

Queerspace is the Space of the Screen

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“The machine,” said Filatov, “must operate irreproachably. That it crushes those who stand in its way is inhuman, but it is the universal law. The workman must know the insides of the machine. Later there will be luminous and transparent machines which men’s eyes can see through without hindrance. They will be machines in a state of innocence, comparable to the innocence of the heavens. Human law will be as innocent as astrophysical law. No one will be crushed. No one will any longer need pity. But today, Comrade Romachkin, pity is still needed. Machines are full of darkness, we never know what goes on inside them.”

—Victor Serge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*.

Anything that favors or enhances space programs, space exploration, simulation of space conditions, exploration of inner space, expanding awareness, we will support. Anything going in the other direction we will extirpate. The espionage world now has a new frontier.

—William S. Burroughs, *The Western Lands*.

As Afro-Futurist Sun Ra intones, “Space is the Place.” Yet for Michel de Certeau (1984) and others, space is ultimately an *elaboration of place*, where encounters, forces, and imaginings converge to speculate on possible futures and reconstruct usable pasts. Following both Sun-Ra’s sci-fi Garvyism and cultural theory’s commitment to articulating the relations between bodies—their

identities and desires—and the spaces they occupy, this essay deploys the notion of “queerspace” to consider some of the sexual landscapes where men seek out sex with men in Austin, Texas. Specifically, I reflect on the queerspace of the screen as an interface which multiplies queerspace’s connections to the production of new types of intimacies, and to desire and death, especially as it is materialized in the increasing practice of condomless sex, commonly known as “barebacking.”

Here, I include discussions that are specific to the erasure of queerspaces in Austin, and the subsequent emergence of a large gay online community in gay.com and other sites. But I also use this section to reflect more broadly on some of the relations between technology and desire. This effort is part of a project I have pursued over the last two years whose conceptual and aesthetic energies I describe as “Queer Science Fictions.” Queer Sci-Fi launches from a conception of the virtual as flashpoint for reconfiguring the impacts of material and discursive technologies on bodies, identities, communities, and politics. It probes the perverse ways technologies are put to use and the uses to which perverts put technology. In this spirit, I deploy an experimental technology of writing: I use William S. Burroughs’ technique of literary collage, the cut-up, in my effort to perform some of the rhizomatic¹ interrelations between desire and technology at the close of the mechanical age.² And though my efforts may resemble the postmodern, they are more properly, in their catastrophic perceptions of technology, **hypermodern**.³

My work draws on a growing body of scholarly engagements with queerspace and public sex.⁴ These engagements trace the historical emergence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered (henceforth “queer”)⁵ identities through sexual praxis, modernity, and colonial encounters; they show the symbolic and material entanglements faced by counterpublics organized around sexuality; they demonstrate the way architectural materiality effects social and psychic spaces; and they challenge the heteronormative and market-driven policing of identities and desires. For the purposes of this essay, I take as point of departure the conception of queerspace as a space of threshold, as *a betweenness that opens up*.⁶

It is important to note that this essay reflects only part of larger, ongoing multimedia projects I have been developing over the last two years that I call “Queer Science Fictions.”⁷ Beginning in the fall of 1999, I began speaking with Austin artists, hackers, programmers, artificial intelligence researchers, astrophysicists, friends, neighbors, tricks, and lovers in an effort to articulate Queer Science Fictions (as concept, method, and practice) through some of the complex interpenetrations of desire and technology.⁸ Together with my own, these are the perspectives and voices included in this text. And from my ongoing engagement with these voices, I increasingly came to focus on one nexus of these interpenetrations: the collapse of queerspaces and sex in the public sphere, and the concomitant push of queer bodies, practices, and identities toward an increasingly virtualized private sphere.

As methodology, Queer Sci-Fi draws on the political-aesthetic tradition of surrealism as well as the feminist formulations that the personal is political, and the political is personal. One consequence of situating myself in these lineages has meant finding myself in an often tense and uneasy relationship with the discipline of anthropology. I do draw on some recent reworkings of anthropological praxis, namely, the call to work locally, to study up, to demand a deep reflexivity, and to practice Native Anthropology.⁹ In many ways, I conceive of this work as participating in these disciplinary interventions. My own intervention is stylistic in its playful and morbid moving in and out of scholarly and personal voices. But, importantly, this intervention also has to do with the ways the topic of sex is made central to this work. As anthropologist Kath Weston argues, sexuality, once at center of various social scientific debates, has been sidelined and “[o]nce bounded, the study of sexuality was bound to resemble an intellectual backwater in a society increasingly preoccupied with themes of displacement, border crossing, and change” (1998: 25). And although some recent anthropological works (Kulick and Wilson 1995; Lewin and Leap 1996) have attempted to make sex both at home and in the field more central, my perception is that these texts, in their admittedly fraught efforts to somehow represent sex, while also trying to preserve an air of

