CompuQueer: Protocological Constraints, Algorithmic Streamlining, and the Search for Queer Methods Online

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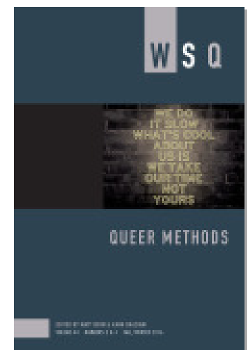

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CompuQueer: Protocological Constraints, Algorithmic Streamlining, and the Search for Queer Methods Online

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Abstract: How has the concept of a queer method achieved coherence and popularity online, without becoming synonymous with an ethos of extreme, indiscriminate inclusivity—with a sense that "anything goes," especially on the Internet and especially under the banner of "queer"? How do digital-networked technologies both manufacture and undermine the intelligibility of specifically queer methods? This essay considers these questions through the close analysis of specific social-networking services and a broad framework for identifying queer media and other inscriptions of queerness online: machine reading, which involves specialty search engines designed to circumvent human interpretation for the sake of discovering the avowedly queer.

In 2013 GLAAD, the nongovernmental media monitoring organization based in the United States, devised a precise method for evaluating cinematic representations of sexual and gender minorities. Dubbed the "Vito Russo Test," GLAAD's approach privileges explicit filmic identifications of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters, thus reinforcing the popular dichotomy between "straight" and "non-straight." This suggests a certain conflation of gender and sexuality, and precludes considerations of queer cinema as a potentially boundless mode of production, distribution, and reception—a category that could accommodate queerness as, in Teresa de Lauretis's terms, "something more than sex" (2011, 243) and that could, in Nick Davis's estimation, "enable a broader base of texts" than typical organizational methods allow (2013, 11). While stressing the significance of direct rather than coded or connotative depictions of LGBT characters in cinema, GLAAD's Vito Russo Test stipulates, perhaps

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paradoxically, that such depictions must not present sexual orientation and gender identity as decisive factors in the development of these characters, who must, in addition, prove essential to the plots in which they appear. GLAAD's promotion of, for example, same-sex erotic attraction as "incidental" to a gay character's identity thus reflects the organization's fantasy of a desexualized LGBT constituency—one composed of upstanding neoliberal subjects willing to work to disavow their various differences from mainstream society and to uphold heteronormative ideals surrounding kinship, citizenship, and consumption (Warner 1999; Duggan 2002; Duggan 2003). By limiting "LGBT representation in film" to onscreen portrayals of such able neoliberal subjects, GLAAD seeks to radically restrict the intelligibility of queer characters and by extension, of queer cinema itself, deploying a method that it couches as common sense. Plainly reproducing the very minority-rights discourse that, in Michael Warner's telling, prescribes "bourgeois propriety" as a means of guaranteeing social tolerance and political inclusion (1999, 36), GLAAD's Vito Russo Test can scarcely be described as a queer method. This is particularly true if "queer" is understood as, in Annamarie Jagose's words, "always an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming" (1996, 131)—or, in Peter Dickinson's, a "literary critical category of an almost inevitable definitional elasticity" (1999, 5). For GLAAD, an organization that officially rejects the term "queer" and claims in its Media Reference Guide that it "should be avoided," any method for the assessment of cinema's relationship to sexual and gender minorities must restrict itself to analysis of "identifiably lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender" characters; must celebrate instances in which these identity claims are clearly subordinate to those that index, say, age or occupation; and must recognize and reward the narrative centrality of a sexual or gender minority whose sexuality or gender identity is yet resolutely extrinsic.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, GLAAD's unveiling of the Vito Russo Test generated an abundance of negative reactions throughout the blogosphere, with *Flavorwire*'s Jason Bailey drawing attention to GLAAD's disproportionate emphasis on big-budget Hollywood productions, as in the organization's annual Studio Responsibility Index, which leaves little room for evaluations of independently produced, nontheatrical, and noncommercial short and feature films (Bailey 2014). How queer can a method be if applied, using conventional metrics, only to heavily capitalized mainstream sources? What's more, GLAAD's guidelines for high-

