Scenes and Sexualities:

Queerly Reframing the Music Scenes Perspective

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Abstract

Historically, research on music cultures has favoured examination of the subcultural affiliations of the youthful urban white working-class heterosexual male. While the prominence of this subject has since been contested by a number of scholars, even the most celebrated forms of scholarship in this area continue to work within heteronormative discourses. In fact, omitted considerations of non-heterosexualities and sexual styles are a stark reminder of the frequent invisibility of the queer subject, not only in relation to much subcultural and post-subcultural theory, but also in relation to broader discussions about musical and extra-musical style generally. This paper addresses these omissions. Specifically, it reviews existing music scenes literature demonstrating how, as a theoretical concept, scene has emerged out of the reductiveness and rigidity of subcultural theory. It examines work on musically mediated performances of sexuality, identifying the need for more work around sexualities and music scenes in everyday contexts. It proposes how and by whom such work can be done. And it details the integration of queer theories into the music scenes perspective, showing how 'scene' can accommodate a more flexible approach to queer collective formations which is necessary for everyday musically mediated queer subjectivities to be understood.

Key words

Queer; scenes; subculture; music.

Introduction

[Boy] George was really the first reflection I saw of myself in the world, I saw him and thought, okay, that's what we do when we're like this: We become singers.

(Transgender singer, Antony Hegarty, cited in Smith 2005, 19)

Popular music, its everyday uses and its implications in the lives of ordinary people have been favoured topics of discussion among cultural sociologists for some years now (Bennett 2000; DeNora 2000). Popular music is commonly understood as a primary means of managing feelings, regulating moods, remembering and (re)constructing relationships, negotiating the parameters of aesthetic agency, signalling individual and collective identities and desires, and it is a strategic resource in the production and transmission of self-narrative and identification as Hegarty's above quote illustrates.

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As innumerable sociological and cultural studies theorists have shown, these functions of music are pertinent to the construction and articulation of identity, particularly in the time of one's youth, where music—commonly accompanied by dance, fashion and other media—is a key marker of self-presentation, collectivity and belonging. More recently, however, 'youth' itself has become a contested category in popular music studies. As scholars such as Bennett (2006), Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004), Davis (2006), Halberstam (2005), Smith (2009), Taylor (2010) and Vroomen (2004) have argued, post-youth subjects continue to invest in music and music scene participation where music may be ideologically connected to a sense of youthfulness, thus 'youth' cannot always be biologically and temporally limited. Following on from earlier debates around popular music and class rigidity (Chambers 1985; Clarke 1997[1981]), ethnic minorities (Bennett 2000; Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004), gendered subjectivities (McRobbie 1994; McRobbie and Garber 1976), geographical specificities (Cohen 1991; Shank 1994; Whiteley, Bennett and Hawkins, 2004) and disabilities (Lerner and Straus 2006; McKay 2009), the problematisation of youth as a delimited category is one of the more recent deconstructive enterprises in a near on 40 year tradition of popular music and subcultural studies.

Still lacking in much of the work around identificatory functions of music and extra-musical style are discussions of queer scene formations and uses of music by queer people. Here, queer refers to a range of identities, practices and scene collectives that cannot be located within either a heteronormative or homonormative frame of reference but may include people who identify as lesbian, gay, dyke, fag, butch, femme, genderqueer, bisexual, pansexual, transgender and/or queer among other things. Potentially, popular music and scene participation may be thought of as more significant to collective formations and mediations of queerness, because 'queer'—in its various manifestations of identity, practice, lifestyle and culture—is a way of being and belonging that is not always readily accessible, spatially locatable or even socially favourable according to many mainstream discourses and the dominant logics of heterosexual hegemony. While there is a large body of existing work that deals with popular music and scene collectives, much of this work is implicitly heteronormative, ignoring non-heterosexual scene formations and the forms of sexual style that emerge from these.

This article approaches the study of popular music and queer scenes as unfixed sites of both regulation and resistance. It employs a radical but well-established understanding of queer (see for example, Berlant and Warner 1998; Halberstam 2005; Sullivan 2003; Taylor 2010) as a way of life that directly challenges the heteronormative logics of desire and social organisations such as kinship family. Moreover, referring to those people, identities, activities, times and spaces that resist emerging homonormativities and the commercialisation of the gay public sphere (Binnie 2004; Duggan, 2002). In the latter part of the 20th and now 21st century, the uses and definitions of queer have shifted dramatically. The reclamation of this once pejorative term indicates an ontological challenge to the medicalisation of gender and sexual non-normativities and to distinct and hierarchical gender and sexual categorisations. Queer now embodies a highly fruitful anti-essentialising ambiguity that produces a complex and ever shifting set of relationships to the perceived norm for not only gender and sexuality but to all normalising regimes. Thus, queer identities, practices and scene collectives problematise placement within a static binary sub / dominant culture, as they emerge—in an urban context at least—in contestation to the dominant norms of both heterosexual cultural and what is perceived as the assimilated mainstreaming of lesbian and gay culture (see for example Binnie 2004; Halberstam 2005).

