

## **THEOSOPHY OF THE QUEER UNSEEN**

**Ricky Varghese**

Two years ago, when this special issue was first conceived by David, Fan, and me, I would have never thought that I would be writing this introduction in the midst of a global pandemic. The world feels like a very different place now than it did then. A psychoanalyst I know (I am a practicing psychotherapist and am currently training to become a psychoanalyst myself at the Toronto Institute of Psychoanalysis) recently wrote to me in an email, “We are living history, I think” (pers. comm., April 3, 2020). And in a way, I would have to agree with her. There is definitely something quite historic about what feels like a cataclysm in the history of humanity, a period in which life as we know it may be changed forever.

But queers have already lived through a historic event involving a viral contagion, not too long ago. There are many critical differences between the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the current pandemic, but I also find myself thinking of the many similarities. Then, as well, there was a near-invisible, impossible-to-fathom object to reckon with. It reckoned with us, too. It reorganized how we lived, how we fucked, how we encountered each other, and how we communed with one another in both the intimacy we have come to expect in our private lives and the sociality on which our public worlds depended. Coronavirus will do the same. The coordinates of its reach and the scale of its magnitude may differ, but these “unseeable, undead, unliving blobs dotted with suction pads waiting to fasten themselves to our lungs,” as writer Arundhati Roy (2020) referred to them, will irrevocably and in an almost obstinate manner reconstitute human life in ways that have yet to become clear to us. Clarity—in all senses of the word—evades us in this moment, be it with respect to what the future may look like for us locally and globally or even in regard to our ever-evolving knowledge about this new virus.

Garden-variety philosophical punditry aside—punditry that is as much a byproduct of the helplessness many of us might presently be feeling as of knowl-

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edge production, of having the first say or the final word on the topic; a kind of punditry that can ostensibly find fertile ground amid the ruins of a crisis—I have been taken in by the need to reexamine the course and nature of doing the work of producing theory in this very instance. What can queer theory, or the theological impulses within social and political life, possibly teach us about the present? How might we engage theoretical work in the foreground of a crisis-ridden eschatological background? On what object or objects of inquiry might the shadow of our thought and thinking, our very queer way of thinking and living, fall? What, even, might knowledge production mean in this version of what appears to be a kind of end times?

There might not be any easily arrived-at answers to these concerns. However, when we consider how life might be reorganized and reconstituted at a scale that may be unimaginable or inconceivable, for which we are not prepared in the least, one thing may indeed be certain: what we are reckoning with right now is an experience with loss. And along with that experience of loss, an experience with grief and grieving. On one hand, there is the very real potential loss of life of those most vulnerable to the illness at hand, the precarious tether on which our lives and the lives of our loved ones may be hanging ever so gently. In another register, there is also the loss of the ways of living to which we may have arguably become accustomed or that we have come to take for granted, like sitting on a park bench, going for a walk, picking up groceries, gathering at a club, at a community event, a bathhouse, or even a religious assembly. Even the gestures of conviviality and sociality have changed for the foreseeable future. A handshake now feels as risky as barebacking might have to some. Even the ways in which we seek and offer support have shifted, as in the case of my own therapeutic practice, which has moved entirely to working with my patients over the phone.

Psychoanalysis replicates something of the theological sensibility that is a particular mainstay of the Judeo-Islamo-Christian faith trifacta. These Abrahamic traditions are well-known for their prohibition against images when it comes to conceptualizing the figure of God. Unrepresentable, God may variously be experienced as a spirit or force or unseen figure in, an invisible host to, or a guest within the life of a believer. Similarly, in the therapeutic scene of psychoanalysis, the encounter between analyst and analysand (or patient, as they are more colloquially known) appears to have an element of the unseen that is implicit to this dyadic relationship. The patient walks into the analyst's office and is led to the couch, on which the former lies down to engage in the emotional work that therapy demands. The analyst sits, listening, some short distance behind and away from the couch. What is enacted is an exchange in which the analyst is never in the line of the

