"I'M QUEER AND I DANCED AND HAD A LOT OF FEELINGS HERE"

The Archive and History's Returns in *Queering The Map*
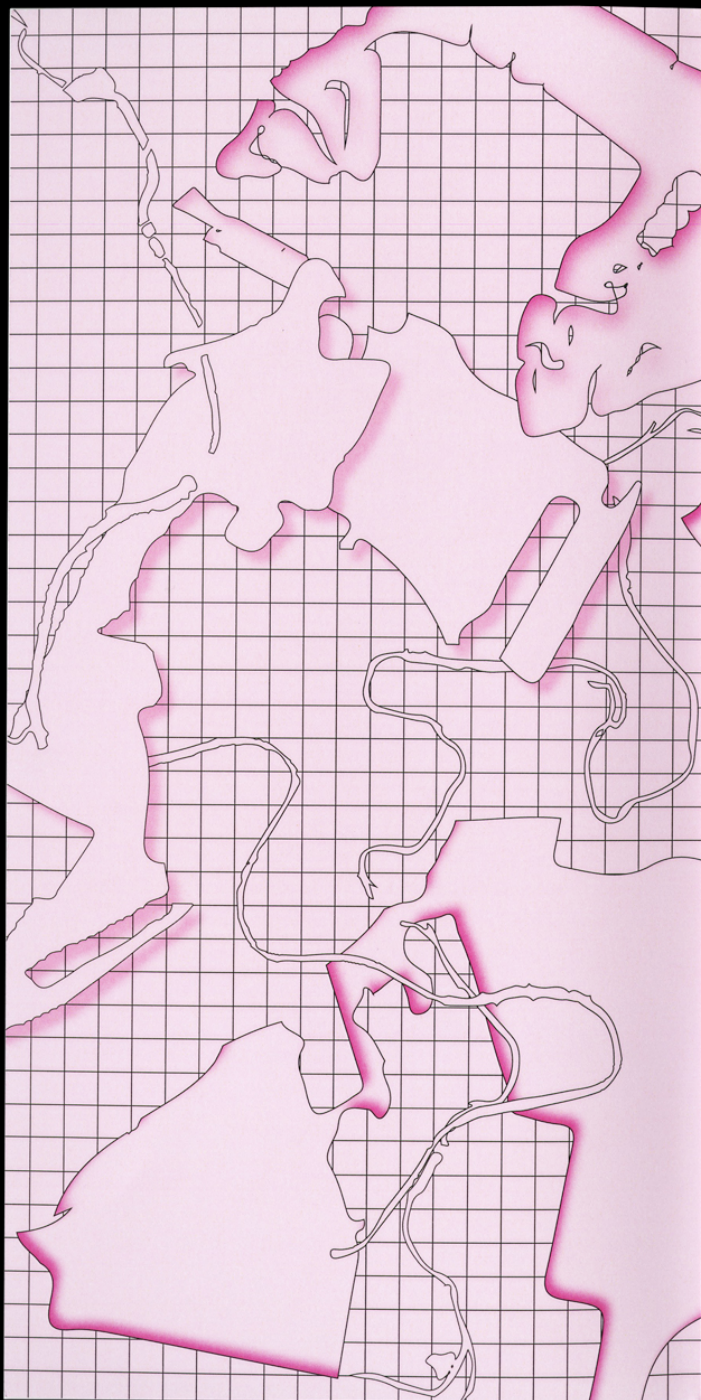
Jacob Carter

Fig.1 – An open field in Leoti, Kansas. See *Queering The Map*, Lucas LaRochelle.

I begin with this image of a nondescript open field alongside a highway in a rural area (Fig. 1). It appears to be approximately midday, though the sun is hidden from view; a thin stretch of clouds diffuses through the sky. The shot is of poor quality, blurring the white farm buildings in the background. In the distance are the hazy impressions of a radio tower and powerlines.