lighting "positive representations" of LGBT individuals would appear to be self-undermining inasmuch as they conceivably describe films in which the subordination of gayness—the relegation of same-sex sexual object choice to the status of a secondary or tertiary "character trait"—is itself a homophobic tactic, a function of filmmakers' squeamishness regarding "non-straight" subjectivities. On the blog *Queering the Closet*, critic Jeremy Redlien pointed out that plenty of flagrantly queerphobic films—including *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)—could potentially pass the Vito Russo Test, thus marking that test as especially suspect. Concluding that GLAAD's methods are "too small, too narrow, and too straight to be queer," Redlien convincingly consigns them to the category of well-meaning but embarrassingly ineffective (2013). In claiming that the Vito Russo Test does not constitute a queer method, however, Redlien and other critics simply suggest a series of queer—or queerer—alternatives to GLAAD's rather conservative approach. Writing online, these critics tend to promote, and position as emphatically queer, a number of methods unique to digital-networked technologies—from the creation of dedicated YouTube channels where clips of queer cinema may be curated to collaboration on shared Facebook pages where the genre may be parsed in startling, perhaps even paradigm-shifting ways.

But what, exactly, is queer about these methods? How has the very concept of a queer method achieved coherence and popularity online without becoming synonymous with an ethos of extreme, indiscriminate inclusivity—with a sense that "anything goes," especially on the Internet and especially under the banner of "queer"? How do digital-networked technologies both manufacture and undermine the intelligibility of specifically queer methods? I consider these questions through the close analysis of a conspicuous, readily accessible framework for identifying queer cinema and other venues for queerness online: machine reading. Here, machine reading involves specialty search engines designed to circumvent human interpretation—especially the kinds of subjective methods at the center of the Vito Russo Test—for the sake of discovering the avowedly queer. While various algorithmically determined approaches to making queerness more visible and interpretable online might convincingly be described—and certainly describe themselves—as queer methods, their results often favor the subjectivities of white, gay, normatively bodied cis men. These results reflect both the inescapable representational limitations of most commercial media and, more broadly, what Lisa Duggan re-

fers to as "the sexual politics of neoliberalism," whereby the radically queer is occluded for the sake of the salability and "spreadability" of homonormativity (2002, 179).

If GLAAD's Vito Russo Test suggests the organization's investment in a conservative, even corporatist method of integration for sexual and gender minorities—what Cathy J. Cohen has described as a limited "lesbian and gay political agenda based on a civil rights strategy, where assimilation into, and replication of, dominant institutions are the goals" (2005, 21)—then the search for queerness on Facebook, Twitter, Google, and YouTube might, however superficially radical its goals and approaches, seem similarly beholden to convention, complicit in queer's institutionalization, and reproductive of capital. In his account of "the fantasy of virtual participation," Tavia Nyong'o points out that even the most ostensibly disruptive, counterhegemonic political strategies, if filtered through social-networking services like Facebook and Twitter, inevitably contribute to the corporate profits of those services, thus strengthening their shared capacity to create global consensus and preempt resistance—whether to Facebook's neocolonialist, drone-assisted excursions into sub-Saharan Africa or to Mark Zuckerberg's tone-deaf techno-utopianism (Nyong'o 2012). Do "likes" really index support for radical social movements? Can a hashtag truly be queer? More to the point, must queer methods be understood as anticapitalist—as profoundly, intractably critical of and resistant to commercialization and institutional protocol? Arguably as dubious as the binary opposition between capitalist and anticapitalist strategies is that between queer and anti-queer methods. Just as dogmatic resistance to any perceived complicity between visibility politics and capitalist systems reads as naive, any attempt to guard queer methods against the taint of the nonqueer or the anti-queer is bound to fail—or, at the very least, to seem utterly unconvincing. As Sara Ahmed suggests, queer methods are perhaps most effective when forced to function within a range of constraints: "*It is the non-transcendence of queer that allows queer to do its work*" (2004, 165; italics in original). Similarly, José Esteban Muñoz, in deploying his concept of disidentification, describes it as "the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy" (1999, 25). Extending Muñoz's terms, Roderick A. Ferguson proposes a particular queer method that he calls a "queer of color critique"—an approach that "decodes cultural fields not from a position outside those

fields, but from within them, as those fields account for the queer of color subject's historicity" (2004, 4). For many queer theorists, then, the search for queer objects must proceed from within a range of arenas, including those that seem most hostile to queer methods, and must also deploy "queer" as a verb, transforming—if, as Ahmed contends, not necessarily transcending—the circuits of global capitalism in order to reflect and respond to a more diverse range of subjectivities.