patient's vision and remains unseen as such for the duration of the session. This allows the patient, in a relaxed manner and free from the presumption of judgment, to speak freely and free-associatively about their emotional world. The immediately perceivable difference between the experience of a believer's communion with the invisible figure of God and that of an analysand in a session with their analyst is that, in the latter scenario, the analyst is ostensibly present in the room with the analysand, and the latter is aware of this corporeal presence in a very immediately responsive manner. It is not that the analyst is God, in this instance, or even God-like, but that there is a theological and theosophical edge to the belief that an analysand might place in the analyst, a belief in the sense that the analyst is truly and earnestly listening to their worries and concerns, not dissimilar to the way a believer ardently believes their prayers are being heard.

Moving our work from the space of my office to the phone in the wake of the pandemic—a requirement that was put in place taking to heart the public health advisory regarding social distancing that was announced in various jurisdictions—has added another layer of disembodiment to the dyadic experience of analytic work, in one sense perhaps bringing it closer to the dynamic between a believer and a truly unseen version of God. Phone sessions require an altogether different kind of psychic energy, it feels, to work from within. I miss the ritual of having my patients come in physically for their sessions. My patients have admitted to feelings of profound loss tied to this ritual as well. If an aspect of psychoanalytic work requires the development of an acute and highly attuned capacity on the part of the analyst to listen, then listening to one's patient's disembodied voice—or their listening to your own disembodied voice—requires a finer sort of attunement and tests the very nature of listening itself. In the absence of both my patients' and my physical yet unseen presence in the same space, the virus has come to reconstitute the very ways by which therapy has taken place thus far. There is a sort of grief and mourning at play here in what has transpired over the last few weeks, a grief and mourning related to the things we have lost.

Furthermore, while both the scene of psychoanalysis and the Abrahamic version of God require a structure of belief in an unseen figure, the ontological nature of the virus is determined by an affect altogether seemingly different: fear in the unseen. We know the virus exists. Microscopic imaging has made it possible to visually represent it. We also feel its effects in the varied symptoms it presents us with. However, rendered invisible to the naked eye and wildly contagious, it feels omnipresent. Every surface should be presumed to be a host to the microbial matter, every person should be understood to be an unwitting carrier, according to the logics of social distancing protocols that have been put in place the world

over. Tanya Goel, a visual artist based in Delhi, India, created a series of sound-based videos archiving the silence that has enveloped quotidian life in the country under a national lockdown. The series of images on Instagram, titled “‘The Virus in the Air, Is Abstract,’ Spring in Curfew, Sounds in Spring” (2020), records the silence in the air as the virus makes its way even more quietly through the nation of 1.3 billion. The virus in the air might be an abstraction, borne of both a belief in its pervasiveness and a fear of its indiscernible reach, which translates to a fear of the other. The material losses incurred, the ravage it leaves behind in its wake, however, may not be so abstract.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I pushed forth in compiling this special issue with my collaborators on the interplay between the queer and the theological in the scene and space of the political. We attempted, to the best of our abilities and for the time being, to organize an issue that made room for a diversity of voices, disciplinary approaches, and ethical and sociopolitical investments. This compilation is not, in the least bit, exhaustive. We hope that it is but a mere yet potentially worthwhile contribution and provocation to what is an ongoing set of debates. I would like to take this opportunity as well to express thanks to our various contributors for their richly incisive essays, to the peer reviewers whose comments and insights only further strengthened this issue, and to Umair Abdul Qadir, whose critical eye and acumen facilitated the copyediting and proofreading of the issue’s manuscript in its entirety. I hope that you find the texts here a worthwhile read demanding of close engagement, whichever end of the queer political theological debate you find yourself on.

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## HOME FOR NEITHER BIRD NOR HOLINESS

Fan Wu

The world in which we live is too dire to call foolish and too funny to forsake.  
 Stained glass learns to begin to rust.  
 The gay pain of your early twenties shoots like a spine through your bum hip:  
     round these  
 parts we wander approximating power or mistaking talk for it.  
 The name is holy, socketed by chains to keep it not carried away by whatever  
     passing wind.