As is evident from the compass in the bottom right corner and the two opposing arrows in the center of the screen, this is a Google Street View image, though this was not a screenshot taken through Google Maps. I first came across the image via a grassroots digital mapping project known as *Queering the Map*. Launched in Montreal in 2017, the map was developed by Lucas LaRochelle, who describes the project as "a community-generated mapping project, which geo-locates queer memories, histories, and experiences in relation to physical space using an

online platform".[1] The image I've shown documents a place located just outside Leoti, Kansas, where an anonymous contributor dropped a digital marker, or pin, which includes the description: "Even here you can find love." *Queering the Map* remixes the Google Maps interface, rendering landmasses in a light pink color and removing the geolocation search engine. In contrast to contemporary GPS technology, which is capable of localizing place and providing clear direction, *Queering the Map* requires contributors to scroll with their cursor—dragging and zooming and clicking through the map in order to mark and transcribe queer memories. It takes work to return to a place—a laborious process of pushing and pulling against the pink terrain until the location of the queer experience appears.

In this essay, I draw attention to *Queering the Map*'s interface and the distinct performance of scrolling, zooming, and transcribing. Much of what animates my interest in this place-based, digital archive is the challenging process of returning to places of queer intimacy and sexuality. The acts that have marked these places as significant are ephemeral, resistant to visibility, and carry no trace of evidence apart from contributors' memories. Ann Cvetkovich's influential scholarship on gay and lesbian "archives of feeling" provides crucial direction in this paper. Cvetkovich claims that "the history of any archive is the history of space" and argues that the usefulness of an archive is shaped by how the space itself facilitates the encounter between the archival object and persons in the archive.[2] Cvetkovich describes how gay and lesbian "archives of feeling" negotiate the absence of gay and lesbian history from state-run memory institutions by emphasizing the importance of affect, memory, and other embodied forms of evidence that are too "difficult to chronicle through the materials of the traditional archive" and that gesture toward the ephemeral histories of sexuality.[3] Cvetkovich describes an idiosyncratic process of movement and touch, wherein persons are brought into contact with the remains of gay and lesbian history. Cvetkovich's "archive of feelings" is about acquiring a direction in relation to the past. It is about the affective pull toward sites of memory and queer history.

It's this affective pull toward the past—this distinct embodied act that informs the production of both space and history—that informs this analysis of *Queering the Map*. Though not limited to gay and lesbian histories, *Queering the Map* is still informed by what it means to move through (digital) space and feel one's way toward objects that carry powerful affective attachments. The focus of my paper is on how queer places are generated and sustained through acts of returning—acts of reaching back toward ephemeral histories that are no longer visible. Such returns always occur anonymously in the context of *Queering the Map*, as the map's moderators do not allow contributors to share any personal information because of the continued precarity and negation of queer life in spaces impressed upon with white cis-heteronormativity. It is not enough to say that this is a paper about identifying queer places and histories, as the term "identifying" is closely tied with the same systems of surveillance that render LGBTQ+ life, particularly nonbinary, gender

nonconforming, and trans life of color, vulnerable. If we position acts of looking and turning back as crucial gestures in the formation of queer places, histories, and publics, then we must also contend with how such gestures are necessarily mobile and resistant to visibility. In part, this mobility points to the precarity of queerness, but it also demonstrates what it means to live in resistance to the overwhelming presence and violence of white cis-heteronormativity.
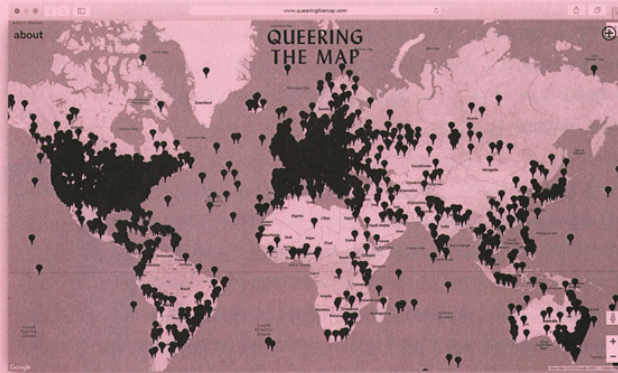

Fig. 2 – The interface of Queering The Map. See *Queering The Map*, Lucas LaRochelle.

