10 Inconclusion

Absent presences

Os Keyes

What AI does to queerness (and what queerness does to AI)

Queer lives, practices, and theories have always had an (at best) troubled relationship with technologies of instrumentalisation. Nowhere is this made more clear, in the here-and-now, than with respect to Artificial Intelligence (AI), which is premised entirely on formal classification and differential outcomes stemming from that classification (Chun 2021).

A range of scholars have argued that AI is, correspondingly, fundamentally incompatible with queerness (Keyes 2019; Schram 2019). AI is about description and prediction; it works to thwart the incommensurate and the unpredictable. In many respects this has been true since the 1970s, with many feminist critiques of the singular model of personhood involved in AI (Adam 2006) retrospectively identifiable as queer in their demand for unpredictable pluralism. The consequences of normative AI's simultaneous increasing power, and failure to adequately take up these critiques, have been tremendous and almost uniformly negative. We have seen algorithmic systems of securitisation built around monolithic and rigid notions of gender, with correspondingly negative consequences for trans and gender non-conforming people (Keyes 2018); we have seen fixed ideas of "digital epidermlization" (Browne 2015), as Katrin Köppert points to in her chapter, and an overlapping exclusion of the "flesh" (Morrison 2019). We have seen the same epistemology of extraction, control, and prediction play out in the methods used by researchers behind these projects, with violence appearing in the making, let alone the using (Gray and Suri 2019; Keyes and Austin 2022). This is unsurprising given that, as Nishant Shah (this volume) demonstrates, a necessary precondition of the perceived purity of AI is too dirty and dismiss queer existences. Shifting this, and the cascade of violence it produces, will require more than better datasets or algorithms.

Of course, things are more complex than that—they always are. People have always used appropriate technologies for contrary purposes, and turned them back on their designers; the same is true of systems of order and classification (Law 1993; Feenberg 1991). Within the territory that AI demarcates, there is always further space to move. From Rodrigo Ochigame and Kye Ye's (2021)

work on pluralistic and perspectival search systems to Brian Schram's (2019) proposals for queer disruptions of datafication, we can see researchers and activists dancing through those gaps and exceptions. Just as online communications simultaneously provide space for queer life and queerphobia (see Scheuerman et al, 2018), AI, it seems, has more going on than control and classification alone, as reflected by Sara Morais dos Santos Bruss's (this volume) reworking of AI's mythos to enable queer imagination.

To the credit of the various authors in this book, the complexity and ambiguity of AI is confronted head-on—how delightfully queer! Klipphahn-Karge's analysis of the queer potential of robotics argues for neither the subject artwork's pure normativity nor anti-normativity, instead pointing to the "potential […] [to] describe the openness and ambivalence of queer bodies." Ute Kalender muses on the fundamentally ambiguous relationship between crip lives and the "smart cyborg," pointing to the tension between the abstract, utopian idea of cyborgification as a means of escape, and the practical pain and normalising forces involved in undertaking it in practice. Johannes Bruder's chapter argues for the "(im)possibility of a queer response" through investigating the links between AI and M. Remy Yergeau's notion of neuroqueerness (2018), with respect to autistic people. In doing so, he not only adds nuance and complexity to analyses of AI, but adds (welcome) nuance and complexity to some of my own analyses of the relationship between autism and AI (see Keyes 2020).

In doing so, the authors address one of the most common critiques of queer theory: the "normative anti-normativity" in which political potential is to be found only in the fundamentally unconventional, and queer scholarship must be "Against! Against! Only and always against!" (Povinelli 2015, 169; see also Jagose 2015; Wiegman and Wilson 2015). But what more is there to be done—in queering AI, and in queering queer theory itself? Where do we go from here, with these critiques and analyses? Two important directions for me—directions that are interlinked—are scholars' choices of *objects* and choices of *actions*.

Object choices

To heavily paraphrase Charles Mills (2005), political activism is already navigating the tensions between queerness and normativity; this is not a question, necessarily, of something *new*. We can see this in Dean Spade's (2011) idea of "law as tactics"; in the history of HIV/AIDS activism (Epstein 1996); in challenges to the biopolitics of prison food (Hatch 2019). And we can see this in already-existing activism around and with AI. The European campaigning against emotion recognition technology—the campaigns of activists in Brownsville, in New York City, against the datafication and securitisation of public housing.

