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## What is Queer Technology?

### Queer-Tech

*Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction.*

--Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*

In a time and place of dis-alignment, ambiguity, and de-centralization, bodies and identities are continuously marked, shifted, and re-assembled at the speed of contemporary telecommunications. As life becomes further infused with technology on every level of existence, formations of body and identity bare the mark of technological networks, systems, and machines. Specifically, biological / technological intersections have formed not only new representations and expressions of gender and sexuality but also have created new genders and sexualities. Today, as technology precariously balances between corporate power structures and subcultural activism, we must turn to examine exactly how these tools mark and position our bodies and identities as we use and interact with them. First, we must assess the technological process, the system or machine itself, as well as its larger cultural representations to even begin to understand how we are being marked / signified / erased.

If, historically and traditionally, technological progress has been routed in heteronormative discourse, are all bodies bound to heteronormative control and ideology? If not, how do marginalized bodies react to / resist these power paradigms and reconfigure them? Or, is there a subcultural technology that marks the bodies it

encounters in alternative, non-heterosexual structures? Most importantly, does technology bind all bodies to a heterosexist ideology of control or can technology offer empowering, subversive structures and processes to give all bodies a freedom that exists as fact—a freedom “that precedes us and . . . is foreign to no one”<sup>1</sup>?

The discourse of queer theory provides a rhetoric of freedom for those positioned outside of heterosexual formations. Judith Butler has theorized the critically queer as breaking out of heterosexual iterations of power that bind,<sup>2</sup> and Judith Halberstam writes that queerness is a mixture of “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices.”<sup>3</sup> Importantly, queer theory moves beyond discourses of only sexuality and gender to approach larger “way[s] of life.”<sup>4</sup> Queer life re-positions the importance heteronormativity stresses on constructs like family, children, marriage, and product. The queer way of life is subcultural, subversive, and anti-capitalist. Today, in a life defined by and through technology, the effects of queerness on technology and technology on queerness must be accounted for. Attempts to formulate a queer technology implicates the urgency in carving out a queer freedom in hi-tech culture and providing the queer community with discursive / practical tools for activism, resistance, and empowerment.

Technology moves between a structure of making and meaning, that is, a technology does / makes something (a process or product, for example) and this act of

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 295. Chun takes the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy to structure her discussion of freedom, control, and technology.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Judith Halberstam. *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

doing / making is given to the world and interpreted (that is, the technological act of making / doing is given a meaning or cultural worth). Therefore, in order to attempt a formulation of queer technology, the critically queer must be evaluated alongside technological action and culture value. This paper will present formulations of queer technology through assessments of 1) technological process (how the machine / system functions) and 2) cultural representations (what the machine / system means). Throughout this attempt to offer definitions of queer technology, the potential for an ontological grounding will be considered: can queer technology be routed in a certain commonality? Does any one element unite queerness with technology? Is queer technology definable or only *potentially* definable? How evasive, ephemeral, and ambiguous is queer technology? Is an ontological grounding antithetic to queerness?

### **Inside the Queer Machine / System**

**TBH** *adjective: 1: sexually available. 2: gay. Acronym for To Be Had.*

**todge omee-palone** *noun: the passive partner in gay sex.*

--Paul Baker, *Fantabulosa: A Dictionary of Polari and Gay Slang*

*According to Friedrich Kittler, language is moving beyond humans toward machines.*

--Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*

Inside queer technology, the process at hand must be accounted for. Yet, before this can begin, the term “process” needs further discussion. In an art-historical context, “process” has a direct relationship to the experimental, subversive, and radical. Beginning with the history of experimental music and sound, Michael Nyman divided experimental

music from the avant-garde with his explanation of process.<sup>5</sup> The term became understood as something that did not produce outside of the process, that is, the process and the produced were the same. John Cage, the father of experimental aural processes, has caused numerous studies in queer musicology to pop up based on his homosexual lifestyle and works / teachings with audio technologies. Again, during the Conceptual Art movement of the 1960s, artists revolted against the idea of art as an object of beauty and began to focus on process-based ideas. Artists like Sol Lewitt wrote that the process of thinking and developing ideas can be works of art without necessarily becoming physical art objects / commodities. Lucy Lippard channeled these methods of process into her theory of art as a dematerialization, which can be defined as moving away from product, capital, object, and the physically tangible.<sup>6</sup>

In queer theory, process is also suggested to be critically queer. David Halperin writes that the act of anal fisting is utterly queer based on its non-teleological structure. Anal fisting is a process that re-directs sexual pleasure away from genital stimulation and as a result, skews the potential for orgasm. Halperin adopts non-teleology as a queer descriptor for that which does not engage in genital orgasm or sexual reproduction. Anal fisting becomes a queer process that eliminates heteronormative configurations of reproductive sex and exists as process interlocked with product, that is, the process is the product. Halperin also notes that this queer process re-aligns and fluctuates traditional power structures, where passive and active constantly alter.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Nyman. *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Lucy Lippard. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

