Queer OS

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by Kara Keeling

From new media's eccentric temporalities and reliance on reading codes to their relationships to ephemera, publics, viruses, music, and subcultures, new media intersect with queer theories in a variety of ways. Scholars working at the interfaces of new media, queer theory, and LGBT studies have produced valuable insights into the roles and usages of new media in creating and sustaining forms of LGBT sociality, experiences, and ways of knowing. Vital scholarship on LGBT and queer cybercultures from a variety of perspectives and compelling descriptions and explorations of the role of new media in LGBT, and queer people's lives, have helped scholars understand the centrality and significance of LGBT participation in new media. Important work on representations of LGBT people in, on, and through new media is ongoing.[1]

Within this scholarly milieu, less attention has been dedicated to the interfaces of new media as they have been theorized through conceptualizations of "the digital," "software," "computation," "manufacturing," "information," and "code," and what currently are perceptible as queer ontologies; theories of queer embodiment and materializations; and other issues, logics, and expressions that comprise queer theory, such as, for example, theories of queer temporality, critiques of homonationalism, and investigations into the relationships of queerness, forms of racialization, and contexts of settler colonialism, among others.

Yet as the opening lines of this brief contribution to an evaluation of contemporary intersections of LGBT studies, queer theory, and cinema and media studies suggest, the materiality, rhetorics, forms, and ontologies of new media readily lend themselves to a theoretical encounter with queer theory that might enliven and enrich both film and media studies and queer theory, thus deepening the capacity of each to attend to the sociopolitical registers of contemporary life.

Existing theoretical scholarship on race and new technologies illustrates that new media scholarship that attends to race also might

1 For a helpful, though not exhaustive, gloss on new media and communications scholarship produced at the intersection of queer and cyber, see Kate O'Riordan and David J. Phillips, eds., introduction to *Queer Online: Media Technology & Sexuality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007). For a consideration of gay participation online, see Ken Hillis, *Online a Lot of the Time: Ritual, Fetish, Sign* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). For an ethnography of queer youth using the Internet in rural settings, see Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

engage with vital and still-generative scholarship happening in queer theory, but it rarely makes an explicitly queer new media studies or technology studies (or even queering new media and/or technology studies) part of its project. Similarly, compelling work on feminism and the cultural logics of new media technologies is suggestive of a direction amenable to a serious engagement with queer theory, but that work rarely substantively stages such an encounter. With this lacuna in mind, in what follows, I offer preliminary thoughts toward a scholarly political project that I call "Queer OS."[2] As I discuss here, scholarship that might be collected under a rubric of "Queer OS" already exists, and provocative and promising work is currently being produced that might contribute to a project at the interfaces of queer theory, new media studies, and technology studies, such as the one I sketch briefly here.

Queer OS would take historical, sociocultural, conceptual phenomena that currently shape our realities in deep and profound ways, such as race, gender, class, citizenship, and ability (to name those among the most active in the United States today), to be mutually constitutive with sexuality and with media and information technologies, thereby making it impossible to think any of them in isolation. It understands *queer* as naming an orientation toward various and shifting aspects of existing reality and the social norms they govern, such that it makes available pressing questions about, eccentric and/or unexpected relationships in, and possibly alternatives to those social norms.[3]

I have suggested elsewhere, following Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony, Marcia Landy's reading of Gramsci's work in the context of film studies, and Wahneema Lubiano's work on "common sense" in black nationalism, that common sense is a linchpin in the struggle for hegemony that conditions what is perceptible such that aspects of what is perceptible become generally recognizable only when they work in some way through "common senses." In this context, *queer* offers a way of making perceptible presently uncommon senses in the interest of producing a/new commons and/or of proliferating the senses of a commons already in the making.[4] Such a commons would be hospitable to, perhaps indeed crafted from, just and eccentric orientations within it. Queer OS makes this formulation of *queer* function as an operating system along the lines of what Tara McPherson describes as "operating systems of a larger order" than the operating systems that run on our computers.[5]

Queer OS would take seriously McPherson's suggestion that the cultural logics of the early operating system Unix embed some of the racial logics of the post–World War II era in which Unix (and the modern civil rights movements) were developed.[6]

2 During a Google search for existing formulations of Queer OS, I found a link to an intriguing workshop in Slovenia titled "Workshop Queer OS: Operating System for Fags, Radical Faeries, and Questioning Nerds." See Ljudmila, "Queer OS," http://wiki.ljudmila.org/Queer_OS (accessed June 25, 2013).

