The Only Thing We Have to Queer Is Queer Itself: Naming the Cultural Machine of Radical Sexual Politics

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ABSTRACT. Language is a machine, and words are individual technologies within that machine. Sociocultural theory applied as activism is also a machine. Over the course of the past thirty years, the linguistic technology of “queer” has been recalibrated, moving from naming a cultural machine of radical, anti-capitalist sexual politics to naming a cultural machine of assimilationist, identity-based sexual politics. This has left the machine of radical sexual politics without a name, making it more difficult for people to find it and integrate it into their technological existences. The machine of radical sexual politics is essential because it focuses on dismantling the societal systems that assign life opportunities to people with normative gender and sexual alignments—in contrast to the machine of assimilationist sexual politics, which only seeks to address surface-level legal inequalities. Analyzing the problems with assimilationist sexual politics and addressing problematic uses and interpretations of the word “queer” creates a compelling argument for recalibrating the term back to a more radical definition.

Language is the technology that allows humans to interface with each other and with society. It makes us cultural cyborgs, starting when our uterine parents speak to us in their wombs. Considering language as a potential machine—and it fits the definition, having a multitude of interlocking parts that come together as a whole to serve a specific function—then humans are certainly, as Donna Haraway (1984/2000) puts it in A Cyborg Manifesto, “a hybrid of machine and organism”
(p. 291). Indeed, our ability to communicate complex concepts in highly efficient ways, our ability to better ourselves by learning and teaching these concepts, and our constant interaction via such communication meets Haraway’s fundamental definition of a cyborg: “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (1984/2000, p. 291). What makes us creatures of social reality more than language? What enables fiction more than language?

This essay concerns a single word in Standard American English—a single piece of linguistic technology—and the cultural machines (mechanisms by which people form communities and alter or reify the dominant cultural landscape) to which it refers. That word is “queer.” The evolution of the term has taken it from referring to a slur, a cultural machine of oppression; to referring to a radical political ideology, a cultural machine of transformation; to a general descriptor of LGBT+ identity, which currently fits into a cultural machine of assimilation. The final shift—from ideology to identity—is the most concerning, as, while it names the machine of the mainstream LGBT+ rights movement, it does so by appropriating the name of the machine of radical sexual politics. In order to prevent the latter from continuing to grow less accessible, activists must reverse the development of the word “queer,” restoring the name of the machine of radical sexual politics.

While the study of the reclamation of linguistic technology—disarmament, in the case of turning slurs into identities, and reprogramming, in the case of turning slurs into ideological descriptors—is fascinating, it will not be a focus of this paper. Instead, this paper will focus exclusively on the evolution of the term “queer” after its reclamation processes began in
earnest. Thus, it will analyze the use of “queer” to refer to radical sexual politics and assimilationist sexual politics.

Much of this essay’s definition of these machines comes from Dean Spade’s (2015) excellent book *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law*. Throughout the book, Spade describes the cultural machine of assimilationist sexual politics as structured around what Alan Freeman describes as the “perpetrator perspective,” which Freeman initially defined through the lens of critical race theory (as cited in Spade, 2015, p. 42). The perpetrator perspective claims that oppression “is about bad individuals who intentionally make discriminatory choices and must be punished” (Spade, 2015, p. 42). This is the dominant perspective on sexual politics in the United States, and the perspective around which assimilationist sexual politics has been constructed. Said politics focuses on passing anti-discrimination laws in order to prevent hate crimes or to allow the justice system to prosecute those crimes more aggressively (with the implication that more aggressive prosecution deters would-be perpetrators). The machine of assimilationist sexual politics focuses on activism surrounding same-gender marriage, gender-based bathroom rights, and access to job opportunities (including admittance into the military) for LGBT+ people. It seeks to establish tolerance and equal opportunity.

Spade (2015) criticizes the focus on anti-discrimination protections and hate crime statutes. He writes that “hate crime laws do not have a deterrent effect. They focus on punishment and cannot be argued to actually prevent bias-motivated violence” (Spade, 2015, p. 40). The reasoning behind this is, in addition to
a lack of adequate enforcement, “most people who experience discrimination cannot afford to access legal help” (Spade, 2015, p. 40), so “anti-discrimination laws provide little relief to the most vulnerable people” (Spade, 2015, p. 41). Furthermore, Spade argues that those laws are actively harmful because they “strengthen and legitimize the criminal punishment system, a system that targets the very people these laws are supposedly passed to protect .... and constantly reproduces the same harmful systems” (2015, p. 45).