When first loading the map, I am presented with a bird's eye view of Montreal, where the project began in 2017. LaRochelle, then an undergraduate at Concordia University, and their friends were the first contributors to the project. Then in early February 2018, Montreal-based DJ Frankie Teardrop shared the map on Facebook, and in a matter of days the number of pins rose from a few hundred to several thousand.[4] At this point, Montreal no longer serves as the locus of the project. More than 30,000 pins extend across the map. Yet, when I load the map, Montreal remains the starting point. This means that I must push outward in order to reach back toward the familiar. Finding my way takes time and a willingness to trace a path through a map that is at this point bursting with tens of thousands of pins. Zooming out from the map might seem the best way to minimize time spent dragging with the cursor, but too great a distance causes the pins to amass into a single collective (Fig. 2). The tendency for pins to congregate and collapse into each other makes it necessary to zoom in closer and separate out these memories. The close proximity to space provides a certain legibility, but there is still a need to move out slowly—a need to allow the space to unfold as I drag my cursor along this landscape, my fingers along the keyboard. It's an often frustrating yet intimate relationship that emerges through the interface, a sensation of giving myself over to the contours of the landscape so that I may trace my way back.

I return to my home in Austin, TX. Familiar places appear: streets I once passed through, apartments I lived in, bars where I once met with friends. To be so close to this space—a necessity when there is no way to input a specific address—is admittedly difficult and frustrating. Places never clearly reveal themselves, often only coming into sight through other points of familiarity: I recognize a street and use it to trace my way through the digital space until I can find what I'm looking for. My memories start to transpose onto this space, becoming a means of orientation and movement. Oddly enough for a map, *Queering the Map* precludes the totalization of space, and places are not identified by their coordinates, but rather by their approximate relationship to other places. There is a partiality of vision even in this close proximity to the map, a certain challenge in acquiring direction.

Fig.3 – The entrance to my old neighborhood in Austin, TX. See *Queering The Map*, Lucas LaRochelle.

Places are not easily located, even when I've ostensibly found the proper direction. I'm reminded here of an early experience with *Queering the Map* when I came upon this image: an entryway to a neighborhood where I lived for only a brief time in my last year of high school and where I experienced my first kiss in a car parked in front of my mother's house—a place where my own sexuality began to feel like something I could articulate, however incompletely (Fig. 3). I find my way to this place through the map and render it visible. The image is unremarkable, just two sandstone structures (obscured in this photo) that demarcate the entrance and a bed of red flowers planted in the median. While this image is not the place I was looking for, connecting only indirectly to my own memories, I linger here precisely because I can go no further. Evidently the vehicle to which the camera was attached never went past this entryway because I cannot advance any further into the neighborhood. Each time I attempt to move forward in Street View, I am only repositioned along a horizontal axis that brings me no closer to my mother's house. Home lingers somewhere around the corner in the space outside of the frame. While I can

and *have* transcribed my memories onto that offscreen location, there is still this gap between what is available to language and what is available to sight. Not that bringing this house into sight is the same as bringing the past into the present. I only wish to point out that, in *Queering the Map*, returning is always an act of reaching out. It is an act of pushing out toward something familiar that remains withheld.

Transcribed memories are also withheld, at least temporarily, while *Queering the Map*'s comment moderation team reviews the content of the description. According to a post on *Queering the Map*'s Instagram, the project is entirely volunteer-run and comment moderation requires time and labor, considering that tens of thousands of pins are added each month (*Queering the Map*, "Over the past four weeks…"). Though pins appear when they are first anchored to places, they are soon removed while the moderation team reviews the content. I remember at first thinking that my transcribed memories were simply disappearing from the map. I often come back to places in the hopes of finding pins that I've left behind. When I returned to an apartment in Milwaukee where I once cathartically danced with a queer friend and fellow graduate student during a tumultuous time in our personal lives, I could not find anything. I clicked through pins located in proximity to the location, thinking that I had misremembered the place. The memories were not there, and it is unclear when they will appear again. I keep coming back, only to find nothing. My pins are not so much lost as they are concealed,
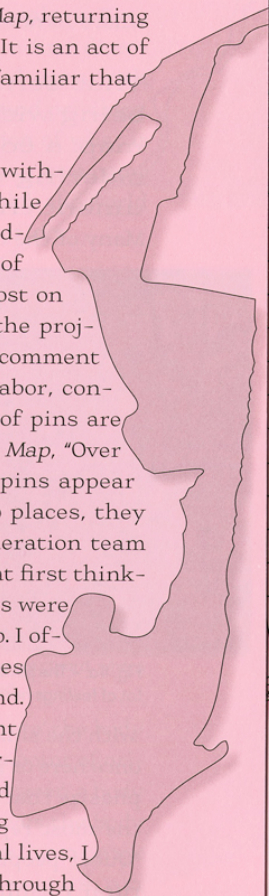
caught somewhere in the rotation of the moderation system. These concealed pins continue to inform my interactions with the map and continuously bring me back toward memories that are in a state of temporal delay. Is it enough to say the memories are gone when I continue to find myself slipping back to where I know they once were?