3 I develop this formulation of queer in greater detail in my book manuscript in progress, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

4 For my formulation of "the image of common sense" in the cinematic, see Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

5 Tara McPherson, "US Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and UNIX," in *Race after the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2011), 21–37.

6 Ibid., 21.

For McPherson, the logics of US racial formation infuse Unix not because the creators of Unix planned it that way, but because those who developed Unix were working within a sociocultural milieu held together by common senses already saturated by those logics.

Inspired by McPherson's analysis of Unix in the context of US racial formation, Queer OS seeks to make *queer* into the logic of "an operating system of a larger order" that unsettles the common senses that secure those presently hegemonic social relations that can be characterized by domination, exploitation, oppression, and other violences. While it is worth noting here that my references to "the commons" are in critical conversation with existing formulations of the "digital commons," an aim of Queer OS vis-à-vis conceptualizations of commons is to provide a society-level operating system (and perhaps an operating system that can run on computer hardware) to facilitate and support imaginative, unexpected, and ethical relations between and among living beings and the environment, even when they have little, and perhaps nothing, in common.

To begin with, it could be said that in its capacity as a social operating system, Queer OS connects existing distributed areas of scholarly inquiry and activism, thereby producing philosophies and cultures within each of those areas that might unsettle the logics that currently secure them. Here, Queer OS would not be simply interdisciplinary, though because it often evinces a studied promiscuity toward the ideas and methods it assembles, it carries many of interdisciplinarity's risks and promises. Nor is it only transdisciplinary, since it can be relatively indifferent to existing disciplines in an effort to include aspects of the world that have not yet entered the logics of disciplines.[7]

Queer OS names a way of thinking and acting with, about, through, among, and at times even in spite of new media technologies and other phenomena of mediation. It insists upon forging and facilitating uncommon, irrational, imaginative, and/or unpredictable relationships between and among what currently are perceptible as living beings and the environment in the interest of creating value(s) that facilitate just relations.[8] Because Queer OS ideally functions to transform material relations, it is at odds with the logics embedded in the operating systems McPherson discusses. Because it seeks to undermine the relationships secured through those logics, even as, like McPherson does when she points out that she is using a computer and word-processing software that shape her own intellectual work in specific ways, it acknowledges its own imbrication with and reliance on those logics while still striving to forge new relationships and connections.

7 In this regard, Queer OS has affinities with Katie King's formulation of "networked reenactments." See Katie King, *Networked Reenactments: Stories Transdisciplinary Knowledges Tell* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); King "A Naturalcultural Collection of Affections: Transdisciplinary Stories of Transmedia Ecologies Learning," *S&F Online*, http://sfonline.barnard.edu/feminist-media-theory/a-naturalcultural-collection-of-affections-transdisciplinary-stories-of-transmedia-ecologies-learning/.

8 It is worth noting here that, although they are of different orders, this description of Queer OS resonates with what I described as "the black femme function" within the cinematic in my book *The Witch's Flight*. See also Franco "BIFO" Berardi, "Precariousness, Catastrophe and Challenging the Blackmail of the Imagination," *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action* 4, no. 2 (November 23, 2010), http://www.affinitiesjournal.org/affinities/index.php/affinities/article/view/58.