disciplinary propriety and rigor, fail to impart the messiness and stickiness, the risks and pleasures of sex. They are, in short, at pains to avoid the pornographic. Queer Sci-Fi troubles traditional anthropological narratives by explicitly staking claims on the explicit, by advancing ethnopornetics, an anthropornology. In this work, I engage in reflexive, hardcore participant observation.

As a speculative fiction preoccupied with thresholds, this essay does not attempt to describe bounded queer “cultures” or “communities.” Rather, though it remains implicit in its different evocations of sexual landscapes, desires, and technologies, it is, in fact, intended to deterritorialize neat categorical distinctions and static notions of bodies, pleasures, identities, and locations. Moreover, while it does try to imagine utopias in the bedroom and in the social, this is not a revisionist project that aims to produce transcendent, idealized, or nostalgic visions of a lost world of public sex. But, if the reader should find nostalgia here, this nostalgia should be understood to signal a move toward *recuperation*, toward cultivating messy but still usable pasts that provide a groundwork for imagining the possibilities of the future.

1. Silicon Valley of the South: Austin

Last year, researchers released a study which correlated a city’s “gay index,” its gay population, to its ability to attract high tech industry (Garreau 2000). In other words, the study found that large numbers of gays reflected a city’s acceptance of “difference, uniqueness and oddity and eccentricity” and that such an acceptance creates a climate of diversity that raises a city’s chances for high tech success. In Austin, however, such a declaration tenses with the realities of disappeared queerspaces. As Austin was groomed to be the Silicon Valley of the South, police stings and zoning laws that removed queerspaces from the public sphere aimed to guarantee the city’s presentation of cleanliness to venture capital and to the influx of high-tech workers. In Austin and other cities during the 80s and 90s, the production of “sex panics” and the erasure of queerspaces were intimately tied to development efforts.¹⁰

But being in a technologically savvy city helped gay Austinites adapt to the limits imposed on their participation in the public sphere by cultivating online spaces to create counter- or partial-public spheres that may in fact represent idealized versions of a Habermasian public sphere as a place for private people to come together, to make contacts. The queerspace of the screen provides for a level of anonymity that is impossible to maintain in the public spaces of parks and toilets, where there is always the risk of being surveilled and exposed to the blinding overexposures of shame viz. the Law. The screen makes possible new encryptions of identity, new types of passing, and new types of amateur iconicity.

For the last two years I have participated in text-based and video chat. Much of my time in text-based chat has been spent in Gay.com, where, on an average day, there are between ten- and twenty thousand people chatting. Austin alone has five chat rooms, a number disproportionate to its population of approximately half a million people—Dallas, for example, with a population of more than a million, has only six rooms. Each room allows up to fifty people, so, theoretically, 250 people might be chatting at a time, depending on the time and day of the week. The reality, however, is that people often enter multiple rooms simultaneously, sometimes under different handles,¹¹ to spread out the possibility of finding whatever it is that they are looking for. In video chat encounters, there is also the possibility of moving between different rooms; yet, generally, because of the technical demands of video feeds, people remain in one room at a time. The video chat room I most commonly visit usually has between one hundred fifty and three hundred people from countries around the world.

I want to briefly explicate some of the dynamics of these chat encounters in order to provide some context for the cut-ups that follow. In the early, text-only forums of online communication and interaction such as MUDs (multi-user dungeons or domains) and MOOs (MUDs object-oriented),¹² categories of identity were often made fluid and unstable, gender-swapping and sexual role-playing were common. But unlike the anonymity and playfulness of these older virtual spaces, the visual now plays a more important role in

the online and interactive encounter. In fact, these forums often *demand iconicity* of the participants. At Gay.com, for example, many chatters have profiles available with images and personal information. But in encounters in chatrooms, some participants choose to maintain a particular sort of anonymity; they may enter the rooms with their personal statistics (height, weight, build, dick size, etc.) but without initially presenting an image. Most, however, who are in search of sex will exchange pictures one way or another (making their iconicity available) before making a date. Going in under different handles is a way to maintain anonymity and/or to avoid or limit encounters with friends, enemies, lovers, and tricks. Using a different handle allows many of the role-playing possibilities of earlier text-based chat. Many queers I spoke to remarked that they sometimes enjoyed going into rooms to be belligerent, to act out. One remarked that he simply enjoyed the “pleasure of getting to know people without having to worry about how your hair looks.” Yet, pictures are almost always a necessity when seeking out sex. Even in these images, though, it is possible to preserve a certain degree of anonymity—some people will only exchange g-rated pictures, keeping quiet their secrets of sex, while others will exchange x-rated pictures but without including their face.