Rejecting pathologised rationalisations of gender and sexual deviance as well as arguments of delinquency and homology upon which subcultural theory is built (Bennett 2000; Laughey 2006), this article does not attempt to classify the modalities of queer scenes, neatly illustrate queer style or situate queer culture as marginal in relation to an illusive parent culture. Rather, evoking a sense of liminality, it arouses considerations of the queer subject in popular music scene theory and asks: how does music and scene participation function in queer imaginings of self and community? As

Whiteley and Rycenga rightly articulate in their introduction to *Queering the Popular Pitch*, popular music can be considered:

... a social force that constructs heteronormativity *and* resistant queer sexualities ... and can thus claim to have played a significant, if often ambiguous role, in the shaping of queer identity and queer self-consciousness. In doing so, it has merged queer social relations with queer musical ones, thus demonstrating the transforming significance of musical discourses ... (2006, xiii, emphasis in original).

Moreover, this article asks, if queer identity, queer self-consciousness, queer social relations and queer musical relations operate differently to non-queer ones, does a specifically queer scene perspective emerge?

Just as studies into popular music, subcultures and scenes have, for the most part, omitted considerations of the queer subject and the ways in which music mediates queer scene formations, queer studies scholars have also neglected certain aspects of popular music production and consumption practices. Commonly, little attention is paid to queer music scenes, favouring instead, discussions of the more spectacular examples of queerness in the cultural industries of popular music (see for example Gill 1995; Whiteley and Rycenga 2005). Here, the spectacular is not discarded, but rather theorised as a node in the rhizomatic structure of queer scenes. Although often an ambiguous marker, music tells us much of queer sexual style, and often we find that scene participants may use music as 'blueprints' for enacting variations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer identities and as a way of situating themselves where coherent pre-existing forms of recognition and distinction are lacking.

Of course, what constitutes a 'queer scene' does not have impermeable boundaries; in fact it is just the opposite. Naming something a queer scene could equally describe the vitality of a local warehouse party, a globe trotting club night event like Horse Meat Disco,ⁱ a drag show in an 'available-for-hire' community hall and the global social phenomena of gender and sexually diverse people who coalesce around particular musics like punk or discoⁱⁱ and performance styles like drag. In all of these however, exists a set of, often translocally acquired, sensibilities that collectively function as queer in a given time and place. Herein, I will attempt to queerly reframe the music scene perspective to accommodate the most ambiguous of these scenic formations. While this is largely a theoretical article—the purpose of which is to examine the usefulness of the scenes perspective and critique the shortcomings of subculture—I will draw upon a number of primary qualitative data sources including participant observation, interview data and personal experiences as a queer-identified person who participates in queer culture to augment the arguments presented herein.

From subculture to scene

Over the last 30 years, music and its socio-cultural significance in everyday life has been a consistent topic of discussion and it is from this, that the scene perspective has emerged. Prior to the notion of 'scene', a number of other terms have been employed in an attempt to theorise music's everyday uses: subculture being the most prominent, enduring and contested.ⁱⁱⁱ In this section, I am concerned to reason why this term—which has been polluted by lax vernacular discourse and in spite of wide criticism is still widely applied—is unsuitable for use in the context of queer cultural discussions, and to introduce the notion of scene which I will come to argue is the most suitable model for examining queer music-orientated collective formations.

Since the 1920s, sociologists and cultural studies scholars have been investigating the nature and composition of subcultures. This began with the ethnographies of sociologists such as Cressy (1932) and Whyte (1943) from the Chicago School who sought to theorise the cultural contexts that produced juvenile delinquency within locally specific frames of reference. While subsequent post-

war studies from the Chicago School such as Cohen's (1972) study of mods and rockers in mid-1960s Britain continued to focus on the deviant sensibilities of youth, this now famous study demonstrated that subcultures are not coherent social groupings created in autonomous local spaces. Instead, it employed Becker's (1963) earlier labelling theory which suggested that it is mass society, media reporting and moral panic that creates deviance through labelling subcultural activity as abject to the norm and thus developing deviant ideological frameworks within which this behaviour is located.