From my own position, it is possible to detect exciting contributions that have already been made, as well as ones on the horizon. Among the early precedents for Queer OS are projects such as Allucquére Rosanne Stone's (Sandy Stone's) *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, a book in which Stone is "seeking social structures in circumstances in which the technological is the nature, in which social space is computer code."[9] Fifteen years after the publication of *The War of Desire and Technology*, Margaret Rhee and Amanda Philips introduced their 2010 Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory (HASTAC) forum "Gender, Sexuality, and Queerness" by announcing their "hope for dialogues that traverse disciplinary boundaries, borders, and fictive territories."[10] As they described it, the forum invited discussions of questions such as "How does queer theory intersect with technology [and/or] technologies?" "How do issues of gender, sexuality and identity play out in digital media, digital arts, and the Internet?" "How does the body function as a theme within theory and art, emerging from queer, ethnic, and feminist, studies and other related disciplines?" and "Is technology historically closely entangled with sexuality?"[11]

The questions that Rhee and Phillips invited their participants to discuss remain compelling ones to explore. Some of those who have been engaged in their exploration also have participated in the conversations about scholarly technology that have come to characterize the digital humanities. This year, Phillips coauthored an article with Alexis Lothian that seeks to make an intervention into the contested category of "the digital humanities." That article, "Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?," builds on the premise that, "if humanities scholars in critical media and cultural studies, queer studies, ethnic studies, disability studies, and related areas are doing work in and with the digital, we should lay claim to our place within digital humanities."[12] In that spirit, Lothian and Phillips offer "a curated list of projects, people, and collaborations that suggest the possibilities of a transformative digital humanities: one where neither the digital nor the humanities will be terms taken for granted."[13]

Picking up on a trajectory of inquiry into technology, gender, and sexuality offered by Jack Halberstam's 1991 essay "Automating Gender: Postmodern Feminisms in the Age of the Intelligent Machine," scholars also are working to queer the histories we tell about computing. Homay King's most recent project centers on pioneering computer

9 Allucquére Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 38. Jack Halberstam's 1991 essay also might be retrospectively understood as precedent for the later work I am collecting under the rubric of "Queer OS." See Judith Halberstam, "Automating Gender: Postmodern Feminism in the Age of the Intelligent Machine," *Feminist Studies* 17, no. 3 (1991): 439–460.

10 "Queer & Feminist New Media Spaces—HASTAC," http://hastac.org/forums/hastac-scholars-discussions/queer-feminist-new-media-spaces.

11 The citations in Rhee and Phillips's introduction to the forum offer an archive of scholarship in new media studies, technology studies, and gender and sexuality studies on which they invite forum participants to draw. See "Queer & Feminist New Media Spaces—HASTAC," http://hastac.org/forums/hastac-scholars-discussions/queer-feminist-new-media-spaces.

12 Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips, "Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?," *Journal of e-Media Studies* 3, no. 1 (2013), doi:10.1349/PS1.1938-6060.A.425.

13 See ibid.

scientist Alan Turing's homosexuality in an effort to, as she put it, "queer the computer just slightly."[14] In a similar vein, Jacob Gaboury is compiling "Queer History of Computing," which can be accessed online.[15]

What all of these efforts have in common is an interest in bringing the considerable insights of queer theory and LGBT studies to bear on discussions and studies of new media and their technologies and vice versa. They offer ways of thinking about new media that disrupt what we think we know about it, and they demonstrate what queer theory can gain from an interested consideration of media and technology. Along these lines, in their solo and collaborative performance art work, Zach Blas and Micha Cárdenas have made contributions to our ways of thinking about transgender embodiments, queer sexualities, new media technologies, and other aspects of mediation that might be considered under the rubric of "Queer OS." By innovating things such as "transcoder," which is "a queer programming anti-language," or instructing people on how to build a gay bomb, Blas's work prompts us to question our assumptions about what technology is and what it can do. Both Blas and Cardenas are producing work that strives to forge new relationships between living beings and the environment by working with, through, and at times in spite of technology.[16]

Blas, Cárdenas, and others working at the theory-practice nexus of queer theory, trans and gender studies, and technology can help nuance understandings of *queer*, *gender*, and *technology* because their work points to ways of embracing *queer* and *gender* as technologies. In this regard, a Queer OS project also could involve reading their oeuvres (which can be grasped as Queer OS), as well as those of other artists working to (re)forge queerness within new media and technology, alongside existing scholarship on "race and/as technology" and the artistic expressions and rhetorics that make that formulation perceptible.