The sheer expansiveness of the Internet might demand a similarly heuristic approach to the study of queer media's online itineraries, given, for instance, that such a tag as "queer" is not always available—and not always reliable—as a means of discovering aggregated queer content on and across websites. As a taxonomic tag that might facilitate searching, the term "queer" is entirely absent from Netflix, Hulu, and other popular platforms, demanding that queer methods—here understood as strategies for uncovering and elucidating queer media on the Internet—turn to more than mere hyperlinks. The case of Netflix, which deploys the decidedly limiting tag "Gay & Lesbian" to classify only films and television programs about sexual and gender minorities, and which, according to numerous studies, accounts for a sizable percentage of Internet traffic in North America—particularly during peak video-watching times (Sandvig 2015)—suggests that, even amid popular celebrations of the bountiful availability of queer media in the digital age (Kane 2012), there remain considerable discursive as well as practical obstacles to accessing and defining queer cinema online. Such obstacles are perhaps characteristic of Web 2.0, that historically specific iteration of the Internet that Tim O'Reilly (2012) describes in terms of interactivity—of the readily available, technologically facilitated impulse to produce as well as consume content online. Significantly, however, and in a manner that echoes the deployment of "queer" as both adjective and verb, O'Reilly also defines Web 2.0 as a tool—a particular heuristic method through which to discover ways of satisfying one's diverse needs through digital-networked technologies, avoiding those online "portals" that prove meager or misleading, and continually advancing toward sites that can accommodate a range of engagements. While O'Reilly's approach, with its emphasis on experimentation and open-endedness, would seem to suggest a kind of queer method—albeit one that does not mention sexual or gender minorities—it tends to position the mechanisms of Web 2.0 in qualitative terms, conflating ease of access with superiority of content and collapsing algorithmic adaptability into an almost

Darwinian conception of survival in the digital age. O'Reilly is particularly taken with PageRank, Google's algorithm for ranking search results, which favors popularity over relevance, commercial viability over artistic merit or intellectual rigor. The "better results" that PageRank generates—that O'Reilly celebrates as empirical proof not simply of popularity but also of quality—are simply reflections of various corporate successes, which ensure the prominence of major, well-trafficked content producers on Google. Resorting to the act of Googling as a kind of queer method, then, means contending with the algorithmic limitations of PageRank, which tend to militate against the discovery of those queer inscriptions that haven't been filtered through the heavily capitalized, frequently discursively confining circuits of GLAAD, queer-identified and sponsor-supported publications like *Out* and the *Advocate*, or major film studios. Their "quality" resting on a shared capacity to reflect popularity, PageRank results may offer little assistance to the user searching Google for, say, accounts of transgender representations in cinema. Such accounts may be relatively difficult to find because they are so often suppressed by precisely the kind of "collective attention" that, in O'Reilly's analysis, "selects for value" and thus inevitably consolidates cultural forms that have already achieved saturation and stability.

Google's limitations as a popularity-driven search engine—one that favors established commercial sites at the expense of emergent and noncommercial ones—suggest some of the central challenges associated with the theorization and deployment of queer methods online. In many ways, despite popular presumptions regarding the medium's boundary-shattering potential, the Internet concretizes that which is most contradictory about queer methods, whatever their scope. In this sense, it only clarifies and extends longstanding concerns in queer theory. Describing strategies for queering the field of psychology, Peter Hegarty notes that the term "queer methodology" may seem paradoxical, given the theoretical standing of "queer" as "an anti-essentialist, counter-disciplinary project, committed to partiality and irony" (2008, 125). If the notion of "queer methodologies" is ostensibly contradictory, that is because "the first term insists on pluralism, heterogeneity and understandings of difference that the second term writes off as error variance" (2008, 125). This automatic dismissal of the complex and counterhegemonic as "error variance" well illustrates what happens when so-called "big data"—which by definition demand new, resolutely nontraditional methods for processing—inspire the design of