There's a sheathe of frost that lines your pockets.  
 The stars above Gabriola are cut at part-dawn  
 by a hawk whose windtrail blurs those stars' light.  
 I am waiting to be removed by love.  
 Those who are closest to knowing  
 what they don't know are halfway dwellers, who unite the more rigid masses by  
     dint of the liminal.  
 The view from up top seems impossible, cloud and sea speckle into each other.

We sit and compose a human knot.  
 Now we are holding hands and forming a parameter around the divine.  
 Now we are vividly lost to ourselves and transfixed to breath.  
 Now family's a loop de loop fountain  
 of ceaseless blood in chromakey cycle.  
 Now we swallow pandemic fears and speak not in tongues of revelation.  
 Now we risk only the Identity that stands next to death.  
 Now there's lichen in our eyes obscuring our view of the kingdom.  
  
 Now a chewy fog of dissolution settles at the base of the lung.  
 Fables deform us; the same stars we'd used to chart our course lay stunned at the  
     bag's  
 bottom, smelling of sheep's knuckle and whalebone.  
 What gnaws at our lives as we gather in silos, drinking water and listening to  
     music?

A paralytic power gestates:  
 Nor Lord nor state but the haze of hope and how slow its speed,  
 encratered in the hurry of  
 the litheness of a line that would divide East from waste.  
 The worried talk to God goes on.

## **THE BERN: A QUEER POLITICAL THEOLOGICAL FEELING**

**David K. Seitz**

“Both the notion of having a rupture with your self *and* the notion of narrated personal coherence are Protestant conventions, heightened in all the American variants of Protestantism.”

—Michael Warner, “Tongues Untied: Memories of a Pentecostal Boyhood”

*I*ll never forget my mother’s words to me when I came out to her again, this time as a democratic socialist: “Is this going to go on your permanent record?”

Her query recalls brutal and ongoing histories of state surveillance and repression of leftists and queers, as well as more banal practices of disciplinary infantilization well known to a wide range of historically subordinated persons. But beyond this expression of concern, my mother was unfazed, not particularly surprised by my “news.”

Chantal Mouffe (2000: 102, original emphasis) writes that “to accept the view of the [political] adversary is to undergo a radical change in political identity. It is more a sort of *conversion* than a process of rational persuasion.” History is littered with dramatic socialist conversion stories with heavy religious overtones (Debs 1908) as well as apocalyptic, racist, and erotophobic right-wing warnings of socialist “recruitment” (Bérubé 2011). Many such conversions are precipitated by galvanizing historical events—in my case, a graduate teaching assistant strike in Toronto and Bernie Sanders’s historic US presidential campaigns. But the actual event of conversion often follows years of rumination and experimentation—for me,

a gradual drift away from the neoliberal, white suburban Democratic party politics of my childhood, nurtured by independent media and queer activism. Indeed, as Michael Warner (2004) reminds us, political-theological conversions are rarely total ruptures. Both my Lutheran upbringing and my training in queer theory have in fact nurtured my socialist sensibilities.

These affinities are in part intellectual. For all its faults (and they are considerable), Lutheran theology's emphasis on God's capacious, loving grace, rather than individual good works, as the path to salvation informs and shapes my appreciation for the radical ethical potential of universal social programs like single-payer healthcare. I am accordingly skeptical of neoliberal, means-tested approaches to social welfare reliant upon essentialized hierarchies of deservingness (Hagan 2019), approaches against which socialist, feminist, queer, Black, and other racialized activists and scholars have long militated (Cohen 1997; Day 2018). And although I was a middling student of the Lutheran catechism in high school, the central place of writers ranging from the Combahee River Collective (1983) to Lisa Duggan (2003) to Jasbir K. Puar (2007) in my undergraduate and graduate training formatively introduced me to critiques of racial capitalism and empire as the indispensable contexts for understanding gender and sexual politics (Taylor 2012).