In the early 1970s, cultural theorists based at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) borrowed and reworked the notion of subculture, shifting the focus of the term from crime and deviance to youth cultural styles of the British post-war period, such as teddy boy, mod and punk (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979). Tied to the social conditions of working-class youth, subcultures were theorised by the CCCS as sites of resistance that emerged as symbolic and aestheticised articulations of disdain for a monolithic parent culture. Imbued with both Marxist structuralism and labelling theory, the CCCS subculture model suggested that style becomes an inherently meaningful form of resistance where clothes, music, dance, haircuts and language form a response to the conditions of one's class struggle, thus it is class positioning which rationalises subcultural members' deviance. According to Hebdige (1979), forbidden identities are signified through a limited array of stylistic artefacts and those who do not partake in these differentiating forms of 'semiotic guerrilla warfare' are implicitly incorporated into this paradigm as complacent unnamed 'straights'.

In a world increasingly characterised by cultural fragmentation (Chaney 2002), subcultural theory, as outlined by the CCCS has since received various unfavourable critiques. In summary, these argue against the presumption of coherent and fixed class, gender and ethnicity identities for subcultural subjects; subculture's hostile and impermeable relationship to the 'mainstream'; its lack of empirically grounded observations; its inability to account for local variations in style; its sole focus on leisure pursuits; its favouring of spectacular displays of normative deviation over the ordinary and everyday; and its relegation of operative and oppositional musical taste as secondary to visual style (see for example Bennett 2000; Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Bennett and Peterson 2004; Clarke 1997[1981]; Laing 1985; Laughey 2006; Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003; St. John 2010; Thornton 1995). Oddly, among the numerous criticisms waged at the Birmingham School's subcultural paradigm, there is scant mention of its failure to account for the styles of sexually 'deviant' subcultures. 'Queer subcultures illustrate vividly the limits of subcultural theories that omit consideration of sexuality and sexual styles', argues Halberstam (2005, 161). Halberstam goes on to outline four serious considerations that need to be taken into account when studying queer subcultures. She urges a rethinking of the relationship between theorist and subcultural participant; a focus on the non-heterosexual, non-exclusively male, non-white and non-adolescent; she points to the ephemeral and subterranean nature of queer scenes and thus the need to develop queer archives; and a redefining of the binary of adolescent and adulthood. Given that queer subjects routinely problematise straightforward distinctions in terms of who is theorising and who is producing culture (Dahl 2010; Halberstam 2005; Taylor 2011), as well as established socio-economic and cultural indicators such as sexual identity, gender, age, geographical location, race, ethnicity, education levels and class composition, theorising the ways in which music functions as a critical resource in queer lives, necessitates the establishment of a theoretical framework that accommodates these. For this purpose, I offer the scene perspective as a viable framework.

Influenced by work in the fields of cultural studies and cultural geography, scene has emerged as a popular alternative to subculture, especially for those popular music studies scholars concerned with the relationship between youth, style and popular music. In Bennett's extensive work on the topic of scenes (Bennett 2000, 2004; Bennett & Peterson 2004), he demonstrates how, 'scene' has transpired out of the reductiveness and inflexibility of subcultural theory and the necessity to be able to theorise beyond the spectacular leisure pursuits of youth. Scene, argues Bennett (2004), constitutes a rethinking 'both theoretically and empirically', of the relationship that music and

associated forms of cultural style assumed in an everyday context. Thinking in terms of scenes suggests that membership is 'not necessarily restricted according to class, gender, or ethnicity, but may cut across all of these' (Bennett 2004, 225). In his seminal discussion of the complex diversity and the degrees of cosmopolitanism evident in locally specific systems of articulation, Straw lays the foundations for the development of the scene perspective stating that a scene—distinct from a community or subculture—can be thought of as a 'cultural space in which a large range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization' (1991, 373). In Shank's work on the rock 'n' roll scene in Austin, Texas, he states:

A scene itself can be defined as an overproductive signifying community: that is, far more semiotic information is produced than can be rationally parsed. Such scenes ... are capable of moving past the mere expression of locally significant cultural values and generic development—that is, beyond stylistic permutation—toward an interrogation of dominant structures of identification, and potential cultural transformation. (1994, 122)

Both Straw and Shank's summations suggest that a scene produces an array of signifiers that dynamically mediate and synergise local and global aesthetics, which in the process of their unfolding contest sameness and coherency and convey indeterminacy, differentiation and flux.