algorithms that ignore or otherwise "weed out" anything that might be described as a statistical anomaly, including any number of avowed queer subject positions. As William Davies (2013) argues, the contemporary constitution of a "Big Data society" is dependent not upon the identification of individual activities and preferences (as in an earlier statistical and market society) but instead upon the recognition of broad patterns of the "social." This suggests that the metadata that social media firms routinely supply to third-party advertisers—as well as to the National Security Agency—indicate less a queer cornucopia than a readily reducible set of "network tendencies," perhaps paradoxically packaged in the neoliberal language of individualism. In asking what an algorithm can "do," sociologist R. Joshua Scannell notes that the algorithm—understood in terms of "a shift in governmentality catalyzed by data analytics technologies"—occludes actual social relations "by reformatting what qualifies as the social" (2015). The algorithm—the bedrock of big data—thus "reduces the complex social world into terms of calculation and irruption that can only be understood by machines. Structural inequalities become computational errors and inefficiencies. Labor is not so much reified as rendered invisible by mathematics" (2015). Machine reading—what N. Katherine Hayles (2012) defines as analysis through algorithms—is accordingly a distinctly queer-illiterate process, here premised on the surveillance of sociosexual groupings understood in terms of their "fitness-within-capitalism" (Koshy 2001, 153), which renders them intelligible in the first place, and plainly distinguishable from queerer formations. What becomes, then, of the outliers—of the practices that simply (and sometimes literally) don't compute? What are their relationships to digital-networked technologies—to the algorithmic operations that cannot possibly name them, let alone classify them as part of a broad social pattern?

Reading the Machines

"To be a one at all, you must be a many," observes Donna Haraway (2015), whose words acquire deeply disturbing inflections in the contexts of big data—and particularly in relation to queer political projects that are not predicated on inclusion and solidarity. A prominent mechanism through which the one may become the many, at least on a popular social-networking platform like Facebook, is the drop-down menu, a distinctly identitarian means of consolidating users according to precise, impermeable, and

longstanding classifications (thus recalling Nietzsche's "prison-house of language," or Foucault's "episteme"). Operating within the very appeal to user autonomy and self-selection that such a menu represents, the ambiguous political dimensions of social-networking services suggest both an investment in familiar minority-rights discourses—with their dogmatic aims of inclusion for the formerly ostracized—and a clear, all but incontestable preference for particular subject positions. Facebook may reach out to "everyone," but in the process it not only enforces the taxonomic distinctions among allegedly separate "categories" (such as "male," "female," "pangender," and "trans"); it also, paradoxically, attempts to regulate these categories by collapsing the "queer" (here understood as the nonstraight and/or noncis) into the already well-regulated, widely commodified identities of the lesbian and, especially, the gay man. It is in this way that Facebook, with its promises of a radically queer inclusiveness competing with corporate techniques for collapsing difference—or, more accurately, for collapsing "the different" into a single, salable "queer" paradigm—is emblematic of the obstacles to encountering queerness as an expansive, discursively challenging category (or anticategory) on the Internet.

Famously, Facebook now offers fifty-six "custom genders"—from "neutrois" to "two-spirit"—but how exactly has its graphical interface changed to reflect this alleged plenitude, this bounty of identificatory possibilities? Simply put, it hasn't—beyond, of course, offering a drop-down menu that includes all fifty-six "options" (some of which are more conspicuous, more immediately "available," than others). More alarming still, there would seem to be a distinctly gay-identified algorithm that continues to operate on Facebook, interpellating even the two-spirit user as a likely fan of a film about white gay boys (such as the well-publicized *G.B.F.* [2013]), or telling the neutrois user to tune in to the gay-focused (and equally whitewashed) HBO film *The Normal Heart* (2014). Demonstrating the persistence of this gay algorithm has become something of a pastime among scholars of the Internet. Experimenting with Facebook's wealth of gender identifications yields, via the interruptions of targeted advertising, so steady a stream of graphical and textual representations of gay men (and sometimes lesbians) that it is tempting to repeatedly expose the service's confusions regarding its own ostensible commitment to an expansive queerness—confusions that are inseparable from the methods of the advertising agencies, content farms, and various intermediaries responsible for mediating the relationship between Facebook and its users.