But, here are some of the objects of this volume's interventions. Jeff VanderMeer's book *Annihilation* (Morais dos Santos Bruss); Jordan Wolfson's

artwork *(Female Figure)* (Klipphahn-Karge); the concept of the manifesto (Junker); a "GIF essay" (Köppert). By and large, these analyses and interpretations are oriented towards the cultural, and away from more visceral, collective activism. This is not to dismiss them (culture matters, and the interventions that have been made here are insightful and flourishing). And it is also not to say that there are no *reasons* for culture as the site of queer analysis. Historically, the trajectory of queer theory (particularly Foucaultian queer theory) has been through the disciplines and methods of the humanities (Koopman 2009), and while there are now efforts to resurrect the possibility of queerness for the social sciences (and vice versa; see Love 2021 and Compton et al. 2018), it has to be admitted that there is far more of a history, a pattern and a habit of cultural analysis around queer theory than of more sociologically inflected inquiry into the practices of social movements. Perhaps, as David Halperin (2003) notes, queer theory itself has become uncomfortably normalised, and normative, in the methods and domains we are comfortable with.

What, as Kenneth Burke would put it, "trained incapacities" (Burke 1984, 18) result from this focus on cultural artefacts? How is queer theory and interpretation correspondingly constrained? And could it be otherwise? My answer to the last one, at least, is "yes," and that it behoves us to explore what that otherwise might look like—to look for queerness not only in cultural artefacts, but in the imaginaries and activisms underlying social movements around technology. These, just as the arts, are sites of contestation, futuring and skewing; of tensions that challenge normativity and "normative anti-normativity" to boot. What would happen if queer theorists examined social, as well as artistic, movements?

This is not to suggest that queer theorists and cultural studies scholars parachute themselves into social movements with the intent of extracting knowledge. To do so would be to repeat one of the classic harms and modes of violence of the academy; the one-directional model of abstracted examination of campaigns against injustice, and as a result, the feeling (quite well-grounded) that "your theory is written in our blood" (Namaste 2009, 27). Instead, we might look to engaging in a more participatory fashion than is the norm in cultural critique. Two particular sources of inspiration for me, here, are Sucheta Ghoshal's work with the Southern Movement Assembly (SMA) in the United States (Ghoshal 2020), and the work of Richa Nagar and the Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan collective in India.

Ghoshal's work with the SMA—a longstanding network of geographically distributed community organisations focusing on Black liberation in the United States—was centred on how to coordinate movement activists with differential access to technology, and do so in a way without compromising radical imaginaries. In (geographic) contrast, Nagar and Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan focused on Dalit activism, particularly that of Dalit women, through direct confrontation, collaboration, and art creation.

While I don't know if Sucheta Ghoshal or the Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan collective would describe their work as "queer," I see a queer

thread in their navigation of activist tensions and imagination of something different—imaginations and activisms that joyously embrace both the grounded work of campaigns and campaigners, and the possibility for these campaigns to be sites of futuring and skewing, just as the arts are. Nagar, in particular, framed her work as motivated by "post-oppositionality," which she defines as a framework that:

> invites us to think differently, to step beyond our conventional rules, to liberate ourselves from the oppositionally based theories and practices we generally employ. Although post-oppositionality can take many forms, these forms share several characteristics, including the belief in people's interconnectedness with all that exists; the acceptance of paradox and contradiction; the desire to be radically inclusive—to seek and create complex commonalities and broad-based alliances for social change; and intellectual humility—the recognition that our knowledge is always partial, incomplete, and thus open to revision.
>   (Nagar and Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan, year, xi–xii)

Incompleteness, contingency, paradox, and contradiction; what could be a queerer lens than that?

Vitally, neither Ghoshal (nor Nagar's) engagement was monodirectional. Instead, they asked what they could give to the movements, as well as what the movements could give to them; they offered what Nagar frames as "radical vulnerability" (Nagar and Shirazi 2019), with the expectation that change and benefit should flow *both* ways. Looking toward social movements in such a fashion would simultaneously provide support to the movements seeking change right now, and provide, perhaps necessary, correctives to queer theory itself. By taking theorists away from interpretation in isolation, and towards material, visceral, collective activism, we would be forced to confront (to paraphrase Kathryn Pyne Addelson (2009)'s thoughts on ethical theory) the fact that queerness is already being practised and navigated in a range of sites. Those sites, and the people within them, are likely to prove far better sources of insight than theorising between ourselves.

Action choices

This shift towards already-existing movements, as well as cultural forms, neatly segues to the other change queer involvement in AI might engage in—a change from describing and critiquing to *doing*: to designing; to building. In some respects, this is an uncomfortable proposal, for reasons of both complicity and capacity. *Complicity* because there is, I think, a sense (perhaps stemming from our normative anti-normativity) that to be engaged in a material way is to give up the ambiguous play of ethical and consequential uncertainty and instead come down on the side of our objects. The side where all of our theoretical training teaches us, complicity and harm are guaranteed.

