

Reconciling Queer Disappearance

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Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire, by Amy Villarejo. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 216 pages. \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paperback.

Representation has for some time been the bad object of queer theory: the entity that contains a slew of anxieties surrounding the continuance, crystallization, and confirmation of “queer” as a generic code, as an intelligible sign that can be deployed (paradoxically) as an antigrammar, as a discipline that cannot exist. Queer is the vestibule for nothing and everything, and thus much of the work on media that has arisen out of queer theory has invested less political energy in the potentials of identity than its inevitable limitations and foreclosures. Media figured queerly is intangible, contingent, and prone to obsolescence, its absence as such placed affectively in line (ironically, straightly) with the negative, the unproductive, the fleeting, the relationally obscure. The necessity to contest the normalizing principles of identification (especially for queer folks outside the mainstream reach) becomes its own normalizing principle,¹ a dogmatic restructuring wherein queer *must* strive for a status of nonexistence, of failure, of semiascetic removal from cultural life, often in a manner that arguably reinforces masculinist models of critique predicated on distancing, isolation, and destruction. Queer is separate from intimacy, queer is outside social affirmation, and queer must constantly eulogize its own death.

At its most provocative, Amy Villarejo's *Ethereal Queer* functions as a renegotiation of these terms of engagement. Her book is simultaneously a phenomenology of televisual signals as queer non-objects *and* a reminder that television² is a crucible for identity's persistence, what she calls "*the* modern implantation of gendered and sexualized social time" (7). Villarejo's thesis thus requires a genealogical assertion of queer presence across many historical periods,³ but she is careful to delineate between relational queerness (her preferred mode) and ontological queerness of either the oppositional or incorporative varieties. She is, for instance, suspicious of the progressive argument that twenty-first-century television is somehow "more queer" than its past iterations simply by the fact that characters are "permitted" to be out in a self-identified manner, and she consistently critiques the facile mimeticism of GLAAD enumerative polls. However, she is equally unwilling to abandon representation altogether and is particularly attentive to the means through which pop media express the desire *for* queer commonality, less as a definitive affirmation and more as a form (like analogue signals) that never translates perfectly into a substantiated object. In this sense, Villarejo urges media scholars to turn their attention back toward television itself,⁴ examining its fundamental ephemerality and the consequences this poses for its figuration as a sexual hermeneutic or, perhaps more important in her terms, an apparatus that encloses public, retrospective temporality. Thus, her proposal of queer as an ethereal figure, simultaneously present and absent, elucidates both her political commitment to ambivalence and her intervention into television studies: in particular a careful, empathetic parsing of representations deemed retrograde or insufficiently complex.

Due to the fact that Villarejo is invested in this sort of macro-criticism, it can sometimes feel as though her conceptual scope is too wide, producing excursions that are as oblique as they are illuminating. The best of these occurs in chapter 3, titled "Television Ate My Family," wherein a careful examination of Lance Loud's repeated "coming outs" on *An American Family* is preceded by a close analysis of *All in the Family*'s Christmas-centric "Edith's Crisis of Faith." The episode concerns the emotional fallout of family friend (and drag queen) Beverly's murder, whereas Villarejo's privileged moment in the Loud saga details an attempt (partially recognized) at transgenerational queer enunciation between a distanced mother and her (purposefully) presentational son. In both instances, Villarejo does not pose the unspeakable irruption of queerness in opposition to family seriality but instead interprets its appearance as an inevitable reconfiguration of kinship: one

resulting from lives lived (and extinguished) through TV as *the* domestic object. In this sense, she extends the mechanism of televisual liveness⁵—of simultaneous production and exhibition within the home—to establish the means through which queerness is not simply iterated but is also *shown*, with these two paradigms (reality programming and the “very special episode”) becoming moments less for the excavation of realness than for the privileged display of uncomfortable, disruptive relationality. In a critique of Baudrillard’s hyperreal *and* liberal normalization, Villarejo proposes that such paranoid demarcations of the real and the false “derive from a worldview in which authentic relationality, that is, marriage, exists apart from its representation on television” (110). The stringency of structuralist criticism (which, Villarejo rightly notes, is often hostile to “perverse” pleasures) thus cannot account for the negotiative spirit to which she ascribes television: it is not just “in” the home but also of it; it is made through asynchronous interaction. In other words, to translate the spectatorial reach of queer arrival, one must first presume that the queer is implicated within the social: it is therefore at least somewhat real, rather than Real.⁶