(Self-identify as a lesbian, and Facebook will shower you with promotions for *Out* magazine and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*; self-identify as neutrois, and Facebook will still shower you with promotions for *Out* magazine and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*.) If Facebook and other popular social-networking services have not yet discovered ways of targeting genderqueer or transgender users without implicitly and sometimes explicitly interpellating them as gay men or lesbians—thus evincing the striking limitations of their own emergent queer methods with their inescapable rootedness in commercial advertising—still other services suggest that analysis through algorithms represents a queerly alternative way of identifying nonbinary sexualities and gender identities in popular culture. Canny experiments with Facebook—those that embrace its interface in order to demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that the sponsor-supported service reads a nonbinary gender identity in resolutely binary terms as "gay" or "lesbian"—suggest an oppositional queer method, a way of uncovering the corporate, algorithmic constraints of a Facebook that, following the methods of various advertisers, is scarcely discursively sophisticated in selling *Out* and *Ellen* to anyone who doesn't identify as cis or as straight. Similarly, the use of certain specialty search engines may unearth appalling, perhaps even openly queerphobic practices, but it may also point, in its own way, to the queerness of machine reading.

With the publication of Lev Manovich's essay "Cultural Analytics" in 2007, machine reading gained considerable visibility as a potentially vital tool of the humanities—a way of working with large data sets in order to illuminate a range of recurrences, from the politically promising to the profoundly limiting. In collaboration with Jeremy Douglass, Manovich would go on to analyze 4,535 *Time* magazine covers, demonstrating how custom software could, in a sense, queerly recast a collection of cultural artifacts that human cognition alone could not possibly consider in a truly relational manner. Apart from but not unrelated to these all-too-human limitations, however, is the matter of hermeneutics—the compulsion to filter findings, however expansive, through preselected frameworks of interpretation, thus restricting their meanings to familiar analytic paradigms. The effort to overcome such constraints has been characteristic of the so-called digital humanities—what Hayles defines as "a diverse field of practices associated with computational techniques and reaching beyond print in its modes of inquiry, research, publication, and dissemination" (2012, 27). Hayles emphasizes those scholarly understandings of "reading" that

deploy, in the digital humanities especially, “a model that backgrounds human interpretation in favor of algorithms employing a minimum of assumptions about what results will prove interesting or important” (29). Mobilized in this way, machine reading suggests an alternative method to that encapsulated in, say, the biases of GLAAD’s restrictive Vito Russo Test, and one whose queerness benefits from foreclosing or otherwise inhibiting hermeneutics. “Databases,” Hayles argues, “are not necessarily more objective”—or, I would add, necessarily queerer—“than arguments” (39–40), and yet, as Manovich (1999) points out, the database as an increasingly conspicuous symbolic form makes machine reading inescapable as an entrée into debates about the circulation of culture in the digital age. Databases represent, however, the work of human cognition, and present particular challenges to queer methods—challenges that Hayles, drawing on the work of Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (1999), reads as emblematic of database culture, since “[c]onstructing a database always involves assumptions about how to set up the relevant categories, which in turn may have ideological implications” (2012, 178). Thus, Facebook, in a widely publicized effort to expand its user base and boost its cultural capital, sought to “queer” its own categories beyond “gay” and “straight,” “male” and “female,” but it continues to find itself enmeshed in the very binary assumptions and advertising and marketing matrices that led it to accommodate “gayness” in the first place. As Jacob Gaboury points out, fixed identity categories remain exceedingly “legible to the true-false, zero-one binary logic of digital systems” (2014). Gaboury goes on to argue that this phenomenon is “nowhere more apparent” than in Facebook’s “upgraded” understanding of gender identity, as well as in its so-called “real names” policy, which led the service’s administrators to suspend the accounts of drag queens and trans people who chose to employ aliases through their profiles. At the same time, several Nollywood film stars, accessing Facebook in Nigeria, discovered that their accounts had been suspended after they began self-identifying with their full Yoruba and Igbo names rather than with their more familiar, anglicized stage names—demonstrating that Facebook’s queerphobia often coexists with a certain ethnocentrism, a certain blindness to non-Western realities (see Tsika 2015; 2016). If, given this history, Facebook’s methods scarcely seem queer (as opposed to simply “inclusive” at the identitarian level of the dropdown menu), queerness may well accrue to efforts to uncover the service’s particular (il)logic with respect to the identification and interpretation of sexual and

gender minorities, transforming mere Facebook use into a kind of queer method in its own right—recalling the arguments of Sara Ahmed (2004), Eric O. Clarke (2000), David Halperin (2012), and other queer theorists who insist on the potentially radical queerness even of authorized entanglements with popular cultural forms. In other words, simply maintaining a Facebook account may well represent a way of consciously exposing the service's constraints, and those of digital media more generally.