There are of course those who find scene problematic also. However, I argue that it is precisely that which troubles some scholars, where scene finds its resonance with queer. To make this point I turn to Hesmondhalgh's (2005) critique of scenes in which he takes issue with the term's inability to convincingly account for both local clusters of cultural activity, global communities of taste and the interplay among these. In his critique, Hesmondhalgh points to Straw's defence of scene in which he states that scene has 'efficiency as a default label for cultural unities whose precise boundaries are invisible and elastic' and is 'able to evoke both the cozy intimacy of community and the fluid cosmopolitanism of urban life' where it 'adds a sense of dynamism' to notions of community and 'a recognition of the inner circles and weighty histories which give[s] each seemingly fluid surface a secret order' (2001, 248). Hesmondhalgh expresses concern regarding what he perceives as the evasiveness and imprecision of the concept. 'Even if boundaries are invisible or hazy, processes of distinction and definition need to be captured in analysis', Hesmondhalgh retorts (2005, 29). Yet to assume one can capture, analyse and distinguish queer as *an* identity, taste culture or collective formation is also problematic given that queer theory has, for some years now, constantly reiterated the fundamental indeterminacy of identities: 'of inside/outside communities, of masculine/feminine, of homo/hetero/bi, of male/female, and of racial and ethnic categories. Ultimately queer theory's target [has been] identity itself—the assumption of unity or harmony or transparency within persons or groups' (Phelan 1997, 2). In Williford's article entitled 'Queer Aesthetics' in which he examines the notion of the queer or 'promiscuous image' as something that embodies excessive aesthetic enunciations, he makes the point, albeit from an art world view, that 'the political force of queer aesthetics lies not in a specific announcement but in an effort that keeps ambiguity at play in relation to social subjectivity' (2009, 7). Queerness, he goes on to argue, reminds us that aesthetic ambiguity is possible; that queer politics see the ordering logics of normativity as a sign that there is always the possibility to reorder meaning and that meaning is always in excess: 'excess is the language of queer logic' (2009, 13). Border evasion and elasticity is always implicit in the politic of queer, but Straw's 'secret order'—or perhaps more appropriately, we should call this the 'secret reordering'—can still be critiqued, which, in the final section of the article I will argue, is perhaps most effectively achieved from within, especially if we are to make sense what Hesmondhalgh termed the 'invisible or hazy, processes of distinction' (2005, 29).

Indeed, scene can accommodate a more accurate reading of music and extra-musical style in peoples' everyday lives, because the heterogeneity of scene as an analytical tool allows for multiple points of orientation, variety in taste and sensibility and socio-cultural flexibility. Taking this notion

further, Bennett and Peterson (2004) have produced one of the most thorough examinations of this perspective in which they establish a trichotomous system that situates scenes as operating within and across local, translocal and virtual contexts. It is within the context of translocality that I will locate my theoretical discussion of queer scenes. While most of the queer scenes within which I have conducted ethnographic work over the last five years have been located in cities around Australia, Germany and England, each local scene has demonstrated connections to other queer scenes that may be located a long way away, thus their translocality. To illustrate translocality in action I offer one example of the many I have witnessed: a group of friends (me included) from a queer scene in Brisbane, Australia go on an overseas holiday/field trip to Berlin, Germany and attend queer scene parties and club nights which they have found out about through a combination of internet research, bar chats with locals and street press. Liking what they have heard in the queer clubs abroad, they then subsequently go vinyl shopping for a broad array of local musics, which are then brought back and played to a 'home crowd' at various do-it-yourself scene parties. On the same Berlin holiday, it just so happens that two Australian queer bands, one from Brisbane and another from Melbourne are playing in the month we are there. Similarly, one can assume that these bands will be aesthetically influenced by what they hear in Berlin and will thus return to their home crowds with some degree of aesthetic adjustment based on their experiences abroad. In this brief example, translocality is evident through the networking of individuals and groups of like-minded people, where local nodes of culture become enmeshed across geographical boundaries and within a larger system of cultural experiences and exchange.