The machine of radical sexual politics recognizes that, based on Foucault’s analysis of population-management power, “power is not primarily operating through prohibition or permission but rather through the arrangement and distribution of security and insecurity” (Spade, 2015, p. 57). Radical sexual politics seeks transformation rather than inclusion—the activism and theory that comprises the machine thereof advocates for demilitarization rather than military inclusion, aims “to abolish marriage and achieve more just methods of distribution” (Spade, 2015, p. 70), calls for an end to the tiered welfare system, and challenges the expansive criminal punishment system that disproportionately targets LGBT+ people, poor people, disabled people, immigrants, and people of color. The cultural machine of radical sexual politics is designed only to be fully functional when operating in concert with other radical cultural machines, including those that challenge ableism, classism, and racism. Ultimately, the goal of the machine of radical sexual politics is to transform how the institutions of power in the United States (including but not limited to laws and the government) distribute health, security, and even life itself.
An important framework for how the gamut of scholars and activists sees queerness exists in Langdon Winner's (1986) discussion of the stronger and weaker paradigms around inherently political technologies, which is conducted in his book *The Whale and the Reactor*. The weaker paradigm Winner describes holds that “a given kind of technology is strongly compatible with, but does not strictly require, social and political relationships of a particular stripe” (1986, p. 32). This aligns with the perception of “queer” as assimilationist, in which mainstream queer activists suggest that, while the machine of radical sexual politics may be more suited to liberated socialism, it can exist and flourish within colonial capitalism as long as there is tolerance. Thus, those activists would argue that the machine of radical sexual politics has not lost its name but rather has been recalibrated, and the shift in the meaning (the function) of “queer” is a logical result of that recalibration.

Winner's (1986) other version of the argument around said technologies, that “the adoption of a given technical system actually requires the creation and maintenance of a particular set of social conditions as the operating environment of that system” (p. 32), applies to the perception of “queer” as transformational--in essence, radical queer activists believe that the machine of radical sexual politics is inherently unable to coexist in the “operating environment” of oppressive colonial capitalism, and as such cannot effectively be recalibrated. This is because colonial capitalism’s primary goal is to generate economic inequality, wherein those who assimilate into the system receive better access to health, security, and happiness than those who are unable to assimilate into the system (including many LGBT+ people). Thus,
radical queer activists--and this paper--argue that, rather than recalibrating the machine of radical sexual politics, assimilationists have instead recalibrated “queer” to refer to an entirely different cultural machine: one of LGBT+ assimilation. This has left the machine of radical sexual politics unnamed.

Cathy J. Cohen discusses in detail the shifts in the use of the word “queer” in her 1997 essay “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens.” Cohen explains for the sake of context that “it was not until the early 1990s that the term ‘queer’ began to be used with any regularity” (1997/2005, p. 22). Cohen is specifically referring to the use of the term in the contexts of politics, activism, and identity that are the focus of this paper, rather than the use of the term as a slur. Cohen goes on to assert that

the roots of a lived ‘queer’ existence are experiences with domination...that form the basis for genuine transformational politics ... a politics that does not search for opportunities to integrate into dominant institutions and normative social relationships but instead ... seeks to change values, definitions, and laws that make these institutions and relationships oppressive. (1997/2005, p. 29).

Here, Cohen illustrates the use of the word “queer” to refer to a cultural machine of radical sexual politics. However, she proceeds to explain the unfortunate reality that “queer politics has often been built around a simple dichotomy between those deemed queer and those deemed heterosexual” (1997/2005, p. 24). This unfortunate reality is the use of the word “queer” to refer to an assimilationist cultural machine rather than a radical one. Cohen’s descriptions also provide more concrete definitions of the two machines of relevance: the machine of radical sexual politics sees the power
structure of heteronormativity as the enemy, while the machine of assimilationist sexual politics sees the people enforcing those structures--heterosexual people--as a temporary enemy, one which will cease to require fighting once tolerance has been achieved.

The first chapter of bell hooks’s (2000) book *Feminism Is for Everybody*, published a mere three years after “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” describes how feminism has faced similar issues to queerness: its primary cultural machine has also shifted from transformationist to assimilationist. hooks summarizes the shift thusly: “Reformist feminist thinking focusing primarily on equality with men in the workforce overshadowed the original radical foundations of contemporary feminism which called for reform as well as overall restructuring of society so that our nation would be fundamentally anti-sexist” (2000, p. 4). hooks then takes this analysis one step further by creating the linguistic technology of “lifestyle feminism,” which is “the notion that there could be as many versions of feminism as there are women” (2000, p. 5). According to hooks, lifestyle feminism’s “underlying assumption is that women can be feminists without fundamentally challenging or changing themselves or the culture” (2000, p. 6). This takes the linguistic technology of feminism--designed to refer to a radical machine that strives to provide oppressed women and femmes with a transformative increase in health, security, and happiness--and repurposes it to refer to an assimilationist machine that propagates the idea that people can become feminists simply by labeling themselves as such. The concept of queerness has evolved in a similar fashion--it has become “lifestyle queerness,” where the machine of assimilationist sexual politics endorses people identifying as queer without
dedicating themselves to dismantling the systems of power that actually harm the most vulnerable LGBT+ people.