Taking this approach a step further is artist and theorist Zach Blas, whose project *Queer Technologies* "critiques the heteronormative, capitalist, militarized underpinnings of technological architectures, design, and functionality," producing "critical applications, tools, and situations for queer technological agency, interventions, and sociality" (2012). Among Blas's *Queer Technologies* is transCoder, a "queer programming anti-language" that Blas and others "shop-dropped" in various consumer electronics stores including Target and Best Buy. It was intended, in Gaboury's words, to "critique the gendered assumptions that go into the way that we describe and understand programming languages" (2014). Blas's queer method is thus a way of using many of the bland, clichéd forms of mainstream culture—the packaging and typographical design typical of certain consumer products, for instance—in order to smuggle in evocations of those who, by dint of their sexual practices, gender identities, or even anti- or unidentities, are never acknowledged, let alone targeted, by the circuits of global capitalism. Through his strategy of queering commercial products from within their formulaic design parameters and major retail locations, Blas evokes Ahmed's notion that "the non-transcendence of queer"—the concept's containment within familiar, even normative forms—is precisely what "allows queer to do its work" (2004, 165). Blas's approach also illustrates Hayles's (2012) comments about the field of critical code studies, which, Hayles suggests, offers methods for perceiving the potential queerness of code without exceeding the boundaries of code's functionality. Referring to Tanya Clement's digital analysis of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, Hayles argues that the need "to translate desire into the explicitness of unforgiving code allows implications to be brought to light, examined, and modified" in startling—perhaps even radically queer—ways (2012, 42).[1] Whatever the biases of its human authors, then, a computer program may accommodate liberatingly queer engagements on its own terms, without requiring that these queer methods "read against the grain" of a given technological system. Such, perhaps, is the

point of so-called "zero-player" iPhone games and other "anti-apps" that, in their own ways, evoke the Warholian notion that the best parody of a thing is the thing itself. As Ian Bogost argues, it is "harder than it looks to game the very idea of an app" (2015, 57), and defamiliarizing that "idea" may well require acceding to it, passing through the infamous App Store review in order to afford iPhone users the opportunity to queerly question Apple's corporate logic "from within." Indeed, as with the example of willingly engaging with Facebook's terms of use in order to expose the service's discursive shortcomings, simply entering into contract with computational arrangements can contain, at the very least, a kernel of queerness.

In this sense, critical methods, in order to profitably acquire the qualifier of "queer," needn't radically repurpose technologies but merely confirm their intended purposes, particularly wherever those purposes might (as with Facebook) proclaim an unearned queerness—an interest in expansion that nevertheless reads as restrictive, capitalist, and deeply identitarian. Advocating "a political analysis of networks at the micro-technical level of nonhuman, machinic practices," Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker call for an awareness of how "an intentionally or unintentionally misused protocol reveals the political fissures in a network" (2006, 150). As a queer method, "misusing" Facebook might entail a deliberate refusal to respect the service's ostensibly sincere calls for users to "accurately" self-identify, putting forth a false claim and thereby altering, however slightly, certain statistical measurements, while simultaneously receiving abundant evidence that, say, "gay" and "intersex" are—to algorithms, at least—indistinguishable. (After all, as Joseph Turow points out, "[I]nformation is only as accurate as those who post it want it to be" [2012, 145].) Or it might look something like Mat Honan's "campaign of conscious liking," in which Honan refused Facebook's appeals for selectivity by "liking everything" for forty-eight hours, turning his feed into "a temple of provocation"—a "cavalcade of brands and politics" that multiplied in blatantly contradictory ways, illuminating the crude imperatives of algorithmic decision-making (2014). Honan's stunt brilliantly reveals the family resemblance between sanctioned methods and their misuse. Does indiscriminately "liking" content help Facebook or hurt it? Does it boost or reduce Facebook's data assets? On the one hand, the service, in exhorting users to select "accurate" identities, also exhorts them to act upon them—including by "curating" their feeds (or, rather, enabling algorithms to do so). And yet, at the same time, the "like" is a corporate currency whose