Music, queerness, scenes and the spectacular

I previously highlighted that a shortcoming of subcultural theory is its unbalanced focus on the spectacular at the expense of how this translates to the everyday. To make sense of this, I point back to Hegarty's quote with which I began this article as an example of what I call a 'music identity blueprint'—a kind of empathetic reflection to gaze into in the rehearsal of self—a meaning-making operation that has been historically important in the formation of queer identities and the development and coalition of queer scenes. Queer narratives are illusive, not because they do not exist, but because until relatively recently, it has not been in the interest of social morality to publicise, let alone celebrate, sexual difference and queer lifestyles. Music, however, tells a different story, 'popular music, particularly from the turn of the 20th century onward', argues Lecklider, 'has provided an arena where marginalized voices can be heard and sexual identities shaped, challenged, and renegotiated' (2006, 117). Indeed, popular musics of the 20th and 21st century have been a productive site of queerness and provided numerous opportunities for people to explore queer meanings and seek definition. This has been central in the emergence of queer scenes and important in the queer critique of subculture, displacing the singularity of style and the lineage of parent cultures, favouring instead eclectic coalitions centred around musical and stylistic imperatives that function as modalities of both queer definition and divergence, and always as testament to queer survival (on survival see Butler 2000 and Halberstam 2005).

Much of the existing work on queer 'subcultures' deals with those that can be theorised according to delimited logics of style, presentation, musical taste and genre. These include, gay dance/disco (Buckland 2002; Currid 1995), women's music (Lont 1992; Morris 1999), drag kinging (Troka, Lebesco and Noble 2002; Volcano and Halberstam 1999) drag queening (Perkins 1996; Rupp and Taylor 2003), queercore/homocore (Ciminelli and Knox 2005; du Plessia and Chapman 1997; Taylor 2009) riot grrrl and dyke core (Halberstam 2005; Kearney 1997). While none of this work directly proposes that these cultural forms are self-contained, impervious and without reflexivity, and this work is crucial in development of our understanding of queer style and queer musical production, what remains unexamined are the significant points of stylistic disjuncture among queer scenes, their everyday musical sensibilities and what this tells us about the transgressive logic of queer scene formations. Before I unpack this, it is important that I stress an

earlier point: growing up queer is a rather unique experience. It is highly unlikely that as a teen who is developing a sense of cultural positioning you had the option of joining a queer dance troupe, playing in a queer band, or the chance to go and see a queer movie on a weekend with your queer friends. Your parents are not likely to have regaled you with stories about your queer aunt—the drag king, or your queer uncle—the infamous go-go dancer come sex-worker. Basically, until most of us are old enough to figure it out for ourselves, queer people do not exist and if they do the frames of reference within which they are located—perhaps a TV sitcom—is usually as limiting as the production of the heterosexual norm that it quite often mirrors.

As a young queer teenager in the 90s, who, like many other queer teenagers, had no real way in to any form of organised queer culture, and thus had no idea of what queer should look or sound like, it was the music and a blend of their accompanying fashions that I—a queer insider researcher—‘naturally’ gravitated towards from which I drew my queer instruction. As such I fashioned a kind of queerness from the sounds and visual styles of Siouxsie Sioux, Sisters of Mercy, Cyndi Lauper, Suede, Nirvana, Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson. This list continues to grow, to which I can now add the likes of Peaches, Patrick Wolf and the Gossip. Thus, my queer self has, and remains, mediated through a number of ‘subcultural’ styles including goth, alternative rock, industrial and more recent forms of glamorous electro and indie. Many of the interviews I have conducted with queer scene participants in Australia tell similar stories of the insatiable queer bricoleur. One woman who is now in her 40s recalled how her particular imagining of queerness was pieced together from adolescent infatuations with ABBA, Suzi Quatro and The Cure. Another interviewee, also now in his 40s recalls how he pieced together his queerness, suggesting that it is very much grounded in ‘cross-over’ styles. ‘In the 80s’ he recalls, ‘it was that cross-over you know ... it was new romantic ... there was a bit of rockabilly, there were mods, there were people dressing in different styles but all hanging out together at the same club’ (i/v, 25 March 2009). In terms of his everyday listening, this interviewee goes on to tell me how he is still really into multiple and very diverse styles. For example, he has a real affinity for Motown as well as minimal techno.

