

This talk addresses the question of the map and the territory through the intellectual and institutional history of queer studies. It has been the burden of queer thought to push back against philosophical realism and the idea that, for instance, gender is simply there, a set of incontrovertible biological facts or an ordinary feature of shared experience. The performativity thesis in queer theory has brought about a new era of gender freedom by loosening the relation between culture, language, and self-understanding from the ‘givens’ of the body, law, and history. But it has resulted in two problems, which Heather Love investigates in this talk: 1. Reference: the long-standing problem of material reality and its appearance within queer and trans theory and 2. Scale: the non-adequation between queer thought and the needs, interests, and self-understanding of the LGBT community. Love will argue that by taking the map for the territory, and representation for existence, queer scholars have not only made it difficult to address ‘bodies that matter’, they have also intensified the methodological problem of scale.

Heather Love is Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania; in September 2026, she will join Rutgers University as the Kenneth Burke Chair of English. She is the author of *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Harvard University Press) and *Underdogs: Social Deviance and Queer Theory* (University of Chicago Press). She is the editor of a special issue of *GLQ* on Gayle Rubin (‘Rethinking Sex’) and the co-editor (with Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus) of a special issue of *Representations* (‘Description Across Disciplines’). In 2023, she published *Literary Studies and Human Flourishing*, co-edited with James F. English (Oxford University Press). Love has written on topics including comparative social stigma, compulsory happiness, transgender fiction, spinster aesthetics, and reading methods in literary studies. She is currently working on a new project (‘To Be Real’), which addresses the uses of the personal in queer criticism.

Lecture Series Scale

Scales are used to quantify properties such as length and temperature, or also to measure popularity and affect. But as Alice discovers in Wonderland, a change of scale can also have dramatic qualitative consequences. It disrupts customary ways of perceiving, acting, and being — to the point of feeling as ‘queer’ to her as a caterpillar’s metamorphoses. Helped by the arguably inextricable intertwinement of different meanings and aspects of scale, Alice’s experiences continue to provide apt metaphors for the disorienting importance and effects of scale and scaling at a time of hyperglobalization and the so-called anthropocene.

Scale is indeed a highly ambiguous notion, even when one only considers the meanings deriving from the Latin or Italian *scala*, ladder. It simultaneously denotes the whole ladder, one of its steps, and the relation between two steps: The scale of a cartographic map is the ratio between a distance on the map and a distance on the ground, but any particular length also defines a scale, and the range of scales from the subatomic to the planetary scale is part of the spatial scale. Paradoxically recursive, scale combines and helps mediate quantity and quality, as well as subjective perception, objective material properties, and contingent construction.

If different disciplines, discourses, and dispositives each have their privileged scales to which they tend to reduce others, what may be gained by thinking them together, acknowledging both the relative autonomy of particular scales — each with their own affordances, limitations, rules, even laws and ontologies — and their interdependence — each affecting and being affected by other scales? What is the critical purchase of developing multiscale architectures or patchworks of scale-specific, mutually inconsistent and irreducible descriptions, theories, and models? How might the tensions be made productive where they overlap or come into contact? The ICI’s Lecture Series ‘Scale’ will address such questions by reflecting upon the critical role of scale within and across a wide range of different fields.

Heather Love

The Map and the Territory. Representation, Scale, and the Real in Queer Studies