growth is much desired, even if its overuse may, as in Honan's example, radically reduce the intelligibility of an individual user identity, thus compromising Facebook's authority as a statistics mill. Selectively "liking" may seem a more radical proposition, however, even if performed as an "honest," "personal" practice: to curate an identity category on contemporary networked platforms is to come into contact with the protocological constraints that govern that category—to better understand the very codes that produce and sustain it. As Friedrich Kittler puts it, "Codes—by name and by matter—are what determine us today, and what we must articulate if only to avoid disappearing under them completely" (2008, 40). Echoing Kittler's position, Hayles suggests that "the results of algorithmic analysis refine, extend, and occasionally challenge intuitions about meaning that form the starting point for algorithmic design" (2012, 72). Proceeding "algorithmically" is thus as potentially profitable a mode of cultural critique as operating "anti-algorithmically"—and could, in fact, queerly eclipse the latter proposition, which seems increasingly fanciful. Alexander Galloway, for instance, has critiqued the romantic notion that there is such a thing as an "anti-technology"—an instrument of "hacking" that contemporary technological infrastructures have not anticipated. Dismissing "the idea that the limits of a tool can be transgressed by hacking, breaking, or otherwise misusing it for some other purpose," Galloway argues that "hacking and creative disruption" are "technologies in themselves . . . and thus worthy of their own scrutiny as determining systems" (2015). A queer method, then, might just as aptly embrace as fuck with an interface, following its appeals to interactivity all the way through to the core of its ill-defined or utterly disingenuous queerness.

The exposure of discursive inadequacy is not the only possible outcome of a queer method that complies with a program's terms and conditions. Another equally vital eventuality is the discovery, through unpopular programs that appear on the surface to have nothing to do with queer theory, of queer elements that remain unreadable through more conspicuous methods. Consider, for instance, those fringe software systems that, on their own terms, enable users to uncover the very word "queer," in the process pointing to its recurrence in cultural forms—including films—that other systems, from GLAAD's Vito Russo Test to Netflix and Facebook, necessarily exclude from analysis. The case of QuoDB, a specialty search engine whose database consists of English-language film and television subtitles, is exemplary in this regard, offering the user a chance to confirm

the source of a favorite quote or to consider the repetition of particular words and phrases across a vast and steadily expanding corpus of popular cultural products. The site's most conspicuous limitations include not merely the size and scope of its database, which consists exclusively of the licensed English-language subtitles for Western commercial media texts, but also the possibility that, of these compiled subtitles, a significant percentage will yield inexact transcriptions of dialogue—translational changes that are both syntactically subtle and strikingly transformative. In his book *Cinema Babel,* Abé Markus Nornes refers to this possible outcome in terms of the "violent translation of the source text" (2007, 159)—a particularly abusive "process of converting speech into writing within the time and space limits of the subtitle" (155)—and while his examples centralize translations from one language into another, it is important to point out that even English-to-English subtitling may necessitate the distortion of spoken dialogue. This occurs, for instance, when an actor delivers a dense monologue with a swiftness that renders comprehensive subtitling all but impossible. In such a scenario, the subtitles may capture the gist of the actor's utterance, but they cannot be considered an exact reproduction of it—a reality that may undermine the authority of QuoDB, at least as a mode of machine reading attuned to a text's original dialogue. Nevertheless, this specialty search engine suggests a compelling way of rethinking queer cinema history—of equipping the longstanding quest for queer representation with some of the tools of the digital humanities.

As a potentially queer method, the central, database-driven mechanism of QuoDB suggests a way of conceptualizing—with the aforementioned caveats—how the incidence and varieties of queer self-identification in commercial media correlate to the kinds of paratexts that one is likely to find online. Consider, for instance, the lines "I'm gay" and "I'm transgender." The latter, when searched on QuoDB, yields only one feature film—the Finnish drama *Open Up to Me* (2013)—and only seven television programs, while the former, perhaps unsurprisingly, yields almost two thousand titles. Even allowing for the possibility that the line "I'm gay" may refer, in some instances, to mood rather than to sexual orientation—and even allowing for the possibility of its misuse—the vast discrepancy between its occurrence and that of the line "I'm transgender" underscores the relative representational weight accorded to gayness in popular media. In this way, machine reading may help to substantiate some of the assumptions that often undergird the study of queer cinema. This includes the

notion that popular constructions of gay masculinity threaten, through their clichéd recurrence, to limit some of the conditions of emergence of alternative queer constructions—sexual and cultural formations that may not be so easily commercialized, and that are therefore relatively obscure, both on film and online.