That sense of places and objects being withheld recurs across the map: a confounding feeling considering that so many pins document the *presence* of queer life. Many of the descriptions are in fact concerned
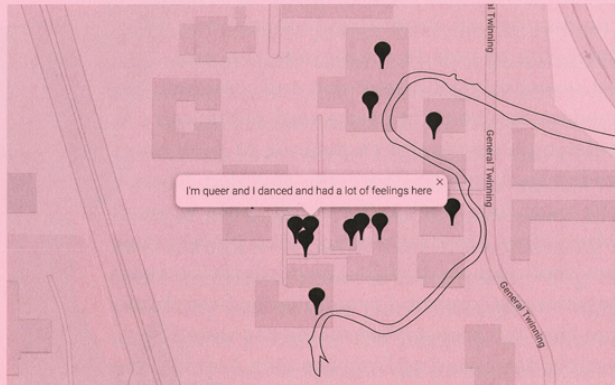

Fig. 4a. – The pin in Sarasota: "I ′m queer and I danced and had a lot of feelings here." See *Queering The Map*, Lucas LaRochelle.

 with the simple recognition that queer life was *once* here or perhaps is *still* here. I'd like to emphasize that word "here" because it is arguably the most repeated word in *Queering the Map*. "Queer people live here too," reads one pin in rural Washington state, a description that is not so much concerned with turning back to the past than with turning forward to a continuously unfolding present in which queer life persists through time and space. One pin in Orvieto, Italy reads, "You took my hand here and my heart started flying." Another in Sarandí del Yí, Uruguay state, "Here I spent the whole
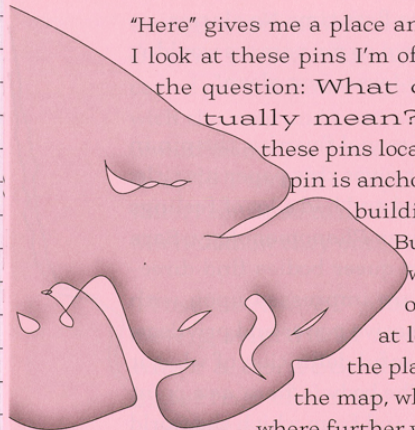
night with her for the first time. No alarms, no rushing out before dawn so my parents wouldn't call wondering where I was…just sleep."

And then there's a personal favorite, the pin in Sarasota, Florida that gives this paper it's title: "I'm queer and I danced and had a lot of feelings here" (Fig. 4a). In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed theorizes how queer bodies find direction in spaces that are impressed upon with white cis-heteronormative power and privilege, and she provides a useful definition of what it means to be "here": "The body is 'here' as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds…The 'here' of the body does not

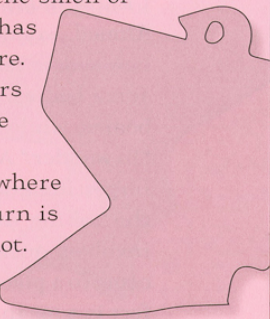Fig. 4b. – The apartment complex in Sarasota. the courtyard, where the pin was placed, is possibly in the background.

simply refer to the body, but to 'where' the body dwells".[5] The word "here" indicates a point of orientation, a specific relationship between a body and the surrounding space that gives the body its bearings in the world. In the context of *Queering the Map*, "here" is an indication that a queer body once found a place and was orientated toward *something*—in the case of these previous examples, that something was love, other queer lives, or one's own body and feelings on a dance floor.

