes that queerness is defined less by the gender of partners and more by its incompatibility with a reproductive schema. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

5. I use “sideways” here as a nod both to Kathryn Bond Stockton’s paradigm of sideways growth and its anti-teleological trajectories, and to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s suggestion that horizontal relations—she uses the word “beside”—can permit a realm of critique without permanent affiliations or dualistic judgments. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

6. Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 69–70, 77, 78.

7. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

8. Johnny Joo, “Rolling Acres: Reclaimed by Mother Nature,” *Architectural Afterlife*, August 28, 2015, <https://architecturalafterlife.com/2015/08/28/rolling-acres-reclaimed-by-mother-nature/>.

9. Thanks to Cooper Long for suggesting this line of inquiry.

10. David Michael Brown, “There Are Few Things Scariest Than an Abandoned Shopping Centre,” *SBS*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.sbs.com.au/guide/article/2017/03/17/there-are-few-things-scarier-abandoned-shopping-centre>.

11. This description of the sound editing comes from Jia Tolentino, “The Overwhelming Emotion of Hearing Toto’s ‘Africa’ Remixed to Sound Like It’s Playing in an Empty Mall,” *New Yorker*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/rabbit-holes/the-overwhelming-emotion-of-hearing-totos-africa-remixed-to-sound-like-its-playing-in-an-empty-mall>.

12. Rick Altman, “The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound,” in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 16.

13. Laura Glitsos describes vaporwave thusly: “Vaporwave is a style of music collaged together from a wide variety of largely background musics such as muzak, 1980s elevator music and new age ambience. The vaporwave song structure is usually short and repetitive, often slow (sitting around 60–90 bpm) with vocal samples positioned low in the mix saturated with heavy reverb and often slowed down to produce a ‘stretched out’ effect or a ‘melting’ quality.” Laura Glitsos, “Vaporwave, or Music Optimized for Abandoned Malls,” *Popular Music* 27, no. 1 (2018): 100.

14. Cecil Robert, "Toto – Africa (Playing in an Empty Shopping Centre)," YouTube, September 14, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D__6hwqjZAs.

15. Jean-François Lyotard, "Acinema," *Wide Angle* 2, no. 3 (1978): 55.

16. Paul Allen Anderson, "Neo-Muzak and the Business of Mood," *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 815.

17. Tolentino, "The Overwhelming Emotion of Hearing Toto's 'Africa' Remixed to Sound Like It's Playing in an Empty Mall."

18. For a discussion of Muzak in relationship to mall-based consumer capitalism see Jonathan Sterne, "Sounds Like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space," in *Ethnomusicology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Jennifer C. Post (New York: Routledge, 2006), 33–52.

19. Delany's account of gay male spectatorship (primarily in straight porn theaters) begins with a critique of the Times Square "development" project, which was crucial to the conservative mayoral project of Rudy Giuliani in the mid-1990s. For Delany, the desire to revamp the area in order to make it more hospitable to tourists and families entailed not just the draining of its local character, but also a rampant disregard for the contingent relationalities sustained in the less pristine, but infinitely more inter-class, interracial arena of the 1970s and 1980s. Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

20. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8.

21. Alexandra Juhasz, "Learning the Five Lessons of YouTube: After Trying to Teach There, I Don't Believe the Hype," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 2 (2009): 147.

22. Mark Andrejevic, "Exploiting YouTube: Contradictions of User-Generated Labour," in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 415. In contrast, Lucas Hilderbrand interprets YouTube's dubious relationship to traditional copyright through a historiography of impermanence and ephemerality: unlike narratives of digital security, flagged videos alert users to the fallibility of online archives. Lucas Hilderbrand, "YouTube: Where Cultural Memory and Copyright Converge," in *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 225–43.

23. For an example of work on political aesthetics see Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge," *Grey Room* 18 (2005): 26–51.

24. Here Vernallis seems to be drawing out an analogy between YouTube aesthetics and Tom Gunning's cinema of attractions model (used to describe early cinematic exhibition practices centered on presentationality, confrontation, and other anti-narrative devices). For a piece exploring these historical parallels see James Leo Cahill, "A YouTube Bestiary: Twenty-Six Theses on a Post-Cinema of Animal Attractions," in *New Silent Cinema*, ed. Katherine Groo and Paul Flaig (New York: Routledge, 2016), 263–93.

25. Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 132.

26. Kris Cohen, *Never Alone, Except for Now: Art, Networks, Populations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 39.

27. Cecil Robert, "Queen and David Bowie – Under Pressure (Playing in an Empty Shopping Centre)," YouTube, February 8, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8AZbPzIWns>.

28. Stephen Thomas Erlewine's review on the compendium AllMusic is indicative of this reception on the whole, particularly in his dismay that "the band that once proudly proclaimed not to use synthesizers on their albums has suddenly, dramatically reversed course, devoting the entire first side of the album to robotic, new wave dance-pop, all driven by drum machines and colored by keyboards, with Brian May's guitar coming in as flavor only on occasion." Stephen Thomas Erlewine, "Queen: *Hot Space*," AllMusic.com, <https://www.allmusic.com/album/hot-space-mw0000195391>.

29. Tavia Nyong'o, "I Feel Love: Disco and Its Discontents," *Criticism* 50, no. 1 (2008): 101.

30. For an extensive account of this incident and the homophobic rhetoric that initiated it see Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (2007): 276–306.

31. Richard Dyer, "In Defense of Disco," in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 411–12.

32. Walter Hughes, "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 149.

33. Kurt Loder, "David Bowie: Straight Time," *Rolling Stone*, May 12, 1983, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/david-bowie-straight-time-69334/>.

34. Lucas Hilderbrand, "Luring Disco Dollies to a Life of Vice: Queer Pop Music's Moment," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 25, no. 4 (2013): 431.

35. It is worth noting, however, that Queen always asserted an apolitical status, and that their touring decisions in the 1980s (specifically to apartheid South Africa in 1984 and Argentina in the midst of the Dirty War in 1981) suggest a commercialized carelessness and blasé ignorance of oppression that is at odds with the claims I make here. As with other elements of this article's argument, I want to hold on to these incommensurabilities, and with them the distinct possibility that my reading contradicts the band's authorial intentionality, as well as some of their decisions as political actors. In this sense, I do not wish to erase the lingering effects of this privileging of capitalist motivations over social justice, but I also recognize in "Under Pressure" (and in many aspects of Mercury's persona) a refutation of such conservative non-interventionism. For an editorial accounting the Sun City concerts and Queen's perceived hypocrisy for performing at Live Aid see John Harris, "The Sins of St. Freddie," *The Guardian*, January 14, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/jan/14/2>.

36. My interpretation of the song here is indebted to the analysis present in this video: 12tone, "Understanding Under Pressure," YouTube, September 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhd-pMT4mSk>.

37. Thank you to Meghan Sutherland for suggesting this thread be pursued further following a version of this article presented at the University of Toronto's Cinema Studies Graduate Student Conference in 2019.

38. John Harper, "Akron's Rolling Acres Mall, from Destination to Dead Mall," *Cleveland.com*, January 11, 2019, https://www.cleveland.com/akron/2015/05/remembering_rolling_acres_mall.html.

39. For an example see This Is Dan Bell, "Dead Mall Series: Rolling Acres Mall: BUSTED BY AKRON POLICE!! (DEMOLISHED)," YouTube, July 2, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zov7PEXdVZk>

40. Moreover, Tolentino uses he/him pronouns to refer to Robert in her article. Tolentino, "The Overwhelming Emotion of Hearing Toto's 'Africa' Remixed to Sound Like It's Playing in an Empty Mall."