Conclusion

How, despite the Internet's evident shortcomings, might we discover queerness as a "zone of crisis" (Waugh 2015)—a profoundly disruptive politics distinct from identitarian minority-rights discourse—online? In the late 1970s, Jean-François Lyotard, recognizing a series of new technological constraints, observed that "the miniaturization and commercialization of machines is already changing the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited" (1984, 4). Lyotard's mournful tone may belie the promise implicit in his invocation of change, but recent history would seem to have confirmed his sorrow and skepticism. Or would it? The protocological norms that govern computing and constrain online expression may call to mind Gayle Rubin's remarks in "Of Catamites and Kings," especially her contention that "no system of classification can successfully catalogue or explain the infinite vagaries of human diversity" ([1992] 2006, 476). But queer theory—a heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory field of inquiry—need not be limited to the rueful recognition of technological repression, however pervasive or effective this mode of repression may seem. Nearly thirty years ago, David Halperin cautioned against the impulse "to collaborate in the reification of modern sexual categories" (1990, 54). My goal in this essay has been to question what constitutes "collaboration" and "reification" in the first place, especially considering the erotic upshot of an ostensibly normative cartography, or the camp value that may inhere in any effort to participate in preposterously limited taxonomic schemes. Simply put, apparent collusion—of the sort symbolized by, say, accession to Grindr's narrow identity categories and equally narrow interactive rhetoric—may give way to erotic practices that violate familiar boundaries or that even supersede the genital. But it may also, in itself, prove erotically fulfilling, thus troubling conventional figurations of queer sexuality as dependent upon bodily penetration.

Thorny questions of access—of the material and infrastructural dynamics that may well prevent exposure to a website or compliance with an

app's terms of use, particularly in parts of the global South or in low-income and generally underserved enclaves of the global North—are perhaps equally relevant to considerations of what constitutes a queer method online. Arguing that "the availability and quality of video on the Internet are significant new political and economic battlegrounds where culture is controlled" (2015, 225), Christian Sandvig points out that "the distribution infrastructure of the Internet has changed to make some content distribution easier and some more difficult" (239). Those who reflexively blame their Internet service provider for poor quality video that is slow to download may not be aware of the fact that "their attention is less valuable than someone else's and that a producer declined to pay to make [a particular] video load faster for them" (235). At a time when net neutrality seems distinctly vulnerable, when electronic surveillance techniques are expanding rapidly and assumptions about the income potential of white gay men continue to shape corporate constructions of queerness (especially online), it is easy to assume that queer content that doesn't "fit" established paradigms will increasingly be confined to the "slow-download" category, as will the users who are not identifiable with stable or salable expressions of queerness. With respect to basic access, then, a queer method may well involve, as I suggested earlier, embracing protocological norms in order to expose, interrogate, or simply enjoy their constraints, comprehending them as conditioned by cultural and corporate practices that produce queer alterity. A queer method might entail recognizing and celebrating the deviance implicitly assigned to us in the sluggishness of a download or the graininess of a video, at the very least as a means of queerly coping with the irritating sight of the buffer symbol. Challenging increasingly popular calls for queer assimilation into digital systems, such a response could conceivably contribute to a counter-history of the kind that Ann Cvetkovich proposes in *An Archive of Feelings* (2003)—a queer alternative to those narratives of progress that persistently produce the fantasy of queer inclusion online. Feeling excluded from this fantasy—far removed from the "tech gays" and "coding queers"—can be a source of empowerment and not simply fuel for an equally but differently productive response, such as the shame that Cvetkovich sees as an animating force within political movements, or the masochism that Jack Halberstam (2011) and others claim as a powerful antidote to a politics of mastery and respectability. Staring at that irksome buffer symbol, or at an ad that misidentifies us in terms of a system of binaries, or at the logo of a Facebook whose dramatic

expansion was achieved, in part, by the valuation of white gay men with their allegedly vast "data assets," we may come to comprehend our own exclusion by digital technologies even as we seek to exploit them, queering the Internet search from within the madness of the machine.

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Notes

1. For more on Clement's project, see Clement 2012.

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