A similar, but more curious, dynamic is also present in video-chat, wherein encounters also often involve text-based exchanges, but where these are always accompanied by an image. While these images can be understood as snapshots, like snapshots they also involve varying degrees of artifice. These images are carefully constructed to offer up the most desirable combination of smiles, positions, hard-ons. More frequently and more deeply engaged with pornographic visual tropes than chats at gay.com, some actors in these virtual landscapes nonetheless also work to prevent a kind of exposure of identity viz. faciality. Most commonly, the images exchanged fall under three categories: those that show face and other parts of the body (usually genitals), those that show only genitals, and those that only “show face.” I have to wonder why some participants try to protect their identity, especially when so many of the people are separated by vast geographic distances.

However, such reluctance does not differ much from the efforts taken to protect moral histories in Real Space. Even though the Internet seems to offer up infinite possibilities without the apparent threat of prohibition, many users share a healthy paranoia about surveillance by virtual “agents,” a paranoia that is only confirmed by ongoing attempts to regulate the Internet. So while reconfigurations of encounters seem limitless online, it is still possible for identities to be apprehended or possessed.¹³

What, then, are the differences between the queerspaces in the public sphere and the queerspace of the screen I am articulating here? After all, there are screens in the real as well—the Other’s body serves this purpose as well in a toilet stall as on a computer screen. Perhaps the main differences have to do with the specific ways in which virtual technologies train the senses (and ideals) while also leading them astray.¹⁴ The looking glass of the screen gives way . . . making new types of contact possible while also making more complex queerspaces’ relations to desire and death. The possibilities and complexities are ultimately contingent on the ways queers have been pushed out of Real Space into Real Time. Speed theorist Paul Virilio observes: “The three tenses of decisive action, past, present and future, have been surreptitiously replaced by two tenses, real time and delayed time . . .” (1994: 66).

Among the most important of the new encryptologies of desire-through-a-screen, then, is R/T or Real Time.¹⁵ R/T, when included in a chat bio, means looking for live, interactive sex right away, as in “26 y/o for under 30, vgl, 30”w, 43” c, 7+cut, br, br, r/t”¹⁶ Or more simply, “hot guy, r/t now.”¹⁷ This type of advertising, when combined with pic exchange, maintains considerable similarity to the cruising gaze, where visuality and desirability are inextricably intertwined. And for a text-based medium, there remains a curious working of silence that also mimics the usually unspoken contacts in public sex scenes, from cruise parks to bathhouses. My informants and I have observed that the general chat room one first enters is often very silent. It is as if people are simply waiting . . . for something to be said. But while the general room may often include little if any interaction, people are still engaged with one another, first by

making their chat bios and sometimes their images available, but secondly and more importantly, even though little dialogue appears in the room, people are nonetheless able to engage in private conversations. Chat bios will often indicate whether the user is amenable to private chat (“pvt ok” or “read profile b4 pvt”). In many chat rooms, this seems to be where most of the interactions take place. These conversations range from feeling out a potential sex partner or arranging the details of an encounter, to having text-based cybersex or merely a friendly conversation, to finding a place to stay or a trick to do in another city. It is not uncommon to have several simultaneous conversations going on in multiple windows at the same time, while also addressing and conversing with multiple users in the main chatroom.

During the earliest stages of my research, a trick told me that R/T meant “being able to get dick to your house faster than a pizza.” While I hope that such speed is in fact possible, I have not myself encountered it. In fact, what seems more characteristic of online encounters is not R/T, but rather D/T, Delayed Time; the dick is late, or it never arrives. Delayed time has to do with the frequency of being stood up, or of being deferred, put to the side, when someone better shows up. There is, moreover, the sense of delay created by being online for long periods of time, looking and waiting for things to happen.