It hardly seems like a mistake that one of the queerest proposals for doing, "QueerOS" (Barnett et al. 2016), is (quite purposefully) impossible to build. This impossibility is certainly desirable, in queer theory; the impossible has a good claim to being the "purest" form of imagination, and non-normativity, which is certainly part of the authors' point. But it also serves to excuse researchers from doing, and thus becoming complicit in the (inevitable) contingency of what is done. *Capacity,* because the number of queer theorists who can code (or: programmers with a deep engagement with queer theory), is small; Winnie Soon (2020) is one of the few exceptions. The skills involved in doing both rarely come together, and for those of us most comfortable in the realm of interpretation, a shift towards doing can feel alienating. Much like the "turn toward materiality" (Mulvin 2021, 192), it seems to be a shift away from practices of cultural interpretation, understanding, and critique; a shift towards things we are not so confident, necessarily, in our ability to execute. But of course, complicity is *always* guaranteed; we are complicit in myriad things simply by existing, much less existing in the university (Moten and Harney 2004). And while doing can be discomfiting, what kind of queer theorist turns away from the uncomfortable? Confronting the uncomfortable and unclear is entirely the point!

Still: this is not to say that the shift does not change the nature (and orientation) of our critique (Jaeggi 2018), nor that the entirely alien and unknown is an ideal place to start. There must be some commensurability, some framework to link the unknown to the known, for anything to be possible. One framework—one we *could* use—comes from Human-Computer Interaction, specifically in the late 1990s and early 2000s. From, really, one of the "white men with a beard" who Junker (this volume) notes as haunting AI: Phil Agre (who, in his defence, does not have a beard).

Agre was (is) an odd fish—perhaps the oddest of fishes. Trained in computer science at MIT, his dissertation and doctoral work focused on phenomenological approaches to designing machine learning systems. But after graduation, he found himself in California, where he worked and collaborated with Hubert Dreyfuss, Howie Becker, Susan Leigh Star, and a range of other philosophically inflected sociologists (and sociologically inflected philosophers). The result was a catalysis of his already-determined desire to weave the humanities and computing together; to have each learn from each other, particularly with respect to AI. His first (and only) book, *Computation and Human Experience* (Agre 1997a), might be the only thing I've read where the index proceeds "Merleau-Ponty, Maurice; Minsky, Marvin."

In reflecting on his successes and failures—his "lessons learned from trying to reform AI" (1997b), Agre perceived that the greatest difficulty in this project was the lack of commensurability between the (computing-oriented) AI researchers, and more philosophically and critically minded theorists and analysts from the humanities. Put simply, they were neither speaking the same language, nor comfortable learning that of the other.

What he advocated for as a (partial) resolution was the development of a "critical technical practice," and of critical technical practitioners—those with "one foot planted in the craft work of design and the other foot planted in the reflexive work of critique" (Agre 1997b).

What might that look like for queer theorists? We have many proposals for purposefully queer technologies in this space—technologies designed to disrupt practices of control, and dichotomous ideas of reality. We are hardly lacking in ideas, or in colleagues. There is Brian Schram, and his proposal for "flooding [the] archive with a million iterations of oneself that stake their claim to a wounded life inside the surveillant assemblage" (Schram 2019, 615). There is the "trans time" project (Haimson 2020), which simultaneously created space for a panoply of trans lives without datafication and worked to counter transnormative temporal flows of transition—a project that shut down precisely because of *an absence of willing and capable partners to maintain it*, demonstrating neatly both the potential for doing to be queer, and the need for many hands in making it so. In my own day-to-day, I have debated, discussed, and joked about the idea of a spinoff of the popular "scikit-learn" machine learning package, "suicikit-learn," that would purposefully obliterate models and datasets after a certain number of uses in order to force developers into closer relations with the flesh and blood and data doppelgangers they depend on. And these are just off the top of my head; what ideas do you, the reader, have? What ideas do other contributors have? How might we go beyond looking, and towards doing? Just as pressingly: how might we ask these questions with and within broader social and activist movements, rather than in books and artworks alone?

The shift to doing will certainly not be comfortable—straddling boundaries never is. But (a la Srinivasan, 2016)—if analysis could build a queer utopia alone, we would not still be here.

Bibliography

Adam, Alison. 2006. *Artificial knowing: Gender and the thinking machine*. New York: Routledge.

Addelson, Kathryn Pyne. 2009. "Why philosophers should become sociologists (and vice versa)." In*Symbolic interaction and cultural studies*, edited by Howard S. Becker and Michael M. McCall, 119–147. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Agre, Philip E. 1995. "The soul gained and lost: Artificial intelligence as a philosophical project." *Stanford Humanities Review* 4(2): 1–19.

Agre, Philip E. 1997a. *Computation and human experience*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Agre, Philip E. 1997b. "Lessons learned in trying to reform AI." In *Social science, technical systems, and cooperative work: Beyond the Great Divide*, edited by Geoffrey Bowker, Susan Leigh Star, Les Gasser, and William Turner, 131–158. New York: Psychology Press.