"Here" gives me a place and a direction, yet as I look at these pins I'm often confronted with the question: What does "here" actually mean? Where exactly are these pins located? In Sarasota, the pin is anchored to an apartment building near the airport. But it's not *the* location where a queer body once danced and felt, at least not according to the placement of the pin on the map, which is located somewhere further within the complex in what appears to be a courtyard (Fig. 4a). According to the Street View image, the car that drove through this area never went further than the entrance to this complex, where a dozen other pins are anchored (Fig. 4b). Street View images are meant to evoke a sense of movement through a place. Based on these images, though, this is a place to pass by rather than move through. It is only one part of a larger panorama designed to evoke a feeling of immersion within a space. It is, in other words, not an image meant to be separated out or lingered upon. But the description left behind by this anonymous contributor asks that I give my attention to this place and to this image. It asks me to push in toward what must remain out of sight. "Here"—the place a body once inhabited—is withheld. It is a term that is only available in the contributor's description. The image is only ever an approximation of "here."

Approximations, gaps between text and image, the indication that something is here when in fact it isn't—these are the things I notice the longer I interact with *Queering the Map*. To visualize place on *Queering the Map* is to recognize that, for many contributors, queer places exist where no visible trace or landmark of queer life remains. There is a slippage between description and image, a certain indeterminacy or illegibility that animates both forms of documentation (the text and the image) and causes me to move back and forth between vacant images and descriptions that assert the presence of life. It's the same sort of slippage that Ahmed notes when discussing the sensation of returning to a familiar place. Ahmed describes this experience through an anecdote about relocating to a new home. Upon arriving to this unfamiliar place, Ahmed is met with the familiar smell of spices, which overwhelm and pull Ahmed back to an unknown place:

> I feel flung back somewhere else. I am never sure where the smell of spices takes me, as it has followed me everywhere. Each smell that gathers returns me somewhere else; I am not always sure where that somewhere is. Sometimes the return is welcome, sometimes not. Sometimes it is tears or laughter that make me realize that I have been pulled to another place and another time. Such memories can involve a recognition of how one's body already feels, coming after the event.[6]

Return is registered as a feeling that pulls the body toward a place tinged with both the familiar and unfamiliar, where objects fail to gather and the body cannot find its way. The return or

reencounter emerges as "somewhere" that the body "already feels" because it always carries the histories of how it arrived in place, and it is subject to the eruptive force of the familiar. An eruption. The feeling of return—the sensation of being flung back—dislocates the body and enacts a spatial and temporal slippage. The body is left in the uncertainty of "somewhere else." I'll never know what motivates contributors to return these places, and *Queering the Map*'s commitment to anonymity ensures, for good reason, that other contributors will only ever be revealed to me through the traces they leave behind. However, this does not stop me from staring at a pin such as the one in Sarasota and thinking: *What brought you back here?* It's a strange question to pose, if only for the intimacy of the second-person pronoun "you." I direct the question toward those who could never answer and continue to do so as though expecting a response. The question invokes, if anything, a sense of wonder and a desire to uncover what I know must necessarily remain hidden. For Ahmed, wonder is a heightened awareness of how spaces take shape and become familiar for some bodies, specifically white heterosexual bodies, while remaining unfamiliar to others. "To wonder," Ahmed notes, "is to remember the forgetting and to see the repetition of form as the 'taking form' of the familiar".[7] Wondering involves questioning how people and objects came to a place and shaped one another. The affect is a means of pushing in toward those "histories of arrival" and unravelling the seemingly natural placement of a person or object.[8] To be animated by wonder, as I often am when interacting with *Queering the Map*, is to attempt to uncover traces that extend beyond what is directly visible in a contributor's description. The recurring question I pose (*What brought you back here?*) reveals my own sense

that these descriptions are not enough. I find myself thinking that there must be something more to find, and if I return enough times to a location, I will start to uncover those traces or excesses.