In this sense, queerness in Villarejo’s terms is always an encounter—often quite an ordinary, melancholic one—that contains none of the bleak, apocalyptic overtones of the subjectless critique. She remains fascinated with desire’s disruptions and decays in a manner not dissimilar from queer *doxa*, but she is also consistently attentive to the operations of siphoning, delimitation, and subsequent reverberation that result from such industrial implementations as time slot or channel placement. In this sense, Villarejo’s strength is her enmeshing of historical developments with formal elaborations: she privileges neither the text nor the purportedly “anterior” (medium, legislation, academia) but instead elucidates their mutual potentialities. A particularly insightful section in chapter 1 provides a reconsideration of 1950s queer stereotype (the flamboyant queen, the standoffish butch) as an iteration of micronarrative play: contained equally by social policy (the rhetoric of state enclosure in broadcasting) as it was by twenty-two-minute, bracketed-by-advertising sitcom time. Villarejo suggests that “the sitcom may be a form that embalms its own past” (31), one that requires exchange and social negotiation primarily because of its brief duration and the relative paucity of programming options in television’s early days, meaning that spectatorial recognition was fostered less as a forward motion in time (the progressive continuity that audiences are accustomed to now) and more as a form of retrospection and playful reattachment to “types.” In Villarejo’s terms, the fundamental inconsequence of

many of these shows makes them productive as sites for the examination of unsubstantiated action and leisurely viewing, the accumulated effects and affects of representations both “out of view” and constantly present. Careful to avoid assumptions concerning the medium’s duplicity or performative vacuity, she instead proposes that in a medium assimilated to both hyperattention and hyperdistraction, “synchronization is never total, and access to prosthetic lifeworlds involves particular engagements that aren’t always identificatory” (80).⁷

Perhaps as a reflection of this uneven synchronization, Villarejo’s writing balances many different methodological structures, sometimes leading to awkward overemphasis of certain disciplinary properties that prohibits communicative potential. Chapter 4 gorgeously illustrates topographical devices in *Tales of the City* but is more convincing in its understanding of political architectures and their accompanying memorialization than in its televisual specificity, and chapter 2 demonstrates a flexible critical acumen (exploring quite persuasively the problem of liveness through discourses on temporality and embodiment) but is spread perhaps too diffusely across media contexts. Villarejo also never fully addresses her almost exclusive focus on Anglo-American programming (except for a discursus on globalization in chapter 4), creating a somewhat unstable mediation of medium-spanning work and the seemingly personal archive she wishes to share. That being said, her tone is best when it is conversational: given that the work contains no specific examinations of spectatorship, her anecdotes about her adolescent remembrances of particularly anticipated programs are casually profound. My favorite of these involves Villarejo pretending to be sick in order to stay home and watch a TV movie titled *A Question of Love*, “just to see what these lesbians, one of them memorably played by Gena Rowlands, would do and say and look and feel like” (23). In a text primarily fixated on disembodiment, these moments function as an acknowledgment of representational stakes as well as a historical/subjective grounding of someone who was a child for the kitschy sitcoms, a teen for the “pragmatic pedagogy” of Norman Lear and PBS, a young woman at the height of ACT UP and the cable boom, and an established academic at a time when methods of transmission and documentation are about to get even more fuzzy. The book is imbued (and perhaps demarcated) by this aura of retrospection, the sense that one is encountering the confluence of recorded pastness (a systematic dissection of an archive and the principles of building one) and unrecorded pastness (theoretical ephemera, half-narrativized memories), producing an uneasy—but perhaps important—alliance of rigorous

formalism and affective slipperiness, preservation and ephemerality, identity and its deaths.

Ether in Villarejo's theory is always a doubled sign: it provides the ambiguous path for transmission (and thus communication of queerness), but it also historically contains an iteration of television that might not be entirely anachronistic. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that her conclusion is structured by romantic remix videos, pieces that swap and rearrange conventional narrativity but are often precariously situated due to their multiple violations of copyright. The work that such objects perform incorporates a familiar praxis, "queering the heteronormative," but in their inclusion here Villarejo raises an interesting point regarding the status of digital television viewing, one that emphasizes how rhetorical horizons are deeply informed by the material figuration of space—and what new opportunities will be afforded due to the disappearance of the TV as a structuring principle for television. In a final chapter enigmatically titled "Becoming," Villarejo aligns television with the melodramatic mode, a mode that uniquely shuffles between the macrosocial and the microindividual, reflecting in their flow the methods of her book:

[M]elodrama, like television, capitalizes on the uncertainties of address, the lacunae of chance, the mute and silent realism of longing, the dissatisfaction too close to name, which are constitutive of both specific subject positions and televisual discourse as a mediator whose function may be guaranteed but whose success never is. (154)

Villarejo recognizes that queerness echoes through images not as a result of audience narcissism or a mistaken attachment to a popular culture or as a vindication of queer folks' own right to history but instead because these transformations illuminate the conditions of possibility: they simply allow us to imagine something other than complete disappearance. And television, like the paradigm of queer, has proven remarkably resilient, in spite of (or perhaps because of) its fundamental ephemerality, its attentiveness towards what is lost.