Barnett, Fiona, Zach Blas, Micha Cárdenas, Jacob Gaboury, Jessica Marie Johnson, and Margaret Rhee. 2016. "Queer OS. A user's manual." In *Debates in the digital*

humanities, edited by Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold, 50–59. London and Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press.

Browne, Simone. 2015. *Dark matters: On the surveillance of blackness*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Burke, Kenneth. 1984. *Permanence and change: An anatomy of purpose*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. 2021. *Discriminating data: Correlation, neighborhoods, and the new politics of recognition*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Compton, D'Lane, Tey Meadow, and Kristen Schilt, eds. 2018. *Other, please specify: Queer methods in sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Epstein, Steven. 1996. *Impure science: AIDS, activism, and the politics of knowledge*. Vol. 7. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Feenberg, Andrew. 1991. *Critical theory of technology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ghoshal, Sucheta. 2020. *A grassroots praxis of technology: View from The South*. Diss. Atlanta: Georgia Institute of Technology.

Gray, Mary L., and Siddharth Suri. 2019. *Ghost work: How to stop Silicon Valley from building a new global underclass*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Haimson, Oliver L., et al. 2020. "Trans time: Safety, privacy, and content warnings on a transgender-specific social media site." *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 4(CSCW2): 1–27.

Halperin, David M. 2003. "The normalization of queer theory." *Journal of Homosexuality* 45(2–4): 339–343.

Hatch, Anthony Ryan. 2019. "Billions served." In *Captivating technology*, edited by R. Benjamin, 67–84. Durham: Duke University Press.

Jaeggi, Rahel. 2018. *Critique of forms of life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Jagose, Annamarie. 2015 "The trouble with antinormativity." *Differences* 26(1): 26–47.

Keyes, Os. 2018. "The misgendering machines: Trans/HCI implications of automatic gender recognition." *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2(CSCW): 1–22.

Keyes, Os. 2019. "Counting the countless: Why data science is a profound threat for queer people." *Real Life* 2.

Keyes, Os. 2020. "Automating autism: Disability, discourse, and artificial intelligence." *The Journal of Sociotechnical Critique* 1(1): 1–31.

Keyes, Os, and Jeanie Austin. 2022. "Feeling fixes: Mess and emotion in algorithmic audits." *Big Data & Society* 9(2). 10.1177/20539517221113772.

Koopman, Colin. 2009. *Pragmatism as transition: Historicity and hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Law, John. 1993. *Organising modernity: Social ordering and social theory*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.

Love, Heather. 2021. *Underdogs: Social deviance and queer theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mills, Charles W. 2005. ""Ideal theory" as ideology." *Hypatia* 20(3): 165–183.

Morrison, Romi Ron. 2019. "Gaps between the digits: On the fleshy unknowns of the human." *Information Design Journal* 25(1): 56–70.

Moten, Fred, and Stefano Harney. 2004. "The university and the undercommons: Seven theses." *Social Text* 22(2): 101–115.

Mulvin, Dylan. 2021. *Proxies: The cultural work of standing in*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Nagar, Richa. 2019. *Hungry translations: Relearning the world through radical vulnerability*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Nagar, Richa, and Roozbeh Shirazi. 2019. "Radical vulnerability." In *Keywords in radical geography: Antipode at 50*, edited by Antipode Editorial Collective et al., 236–242. 10.1002/9781119558071.ch44.

Namaste, Viviane. 2009. "Undoing theory: The "transgender question" and the epistemic violence of Anglo-American feminist theory." *Hypatia* 24(3): 11–32.

Ochigame, Rodrigo, and Kye Ye. 2021 "Search atlas: Visualizing divergent search results across geopolitical borders." *Designing Interactive Systems Conference* 2021: 1970–1983. 10.1145/3461778.3462032.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 2015 "Transgender creeks and the three figures of power in late liberalism." *Differences* 26(1): 168–187.

Scheuerman, Morgan Klaus, Stacy M. Branham, and Foad Hamidi. 2018. "Safe spaces and safe places: Unpacking technology-mediated experiences of safety and harm with transgender people." *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2(CSCW): 1–27.

Schram, Brian. 2019. "Accidental orientations: Rethinking queerness in archival times." *Surveillance & Society* 17(5): 602–617.

Soon, Winnie, and Geoff Cox. 2020. *Aesthetic programming: A handbook of software studies*. London: Open Humanities Press.

Spade, Dean. 2011. "Laws as tactics." *Columbia Journal of Gender & Law* 21(2): 40–71

Srinivasan, Amia. 2016. "Philosophy and ideology." *THEORIA. Revista de Teoría, Historia y Fundamentos de la Ciencia* 31(3): 371–380.

Wiegman, Robyn, and Elizabeth A. Wilson. 2015. "Introduction: Antinormativity's queer conventions." *Differences* 26(1): 1–25.

Yergeau, M. Remi. 2018. *Authoring autism: On rhetoric and neurological queerness*. Thought in the Act. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.