When I reference the challenge of returning in *Queering the Map*, I am not referring only to the difficulty of navigation across the map. I am also calling attention to the unsettling, incomplete, and disorientating ways in which places return. Across the map, pins document their own limitation— failing to capture through writing what no longer remains in place or bringing the contributor to the limits of visibility. It's not so much a *here* that gets recorded so much as a *not quite here* or a *perhaps here but probably over there*. Memories cohere around approximations or empty spaces, and they seem to carry a mark of their deviation through images that are absent of bodies. These are memories that have fallen out of line and instead settled somewhere off from where they should otherwise gather. It's difficult to claim that any digital project carries the traces of its users, especially when that project is committed to anonymity. But I still propose that, just as descriptions carry the trace of what was once there, these spatial approximations gesture toward queer lives that are attempting to make their way back to the places they once inhabited. The imperfect mapping of description onto place signals the presence of lives who have engaged in the labor of scrolling, dragging, clicking, zooming, and tracing their way back in an effort to touch the

familiar. The points at which the map fails are the points where I can begin to perceive the act of returning—that gesture of reaching back that cannot entirely will the past into the present yet tries nonetheless.
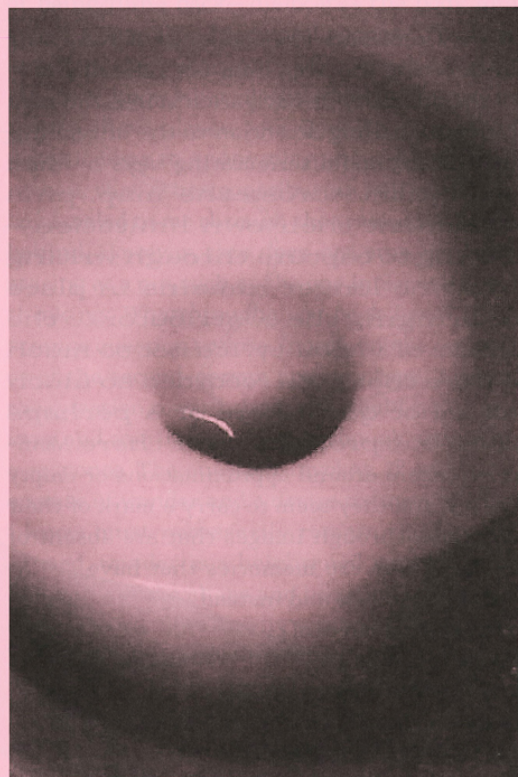

Fig. 5 – Tony Just, Untitled, 1994. Printed courtesy of the artist in Muñoz, *Crusing Utopia*

Throughout my research on *Queering the Map* and my exposure to images that are animated with the absence of queer life, I've been repeatedly brought back to another image that indexes absence, one that was discussed by José Esteban Muñoz in the essay "Ephemera as Evidence" (Fig. 5). Discussing this Tony Just photograph, which documents a former tearoom that Just thoroughly sanitized before photographing it, Muñoz describes how the image visualizes a queer lifeworld of public sex but "through negation, through a process of erasure that redoubles and marks the systematic erasure of minoritarian histories".[9] For Muñoz, this image of a toilet, removed from its context through its extreme closeness, is haunted with the traces of queer life. These traces are experienced as a "structure of feeling," to invoke Raymond Williams for moment, that is made available to the body in the encounter with the image. Memory, feeling, and other forms of "ephemera" provide the sense that *something* has returned in spite, or perhaps because of, the stubbornness of the past, its refusal to return in full.

It is admittedly difficult to me to attach a similar reading to the images I've shown— images that were not taken within any regard for the queer life that once moved through these spaces. These are images that were never meant to hold our attention. But the descriptions that contributors have left behind signal that an attempt to return has been made. These descriptions tell me to linger here in the stillness and incompleteness of the image. These points of slippage between the writing and the site of experience are what prevent me from seeing the past as entirely past.