A Queer OS project might notice, for example, that Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's essay "Race and/as Technology or How to Do Things to Race" becomes just a bit queerer through the revisions that accompanied its transformation from serving as the introduction to the special issue "Race and/as Technology" of *Camera Obscura* that Chun coedited with Lynne Joyrich in 2007 to a stand-alone essay in the 2012 collection *Race after the Internet*, coedited by Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White, and build upon that observation. It is only in the latter version of the essay that Chun turns to Greg Pak's 2003 feature film *Robot Stories* to rethink arguments she made in the past regarding "high tech Orientalism—the high tech abjection of the Asian/Asian American other."[17]

14 See, e.g., "Lecture: 'Keys to Turing' by Homay King Nov. 8, Visual Arts Center, Beam Classroom, English, Calendar (Bowdoin)," http://www.bowdoin.edu/calendar/event.jsp?bid=601095&rid=68848.

15 Jacob Gaboury, "A Queer History of Computing: Part Four," Rhizome.org, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/may/6/queer-history-computing-part-four/.

16 See "Queer Technologies—Automating Perverse Possibilities," http://www.queertechnologies.info; Micha Cárdenas, "Micha Cárdenas—Movement, Technology, Politics," http://transreal.org.

17 Wendy Hui Kong Chun, "Race and/as Technology or How to Do Things to Race," in *Race after the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2011), 49; Chun, "Introduction: Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 70 (2009): 7–35.

Stating that her reevaluation of high-tech Orientalism is inspired by Beth Coleman's essay "Race as Technology," Chun presents Pak's film as an exploration of "the extent to which high tech Orientalism might be the ground from which some other future can be created; the ground from which dreams can be made to fly, flower, in freaky, queer unexpected ways."[18] Chun's discussion of *Robot Stories* attends to the meaningful ways that technology, race, gender, and sexuality work together in the film. She claims that "what is remarkable" by the end of *Robot Stories* is that "the invisibility and universality usually granted to whiteness has disappeared, not to be taken up seamlessly by Asian Americans and African Americans, but rather to be reworked to displace both what is considered to be technological and what is considered to be human."[19]

Though Chun does not pursue an evaluation of the work that "queer" does in *Robot Stories*, it is clear from her discussion (as it is in the film) that something queer persists (even after her brief discussions of the queer sexual acts in the film) in her reading of how *Robot Stories* makes race do things within high-tech Orientalism other than reproduce its logics. It could be argued that what Chun calls Pak's methodology is presented in the film as a Queer OS. Chun describes it in this way:

> The opening credits of *Robot Stories*, which begins with the now stereotypical stream of 1s and 0s, encapsulates Pak's methodology nicely. Rather than these 1s and 0s combining to produce the name of the actors, etc. (as in *Ghosts in the Shell* and *The Matrix*), the credits interrupt this diagonal stream. . . . As the sequence proceeds, little robots are revealed to be the source of the 1s and 0s. Shortly after they are revealed, one malfunctions, turning a different color, and produces a 2. . . . Soon, all the robots follow, turn various colors and produce all sorts of colorful base-10 numbers. Thus, robots turn out in the end to be colorful and operate in the same manner—and in the same numerical base—as humans. The soundtrack features a Country and Western song telling Mama to let herself go free. The 1s and 0s, rather than being readable, are made to soar, to color the robots that are ourselves.[20]

In Chun's description of Pak's methodology, Queer OS can be grasped as a malfunction within technologies that secure "robot" and "human," a malfunction with a capacity to reorder things that can, perhaps, "make race do different things," tell "Mama to let herself go free," and make what was legible soar into unpredictable relations. ✻

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18 Chun, "Race and/as Technology," 49. Chun refers to Beth Coleman, "Race as Technology," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 70 (2009): 177–207.

19 Chun, "Race and/as Technology," 56.

20 Ibid., 56.