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Notes

1. A short encapsulation of the terms of this debate can be found in the 2006 summary dialogue in "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May 2006): 819–28, conducted between Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, Tim Dean, and José Esteban Muñoz and following from conference presentations regarding queer relationality and its related archives. Edelman is generally considered to be the figure par excellence in this conversation, most especially as a result of his 2004 book *No Future*, which details the political necessity of queer rejection—rejection of marriage, rejection of reproduction, rejection of gay liberal inclusion logic—a rejection he envisions as the rhetorical death of the child, a figure who encapsulates the violence of subjunctive ethics. For Edelman, the figure of queer is understandable only as the anticomprehensibility of the death drive, that which exceeds purposeful signification: his interest being, of course, the extrication of "queer" as a negative term and as an umbrella term for all nonstraight sexual identities, with particular conceptual pressure placed on the "sinthomosexual," a figure of antirelational jouissance.

While in Muñoz's perspective the specter of gay normalization remains, he is uninterested in coupling normalization and antirelativity, a move that he argues valorizes white masculinism. Muñoz's critique, born of his own suspicions of queer theory's raced and classed outlook, elucidates the need for utopian thought, if only for those queer subjects whom the antinormative thesis excludes. This becomes one of the primary tenets of queer-of-color critique, initiated less as a collusion with the promise of gay futurity (to which they are more rigorously excluded than Edelman's hypothetical sinthomosexual) than as a survival precaution, one that recognizes the uneven distribution of "the future" but also the necessity of combating pragmatism through utopian yearning. A recent issue of *differences* (May 2015) titled "Queer Theory without Antinormativity" continues these debates, providing further questions as to whether such a "discipline in the negative" is tenable as a pedagogical project.

2. For ease of clarity throughout, I define television as the visual/textual form that Villarejo describes and TV as its material container. That being said, the removal of this obvious physical apparatus from medium-specific discourse is certainly a major theme of this work, and thus the aesthetic ephemerality cannot be divorced from the spatio-temporal circumstances from which it is experienced.

3. In terms of the queer negativity debates, it thus might be more useful to connect Villarejo's approach (which is politicized through an affective negotiation of time) to Heather Love's investment in queer "backwardness" or the complicated—often shame-ridden—negotiation of preliberation, politically suspect displays of dissident sexuality. Love's work is especially useful for the manner in which it de-masculinizes the extricating approach favored by Edelman, Dean, and Michael Warner while also remaining committed to an anti-identitarian, putatively antipride ethics. For her most famous work on the subject, see Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

4. This gesture could also implicitly be related to the enshrining of "quality" as a privileged form of televisual criticism that often restructures television in the negative—in other words, good television is not television at all. Villarejo recognizes that such discourses of legitimation inevitably reflect the "exemplary citizen" politics of the contemporaneous moment—that respectable inclusion directly involves the disavowal of feminized deferral or consumptive (i.e., eroticized) pleasures. For an overview of the historical and methodological dimensions of the quality paradigm, see Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence*

and *Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012). For an anthology examining the problem of visibility and democratic citizenship vis-à-vis the televisual apparatus, see Glyn Davis and Gary Needham, eds., *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

5. Perhaps the classic study of this concept is Jane Feuer's "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan, 12–21 (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), which argues that liveness is the privileged site of suture in the apparatus of television, a totalizing effort that attempts to mask the conditions of fragmentation or nonsimultaneous maneuvering that comprise traditional broadcast. John Caldwell's argument in *Televisuality: Style, Crisis and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), that television is almost entirely disinterested in liveness and instead appropriates a presentational, theater-based aesthetic is also a commonly cited component of these debates. In recent years (particularly since the rise of reality TV scholarship), liveness becomes the mechanism used to explore those shows' affective projects, with particular attention paid to the teleological reveal or the melodramatic collapse of narrative. For several explorations of this latter approach, see the "Project Reality TV" issue of *Camera Obscura* 88, no. 1 (2015).

6. Referring to the Lacanian conceptualization of the Real as intangible, or as an excess of representational value. Taken in concert with queer theory, such a conceit would suggest that sexuality as a signifier is always in some sense antisubjective and thus incapable of enunciation or inscription. Counter to this logic, Villarejo proposes that queer's existence need not depend on either the eradication or reification of an established subjective center but instead is an inherently intersubjective term.

7. This approach is also related to her provocative (but not always successful) defense of Theodor Adorno's work on the medium. Instead of enumerating his elitist hermeticism (the image to which, she polemically suggests, he has been assigned), Villarejo attempts to situate his writing as a queer project that displays sensitivity toward subversive irruption while remaining conscious of material barriers to expression. While this interpretation contains a few unexpected insights (such as his relating of television spectatorship and "women's labour"), one is still left to reconcile such openness with Adorno's generally suspicious outlook and a few questionable terminological choices. For instance, he refers to rebellious female characters as "bitch heroines" (Villarejo, 57) that keep women locked in infantile or regressive states, a wording that Villarejo suggests could be conceived of as a transformation of developmental terms vis-à-vis identification practice but remains somewhat opaque in the quotation she has provided. For her part, Villarejo acknowledges these limitations and even pokes gentle fun at Adorno's theories of devious ideological work in culture, or what she calls "the secret decoder ring" (43) practice of media studies.