It is often hard to feel that sense of "somewhere else" that Ahmed describes in these empty expanses and vague descriptions. "Somewhere else" is an abstractly defined space that brings forth laughter or tears and perhaps even brings you into contact with other queer lives. So much of what animates the work of Ahmed, Cvetkovich, and Muñoz— these scholars that in the past have let me know that even an

absence or a refusal can be some-
thing to hold onto—is this idea of
world-building or -making. These
terms are meant to invoke the possibility of
queer encounters across space and time. It is
difficult to attach hope to an idea of a potenti-
ality that is always held in the abstract—with-
held from view, refusing clear definition. But
still, one of the objectives of this paper has
been to question what becomes available when
queer spaces are understood as emerging at the
point of looking back, in the attempt to return
to familiar objects that hold memory and his-
tory. What returns in the return?
And what other forms of knowl-
edge production become avail-
able through the recognition that
history is in part embodied and
spatially motivated—something
that emerges in and through the
sensation of being dragged back?
Might there be a way to feel the persistence of
queer life and history at the point of reencoun-
ter? Perhaps to linger in the aftermath of an
ephemeral event is precisely the gesture need-
ed to perceive what continues to linger and to
dance and to feel.
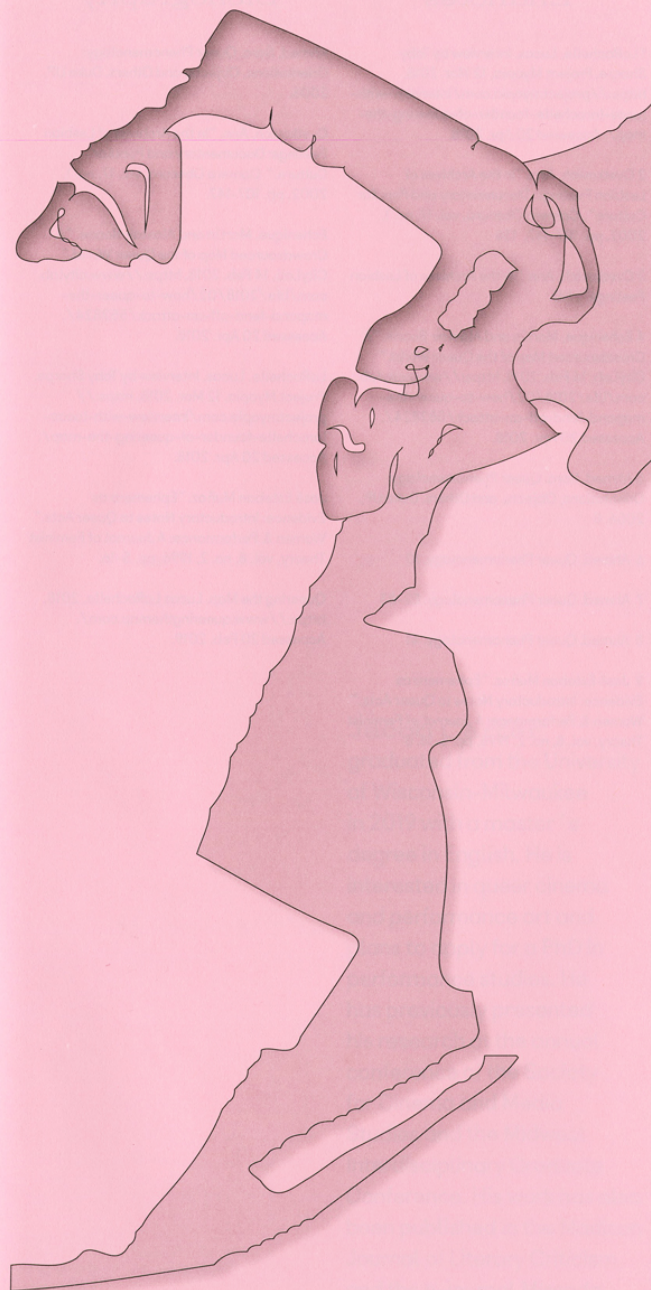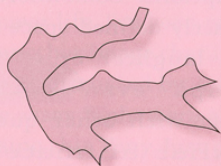
Endnotes

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3 Cvetkovich, Ann. "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings" , 110

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7 Ahmed. Queer Phenomenology. 82-83

8 Ahmed. Queer Phenomenology. 41

9 José Esteban Muñoz. "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts." Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory, vol. 8, no. 2, 1996, pp. 5-16. 6

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