From research I have conducted as part of a translocal queer scenes ethnography that began in 2005 and is still continuing, I can also add to this list numerous citations of seemingly unrelated artists and bands located across incompatible musical styles including, in no particular order, Pink, David Bowie, Black Flag, Diamanda Galás, Faithless, Grace Jones, L7, Morrissey, the Eurythmics, Sinéad O’Connor, Soft Cell, Le Tigre, Bronskie Beat, Dusty Springfield, Antony and the Johnsons the Pet Shop Boys and most recently, Lady Ga Ga to name only a few: all of which have been cited by queer scene participants as possessing queer qualities—some more decidedly than others—and, most importantly, affirming their identities. In Cvetkovich’s (2003) work on queer and lesbian public cultures, she demonstrates the necessity to be genre-inclusive when theorising what she terms ‘an archive of feelings’. In Driver’s study, *Queer Girls and Popular Culture* she similarly concludes that queer scenes are often hard to place in relation to any single subcultural identification due to their more ‘eclectic modes of selection and reception across stylistic and social boundaries’ (2007, 201).

For many queer girls, clear divisions and categories are impossible to formulate, they prefer to list queer artists in heterogeneous ways, jumping between folkie singers Tegan and Sara, diasporic Asian electro artist MIA, raunchy pop star Peaches, soul-inspired Meshell Ndegeocello, transgender rapper Catastrophe, heavy metal black feminist vibes of Skin in Skunk Anansie, queer hip hop innovations of Deep Dickollective, upbeat party mixes of Lesbians on Ecstasy, and the hardcore sounds of Tribe 8. (Driver 2007, 200)

While much of the music cited above can quite easily be linked to explicit representations of queerness, either through an artist’s lyrics, gender performance or known sexual exploits, others are less easy to place, equally sustaining popularity in the ‘straight world’. For example, in Hubbs’ work on alternative and sexually ambiguous British rock musician Morrissey, she concludes: ‘I

know of no queer fan who perceives Morrissey's work or persona in terms at all straight ... I also know of straight fans who harbor no notion that Morrissey or his work has anything to do with queerness' (1996, 285). Moreover, an easily discernable musical aesthetic or lineage of genres is remarkably absent from the aforementioned lists. The rubric of 'queer music' might then, be more accurately conceptualised as a ambiguous set of ideologies which are just as dependant upon the maker's intention and self-styled presentation as they are performatively located in the way the music is read and rearticulated by a given social actor. By extension, the extra-musical style or 'look' of queer equally crosses over and cuts across multiple 'subcultural' sites.

Hegarty, who saw himself in Boy George has since gone on to become an icon of queer music himself, his music however, cannot easily be located within the same style as George. George's up-tempo new romantic, soulful reggae sounds have little in common with the melancholic fragility of Hegarty's symphonic folk style. The two examples I gave previously which were drawn from my own scene ethnography similarly exhibit degrees of stylistic disjuncture in terms of what has inspired them and the kinds of music they now produce: the man who loves Motown and minimal techno also sang for a number of years in a queer punk band, while the woman who came of age with the music of ABBA has gone on to have a highly successful career as a house deejay. Moreover, both of these like-minded people, live and socialise in the same city, are both in their 40s and at one time or another have attended the same queer events and danced in the same clubs. This suggests that individuals may bring an array of musical sensibilities to queer scenes that can often exhibit hybrid combinations of musical style within specific geographical locations. Thus, queer taste cultures lack a direct correlation with a systematically definable range of aesthetic signifiers, which is part of the defining feature of queerness. That is, favouring excess of meaning and ambiguous possibilities, they exhibit the ability to critically locate pleasure and meaning in popular cultural texts when a codified set of specifically queer stylistic parameters are lacking.

Queer scenes and their members do not, therefore, reject popular culture entirely, but rather they draw upon those, often spectacular, forms of presentation available to them and adeptly reconstruct and reorder culture queerly. As large-scale and now globally recognised queer cultural forms such as drag and queercore more blatantly suggest, queers can poach all manner of heterocentric cultural artefacts—from performances of gender to those of punk—for their own ends, turning them of their head, claiming them for themselves and forging around them, a sense of community, like the International Drag King Community Extravaganza, or the Queercore Blitz festival. Yet, theorising queer music scenes cannot and should not be contained to these more cogent scenic configurations, as I have argued, the transgressive logics of queerness can also bridge genre of musical expression, and when they do, we are able to glean further information into the flux of aesthetic negotiations that make queer scene formations unique. Supplementing existing examinations of the more cogent and spectacular types of queer scenes with work on the 'messy everyday' composition of queer scenes will accommodate a more detailed exploration of queer sensibilities. As such, it is the 'messy everyday' to which I now turn in order to further synergise queer theories and the scenes perspective.