In 2012, Jane Bryant Meek surveyed a number of students at a prominent Midwestern university about how they interpret the word “queer.” One student, named Javier, explained that “with gay you think of rainbows and Pride in general, and then when it comes to queer, it seems more of a natural, low-profile kind of setting” (as cited in Meek, 2012, p. 192). Another student, Paul, wondered if “the ones that are in the gay community that don’t understand the word queer, maybe are living too much of a heterosexual life, I don’t know” (as cited in Meek, 2012, p. 192). Meek interprets the students’ thoughts, which indicate their attraction to the term “queer,” as responses to the “commodification” (2012, p. 192) of gay and lesbian culture—in essence, Meek portrays the students as setting themselves against the assimilationist nature of mainstream homosexuality. This is optimistic on Meek’s part; however, Javier and Paul are discussing lifestyles rather than politics, even suggesting that queerness should be “low-profile” rather than something as publicized as a pride parade. In essence, Meek unknowingly furthers a vision of queerness where the term names an assimilationist cultural machine that can be calibrated to function in contemporary American society. Gay and lesbian culture, Meek suggests, has integrated itself into mainstream society by optimizing itself to function within colonial capitalism, while queerness is still calibrated to function optimally outside of colonial capitalism.

The error Meek (2012) makes is that those are not the only two options. Meek relies entirely on a worldview mirroring Winner’s weaker lens: that
technology cannot be incompatible with a given political system, but rather functions suboptimally within a system for which it is not configured. However, the machine of radical sexual politics cannot be configured in that way because it simply does not function within colonial capitalism. Although lifestyle queerness is opposed to gay and lesbian culture being optimized for capitalism, it still fails to recognize that, while the cultural machine of assimilationist sexual politics is reconfigurable, the cultural machine of radical sexual politics is not. The latter is designed from the ground up to be incompatible with the current American method of assigning health and happiness to people based upon their assimilation into mainstream society.

In her essay “From Queer to Gay: The Rise and Fall of Milo” (2017), Yasmin Nair’s (2017) interpretation seems to be the opposite of Meek’s. Nair argues that the downfall of Milo Yiannopoulos demonstrated that the terms “queer” and “gay” are in fact the opposite of how many perceive them. Nair suggests that the machine of “queerness [emphasis Nair’s] has moved from a theoretical, academically inflected identity to a widely understood constellation of harmless non-straightness, a set of characteristics that straight people will endure as adorable, sweet, fun traits” (2017). In contrast, while the gay community would like the linguistic technology of “gay” to refer to “devoted community members devoted to each other, people willing to fight unjust wars for their countries, good parents to sweet, adorable children”—an assimilationist machine—in truth, “gay’ in America has never actually shifted” (Nair, 2017) from being seen as predatory to being seen as mainstream. In essence, Nair is arguing that the cultural machine of radical sexual
politics has been reconfigured from transformational to assimilationist, while “gay” has, despite the community’s efforts, failed to be reconfigured at all. Under Nair’s interpretation, when people think of gayness, they think of a cultural machine whose primary function is radicalism, whereas when people think of queerness, they think of a machine whose primary function is flamboyant assimilation. Additionally, Nair suggests that the re configuration of queerness allows the machine’s new function to serve people as dangerous as Milo Yiannopoulos, provided those people align with the machine’s goal of upholding the status quo.

While Nair and Meek seem on the surface to be arguing for opposite things, they have actually fallen into the same trap: the trap of assuming that a piece of linguistic technology is synonymous with the cultural machine to which it refers. “Queer” as a piece of linguistic technology has been recalibrated, certainly, but the machine to which it used to refer has not been. It is as if, over a period of a decade or two, people slowly transitioned from calling refrigerators “refrigerators” to calling them “freezers,” simply because the two served similar (but distinct) functions and were positioned next to each other. The word “freezer” would then mean something entirely different, even though the machine to which it referred performed the exact same function as before the naming change. Furthermore, the machine that used to be a freezer would no longer have a functional name.

That same process has happened to queerness: the linguistic technology of the word “queer” has been repurposed, moved from referring to the cultural machine of radical sexual politics to instead referring to “a constellation of harmless non-straightness,” as Nair
so eloquently described (2017). However, the cultural machine of radical sexual politics still exists, simply without a name. This namelessness is ultimately the core of the problem. Radical sexual politics has not been destroyed by the changing definition of “queer”—it has merely become anonymized. Radical sexual activists no longer have the linguistic technology to refer to the cultural machine of their movement, which prevents many people from finding it and integrating it into their cyborgian existences. Just as a computer cannot run a program if given the wrong name, so too do people struggle to access anonymized cultural machines.

The solution is for activists to recalibrate “queer” a second time, returning it to its original function: to refer to the cultural machine of radical sexual politics. This recalibration will not be fast or easy, but with deliberate effort to educate the public about the optimal function of the word “queer,” especially in context to the vital importance of radical sexual politics, linguistic recalibration is possible, and the result will be worth the effort. By once again naming radical sexual politics, we can allow for a broader swath of people to integrate it into their current cultural hard drive, giving them access to a movement they likely did not even know existed.

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