In a recent study of queer technological embodiment, Halperin's analysis of anal fisting is linked to the process of video feedback, where video feedback was argued to embody the same principles of queer non-teleology.<sup>7</sup> As one possible methodology for formulating a queer technology, the question can be asked: can technology be broken down into terms of sexual difference? While Friedrich Kittler would say no, one only needs to look to cultural representations and interpretations of technology to learn otherwise: electrical plugs are heteronormatively defined as male and female; in films like *Peeping Tom* and *Rear Window*, cameras function as phallic extensions; and in *Videodrome* and *Poltergeist*, television monitors become highly feminized. If technology becomes gendered through mainstream society, queer technology mutates and confuses these binaries, just as Judith Halberstam writes of "mutual mutation."<sup>8</sup> In the video feedback system, the camera and monitor blur their culturally assigned gender roles.

Now, in the age of the computer, code is the basis of technological processes that enable technological actions. The process of code is so pervasive today that some theorists have defined it is an ideology.<sup>9</sup> If code is potentially replacing human language and becoming "the lingua franca of . . . all physical reality,"<sup>10</sup> then code must be assessed as a human language and not just as computer code. Indeed, Katherine Hayles writes "language alone is no longer the distinctive characteristic of technologically developed

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<sup>7</sup> See "The Hole(s) of Non-Teleology: Video Feedback as Anal Fisting – From Technological Representation to Human Embodiment" by Zach Blas.

<[www.zachblas.info](http://www.zachblas.info)>

<sup>8</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Time*.

<sup>9</sup> See Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's essay "On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge" in *Grey Room 18*.

<sup>10</sup> N. Katherine Hayles. *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15.

societies; rather, it is language plus code.”<sup>11</sup> As a human language, we must ask why is computer code coded? In the history of linguistics, code within languages points to secret societies and marginalized communities. Specifically, a history of homosexually coded speaking “languages” exists: from Polari in the UK to Gail and IsiNgqumo in South Africa.<sup>12</sup> The basis of these coded languages is primarily protection from sexual discrimination and violence, but they are also queer tools used to unite and empower community. They are action languages that help create queer formations and identities just as computer code is an action language that forms what it is running. Importantly, however, these gay languages implement the closet: although they create community, they also hide identities from the public.

On the other hand, what does the closet (as a means of hiding from the larger public) mean to code? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes that “ ‘closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.”<sup>13</sup> Code operates under a performative process of silence aurally and visually, hidden from the masses. Yet, computer code finds itself in a closet different from repressed homosexual communities. Interlocked with flows of global markets, capitalist economies, and corporate control, code finds itself in the closet of Empire.<sup>14</sup> As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has written, computers—comprised of software

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>12</sup> “Gail Language.” *Wikipedia*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gail\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gail_language) (accessed on 10 December 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>14</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

and hardware—function as an ideology of imaginary relations.<sup>15</sup> Technological innovation is developed to increase capital and tighten control. The visual and aural silence of code resides over the masses as that which is “user friendly,” seemingly simple yet unexposed. Like Polari, computer code is a language known to the community that developed it, but unlike Polari, computer code directly alters the lives of those that do not “speak” its language.

The “outing” of computer code begins with the open source community. Once code is visible, its ideology has the potential to become fractured. People can begin to understand and interpret code and the effects its actions have on their lives. The visible exposure of code, however, is only the first step in a larger sequence toward empowerment for the masses. If we are now defined by language *plus* code as Katherine Hayles writes, then we must look back to languages like Polari to examine the possibilities of formulating subcultural identities within current modes of communication. Polari’s use in the UK between the 40s to the 70s “provided a means by which an alternative social structure (or reality) could be constructed.”<sup>16</sup> Paul Baker describes Polari as an anti-language: “Anti-languages are generated by anti-societies and in their simplest forms are partially relexicalised languages, consisting of the same grammar but a different vocabulary in areas central to the activities of subcultures.”<sup>17</sup> Baker even defines the anti-language as a “sociolinguistic *coding* orientation.”<sup>18</sup> If in the past queer communities have used subcultural structures like anti-languages to develop their own

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<sup>15</sup> Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge” *Grey Room* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Baker. *Polari: The Lost Language of Gay Men* (London: Routledge, 2002), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

identities, now, computer code *with* language must be re-structured to create a contemporary anti-language. Just as new open source computing languages like Processing and Pure Data have emerged for visual and aural cultures, the invention of a queer computing language is necessary for queer communities to be able to fully communicate in queer methods, styles, and structures. A queer computing language must change easily for its community to adequately accommodate its shifting values—but it must also represent and speak out for its community and users in a public manner, not in a private way.