Queerly reframing (messy everyday) music scenes

Queer scenes, like other types of scene formations, mark and perform their difference through textually mediated discourses. But an important addition to the discursive mediation of a scene in queer terms, is the textual and intertextual constitution of non-heterosexualities both in terms of the scene's cultural artefacts and the logic of its formation. The spatio-temporal organisations proffered by the subcultures model are implicitly heteronormative. The fixidity, visibility and permanence of the shopping mall, the commercial nightclub and the rock arena are, by default, heterosexualised spaces—spaces that are located within heterosexual temporal narratives of youth. In queer scene formations, access to such spaces is commonly restricted and scene participants cannot be contained

within the category of youth as many participants remaining active within scenes well into, and sometimes beyond, middle age (Halberstam 2005; Taylor 2010). Thus, queer people (have to) construct space, time and cultural operations within which to locate themselves that are discernibly different from the normative heterosexual models of subculture. Given that heteronormativity 'is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life' (Berlant and Warner 1998, 554), queer scenes then, will operate according to differently emphasised notions of space and time within which alternative narratives play out. However, these differently emphasised notions and narratives resist stability in definition and evade sameness. This is where the detailing and interpretation of queer scenes appears hazy, especially when one is attempting to elucidate the logic of the non-spectacular queer scene to a non-queer audience, which does of course play to one of Hesmondhalgh's (2005) criticisms. While the queer sensibilities that operate within queer scenes are, to some degree, perceivable to the non-queer, I would argue that it is from within—that is, as an outsider to the heterosexual norm—that queer collective formations can be most lucidly translated. This is especially the case when we move beyond the more spectacular marshallings around specifically queer forms like queercore or drag kinging for example.

To defend this claim, I return to Halberstam's rethinking of subculture and the 'lack of distinction between the archivist and the cultural worker' (2005, 162) that she argues is typical of queer subcultural formations. Neither Halberstam nor I (see Taylor 2011) have claimed that queer scenes are the only sites or even the most effective sites in which such insider work occurs. However, I would argue that an ability to see, feel and read queerly is the key to making visible the seemingly invisible and making sense of the seemingly nonsensical musical and stylistic permutations of queer scenes. Where it would make most sense for the speaker of a particular language to translate a text in that language, it would also make most sense for someone with queer sensibilities to theorise them, especially given that the queer 'language' of self-cultivation is entextualised in multiple ways and rarely in the plain. In their paper, 'Sex in Public', Berlant and Warner highlight this:

Queer culture has found it necessary to develop this [shared] knowledge in mobile sites of drag, youth culture, music, dance, parades, flaunting, and cruising—sites whose mobility makes them possible but also renders them hard to recognise as world making because they are so fragile and ephemeral. (1998, 561)

Muñoz too writes of queerness as an ephemeral mode of sociality and relationality, one that is most apparent to those who operate within its cultural sphere:

Queerness is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility. (1996, 6)

These particular spatio-temporal qualities, I argue, necessitate epistemological, practical and emotional familiarity with queerness for one to effectively achieve understanding of queer modalities, operations, sensibilities, styles and cultural artefacts.

Through participant observation I conducted at numerous queer events and in queer scene spaces (both locally and translocally) (see Taylor 2008, 2010) there are a number of features that can be deciphered as typical of everyday urban queer scene structures. Here, I am referring to those that cannot be easily aligned with a particular genre of expression. Displaying a distinctively do-it-yourself ethic, queer scenes are quite often impermanent and transitory, operating 'under the radar', congregating semi-regularly at available-for-hire locations, in illegal, abandon or hijacked spaces, and in private residences. Often, participants find events via word-of-mouth, sharing photocopied or emailed fliers, through friendship and scene networks on social networking sites, or gig listings in local queer press. Members commonly identify as 'queer' thus, distinguish themselves from

homonormative culture and signalling the ambiguity and diversity of sexual practices that scene members engage in. Through the use of queer, several constituencies, such as transgender people, genderqueers, bisexuals, polyamorists and heterosexuals gain a visibility that is not afforded to them in exclusively gay and/or lesbian culture. Scenes spaces are mostly welcoming to people of all genders, however, male-identified, female-identified and genderqueer specific events do occur and the most common types of gender-specific events are those that involve cruising^{iv} or sexual activity. In terms of race, the large majority of scenes participants in places where I have conducted work (Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Berlin and London) are white. However, it is worth noting that in Brisbane for example, Polynesian, Indigenous Australian and Asian people are visible on the scene, not only as participants but as performers and deejays also. While queer scenes are largely middle-class with university level education being common, members also demonstrate a significant degree of social mobility, with many circumventing their working-class origins, and many others acquiring queer theoretically informed perspectives on social issues through scene mediated interpersonal engagements, social discussions, and the often highly politicised forms of entertainment typical of queer culture. Queer scenes also offer a unique site to explore age-related scene membership, as it is common among queer scenes for post-youth subjects to remain highly visible and active. Queer scene participants, it can be suggested, enact a form of queer temporality, problematising notions of maturity and appropriate progression into adulthood and thus troubling the reproductive logics of hetero temporality which unfold according to the normative expectations for a subject to do away with youthful behaviours and settle into adulthood in order to marry and reproduce (Halberstam 2005). In fact, a subject's continuing investment in scene activities beyond the category of youth is itself a queer act (Taylor 2010).