But my attachment to democratic socialism, an affinity that shows up in the mundane work of organizing, is also profoundly, queerly visceral. For one thing, I have never teared up so regularly as at political organizing meetings or rallies, as complete strangers open up to me about the horror that the US healthcare or criminal justice system has wrought in their lives, or as long-repressed socialist and anti-imperialist convictions belatedly and provisionally (re)enter into politically admissible speech in the United States. I have also been surprised by the ways in which my banal, anxious habitus cultivated on queer Internet hookup and dating apps—mustering the openness required for fleeting, alienating, potentially thrilling, disappointing, boring, life-changing, or even life-threatening encounters with strangers every weekend—has prepared me for the improvisatory, cross-race, cross-class intimacies of door-to-door canvassing for a political organizing campaign (Delany 1999). And although I have never knocked on doors as a (formally) religious evangelist, I would imagine proselytizers experience similar surprises in these strange conversations, listening intently, going off-script, giving voice to their training and convictions in unpredictable, sometimes inchoate ways, as the moment might seem suddenly to require.

My previous scholarly work examines the radical political potential of

affective moments when normatively white, queer, Protestant formations are disrupted, moved beyond liberal identitarian states of injury (Brown 1995) toward more coalitional and capacious forms of solidarity. “What are the *affective* conditions,” I ask, “under which differently marginalized people might engage in meaningful solidarity and reciprocal intimacy with one another?” (Seitz 2017: 227, original emphasis). There are many answers to this question. But I hear the beginnings of one answer in Sanders’s own question (2019), which became something of a religious refrain for campaign volunteers: “Are you willing to fight for a person you don’t know as much as you’re willing to fight for yourself?” Julia Kristeva would have a field day.

Our aim in this special issue is to build on scholarly accounts of this strange, visceral *queerness* already immanent to political-theological life and to efforts to transform it. Reflecting on the relationship between his Pentecostal upbringing and his latter-day secular queer theorizing, Warner (2004) notes affinities between Pentecostal and queer ethical and textual practices—a profoundly suspicious hermeneutic tradition and a visceral, pleasurable investment in the cancellation of the world in its present form.

But narrative and subjectivity are not the only game in town here. In his consideration of what he amalgamates as “Blackpentecostalism” for Black study and Black queer studies, Ashon T. Crawley (2017: 4, original emphasis) privileges the transformative work of flesh, vibration, movement, aesthetics, and performance, arguing that “the tradition of [Blackpentecostal] performances is an *atheological-aphilosophical* project, produced against the grain of liberal logics of subjectivity.” Crawley’s approach reverberates with the work of psychoanalytic critic Eric L. Santner (2011: 60), for whom the sovereign subject is also “fundamentally precarious,” because it is “subject, in a singular fashion, to a radical ontological vulnerability whereby a form of life can become horribly *informe* [shapeless].” But where the sovereign, for Santner, fears the “formlessness” that the liminal space between forms of creaturely life entails, Crawley (2017: 2), working in the abolitionist tradition of Black studies, sees liberation, transformation, “otherwise possibilities.”

Each of the contributions to our special issue examines precisely this site of jointure, the place where people’s nonnormative erotic, affective, and psychic investments exceed or depart from secular, (neo)liberal forms of political-theological life. Such excesses offer glimmers of otherwise possibilities—possibilities that Crawley is quick to point out are not necessarily new but remain immanent in potentially emancipatory ways. Such visceral attachments to otherwise possibility, because they are irreducible to philosophy or theology, will always elide capture—whether, to return to my mother’s query, by the disciplinary form of a “permanent record”

or even by the more pleasantly subjectivizing form of my Democratic Socialists of America membership card. Our collective project in this special issue, then, is not one of capture, but one of thinking with and through *some* otherwise possibilities of *some* queer political theologies, with the knowledge that no academic journal article or issue could ever come close to exhausting them.

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