However, we live in a time that is an amalgamation of the past, present, and future. Technology surrounds us that is not based on the fundamental building blocks of code and programming. How are we to understand formations of queer technology before and beyond the computer? Paul Baker writes that “attempting to find something ‘universally homosexual’ in language is as unproductive as trying to uncover something ‘universally heterosexual’.”<sup>19</sup> Is the creation of a queer programming language attempting to develop a universal method for homosexual communication and interactions or is it offering a specific queer anti-language as one tool among many to communicate through? Whether or not this question can be answered now, queerness in technology alludes ontological grounding. Queer technology cannot be defined but rather *potentially* defined through various methodological approaches. Queerness and technology fluctuate in rapid alterations, affecting each other in “mutual mutation.”<sup>20</sup> According to Judith Halberstam, technology and queerness continuously form an ambiguous union—“a technotopic vision of space and flesh in a process of mutual

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>20</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Time*, 103.

mutation.”<sup>21</sup> Outside of the queer machine / system, we must look to how this union merges, exists, creates, and is represented in culture.

### **Outside the Queer Machine / System**

1:07: *One of ‘em’s killing me.*  
 1:08: *Oh, shit.*  
 1:09 *No, other one stopped him.*  
 1:10: *One of ‘em’s screwing me.*  
 1:11: *That one hates me.*  
 1:12: *No, other one woke up.*  
 1:14: *One of ‘em’s taking a piss on my face.*  
 1:14: *Other one stopped him.*  
 1:15: *One of ‘em’s strangling me.*  
 1:17: *Scared.*  
 1:20: *Okay now.*  
 1:23: *Same one’s strangling me again.*  
 1:24: *Other one loves my ass.*  
 1:24: *Other one hates it.*  
 1:29: *One’s kicking my ass. One’s kissing my face.*  
 1:30: *Other one’s strangling me.*  
 1:31: *Dead.*  
 1:33: *Yeah.*  
 1:33: *One of ‘em’s hugging me anyway.*  
 1:35: *Other one hates me.*  
 1:37: *One of ‘em’s mad at the other.*  
 1:38: *They’re fighting.*  
 1:40: *Can’t see ‘em.*  
 1:45: *All alone.*  
 1:49: *Bored.*

--Dennis Cooper, *Period*

Once one looks outside of the technological processes potentially defining queer technology, a larger cultural context of queerness in technology is revealed. As Judith Halberstam describes “technotopias” in transgendered art as moving in “mutual mutation” between the humanly queer and the technologically queer, it becomes evident that as queerness and technology constantly alter one another, queer technology is not

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

necessarily universally definable as it is more akin to many specific embodiments throughout time, space, and history. This closing section will briefly examine two art works—Dennis Cooper’s novel *Period* and Derek Jarman’s film *Blue*—that expose different contemporary representations of queer technology..

If queer computer code visualizes unstable embodiments of “identity as process, mutation, invention, and reconstruction,”<sup>22</sup> earlier forms of this anti-language can be found in queer literature. In Dennis Cooper’s *Period*, coded language functions as a queer mutation of narrative text—a queer literary code. Cooper uses short phrases, broken-up sentences, and single words to construct a queer coding of ambiguous bodies, identities, and desires. By working within a display of digital time, the text reads as coded cycles of linear action. Halberstam’s concept of “mutual mutation” becomes quite visible: as Cooper alters the writing structure from language to anti-language, bodies, stories, identities, and sexualities become queer. Queer code, a *potential* component of queer technology, manifests outside of the computer in *Period* and offers new forms of queer subcultural expression.

In Derek Jarman’s final film *Blue* (1993), the semiotics of the color blue are re-written as a trait of queer technology. In the world of film and television, blue exists as a signifier or emptiness (a blank television screen) or a catalyst for special effects (blue screens). However, Jarman’s film re-positions blue as a signifier of queerness by highlighting the color’s queer history. Playing upon Warhol’s *Blue Movie*, notions of “blue” sadness as expressed by queers of the past, as well as his own claims of only seeing blue after going blind from AIDS complications, Jarman viewed *Blue* as a method

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 105, 111.

of queer seeing and exposure.<sup>23</sup> The film itself is 70 minutes of the color blue with Jarman narrating about his experiences as a gay male and victim of AIDS. With each progressing minute of the film, Jarman takes the universality of blue—in life and in film and video—and morphs it into an anti-language of queer empowerment and celebration. The electronic blue of nothingness becomes a beacon of queer hope, resistance, creation, and survival. Again, Halberstam’s concept of “mutual mutation” in queer art becomes the criterion for queer technology to exist: queer bodies interpret and intercept technologies while technologies continuously interpret and intercept queer bodies.

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<sup>23</sup> Michael O’Pray. *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England* (London: BFI Publishing, 1996), 200 – 202.

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