In queer scene spaces—bars, clubs, dance parties, live music venues, warehouses, private homes—music is a highly significant, considered and valued accompaniment to congregation. As a regular participant in queer scene culture, I have never been to a collective gathering of scene members that has been music-less. However, unlike an indie scene, metal scene or punk scene where the music that is played loosely conforms to an obvious set of stylistic parameters, as I argued earlier, the stylistic parameters of what, in the context of the scene space, is appropriated as queer or at least considered queer-appropriate, brazenly infringes the bounds of stylistic definition. Instead, the way I propose we think of music and extra-musical style in terms of queer scene formations is as an aestheticised extension of the disidentificatory logic of queer: that is, while queer undoubtedly signals particular identities, practices, knowledges and texts, it refuses to do so monolithically. Given that individual members of queer scenes problematise straightforward socio-economic distinction, demonstrate a range of musical tastes and multiple stylistic persuasions, and politically situate themselves as critical of normalising institutions through self-presenting as queer, it may not be all that surprising that queer scenes have not coalesced with stylistic confluence. However, it significantly challenges the way we think about the construction and logic of collective cultural formations, particularly around music, and impressively demonstrates the inability for subcultural theory to accommodate these. Subcultural theory cannot account for these kinds of messy everyday collections of people whose cultural styles embody the aesthetic excess, promiscuity and ephemerality of queerness. And if it cannot do this, then it will never be able to speak with accuracy about the queer subject and the everyday significance of music in self-stylisation and the ways in which queer scenes and cultural practices emerge from these.

Conclusion

In this article, I have called attention to the queer subject, one who is largely forgotten in subcultural and popular music studies. In the context of queerness, I have outlined the shortcomings of subcultural theory and proposed that the scene perspective effectively enables interpretive work attuned to the multilayered, shifting and fragmented modes of cultural production and consumption with which queer people engage. Where a subculture is locked into an oppositional binary

relationship to a parent culture, scene acknowledges the more flexible relationship that queer assumes in relation to multiple cultural expressions. Where subculture suggests stylistic cohesion, scene can accommodate the vast stylistic permutations of queer. Where subculture is suggestive of socio-economic homology, scene acknowledges that membership cuts across multiple socio-economic indicators. Where subculture places its emphasis on performances of youth subjectivities, scene can accommodate the queer temporality of post-youth scene activity. Where the epistemology of subculture highlights the distance between the theorist and subject, scene encourages empirical approaches based around reflexive ethnographic studies of everyday cultural forms that are far more conducive to the less clear-cut distinction between the queer cultural worker and queer cultural archivist. This interpretive work is part of the vital project of theorising queerness, not only the most spectacular and cogent occurrences of it, but also in its fleeting moments, transitory locations and everyday contexts in which music and extra-musical style functions simultaneously as modalities of queer definition, distinction and divergence.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

ⁱ Horse Meat Disco bills itself as 'the queer party for everyone'. Beginning in a basement in Soho, London in 2004, it has now toured to numerous locations in the UK, America, Australia, New Zealand and Mexico.

ⁱⁱ A punk ethic and style is central to the queercore and riot grrrl movements, while disco music was particularly central to the emergence of gay culture in the 1970s and dance music remains as such today.

ⁱⁱⁱ Other notable attempts at theorising beyond subculture to account for music and style include community (Frith 1981; Lewis 1992), club cultures (Thornton 1995), lifestyle (Chaney 1996), post-subculture (Muggleton 1997) and neo-tribe (Bennett 1999).

^{iv} 'Cruising' is an argot used predominantly (but not exclusively) by same-sex attracted males. The term generally refers to the act of seeking casual sex either at known public 'beats', at designated sex-on-site venues, through internet sex sites or telephone services.

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