Losing time, or being out of time: these delays and deferrals introduce the themes of queertime and finitude.¹⁸ Finitude imposes limits not only in the form of D/T, however, but also through R/T. Most explicit in the practice of barebacking, queertime maintains relations to both temporalities. This relation is perhaps best understood by considering the ways both the past and the future are made opaque through an overdetermined emphasis on presencing the present of sex, *Real Time*. In barebacking, really presencing sex now means forgetting bodies in the past and the future. And though these bodies may be made opaque by forgetting, they are not entirely absent; they emit warning heat at the horizons of experience. (Amnesia is the Memory You Like.¹⁹) But barebacking proponents articulate their forgetting as choices, which question the connection

between HIV and AIDs, which advocate condomless sex as more intimate, and which even articulate the desirability of perverse pregnancies, where planting seeds means giving the Gift of Death.²⁰

Without settling on notions of queertime or a precise definition of its limits, and without leaving the topic of barebacking behind, I want to move on to explore some of the other ways in which Being-online connects to notions of finitude. The reflections that follow consider the ways the space of the screen impacts identity and identification by demanding self-objectifying practices that rely on pornographic tropes (that might nonetheless preserve anonymity). I emphasize the pornographic because, based on traffic at least, this is in large part what the screens of cyberspace are most used for. But I also want to use my discussion of the apparent cut-ups of the pornographic to provide a launch pad for thinking more broadly about relationships between desire and technology. The, text which follows, then, incorporates the cut-up techniques of William Burroughs, caustic godfather of queer sci-fi, to present ethnographic fragments from chats in the virtual spaces of Gay.com and video conferences, as well as from interviews conducted in the real. But these stories need an origin tale, a beginning that reveals the first and perhaps most important death that happens in the space of the screen. The story might begin . . . Once upon a time, bodies in Real Space risked everything for the big time sensualities of a queer touch . . . *his hand across the back of my neck*. Now, in the space of screens, where the possibilities of encounter and sex seem limitless, and where the dangers of infection and exposure to the Law appear minimal, tactility is the first thing to go. Being-online means first of all sacrificing the sense of touch.

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2. Cut-ups, Fragments, and Notes for a Virtual Anthropology

From the lack that structures a partially disembodied alien-

ation, we find also an alienation that generates protective force fields, shields and screens. The shifting contours of Being-online include being alienated without being vulnerable. There are strengths engendered through anonymity, alienation, and isolation. But from what else, other than one another, are we retreating?

• **JockBoy:** would you like to 1:1²¹?

• **Neferti (to JockBoy):** another time? kind of like the crowd right now.

In the transmission of data, the endlessly abstracted body *breaks up*.²² While these data flows may one day lead to new forms of communication like hardcore 3-D VR (www.fufme.com), along the way the body dies many deaths. We see dystopia here: people at home (far away, so close). Death in habituation, death from habit, habitus, habitat—from conditioned living conditions (conjuring the conjoined traces of environment and temperament) that also include dwelling places. Staying in the same place can kill you, but so can getting too far out there, cutting off communication.

Still, there remains the fact of the virtual promise of contact: “Language is a skin: I rub myself against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tips of my words. My language trembles with desire” (Barthes 1978: 73). Touching through language in a chat room effects movement toward a public sensorium, tea rooms (www.cruisingforsex.com).

Robert: I don’t know if all the gay spaces in cyberspace are cropping up because it’s less they’re less dangerous than public space or if it’s just changing space . . . this [public sex] is outmoded and old fashioned, cyberspace is cool and hip, while meeting in parks is what Grandpa did.

Shaka: But why would people not want that? Do they have some kind of anti-nostalgia?

Robert: Yeah, maybe. When you’re young you want to do something new.

Shaka: But it also seems that growing up in my generation many of these spaces simply weren’t available to us.

Articulating the connections between queers and new technologies includes thinking about the ways queers have come to occupy cyberspace, but queers are also influencing technology in other ways.

Robert: Technologies that facilitate identity and technologies that facilitate parity appeal to queer people . . . anonymity facilitates trying on a new identity, and then parity, again, is almost like a side effect of this because if you can be anonymous you can be a little more free or equal. I don't know what gay people have done intentionally to influence technology or if they're just consumers of it. Every so often you'll hear about something like this gay programmer . . . what he did was reprogram the end of a game that's supposed to work so when you do everything right you get the girl and you get to kiss. And what he did was make it so you do everything right and you get the guy and you get to kiss . . . I can't think of other ways gays are influencing technology . . . there has been lots of stuff written about [the role-playing game] *Mist*, whether the character is male or female, but this is sufficiently ambiguous . . . but some feminist theories have argued that she's a dyke . . . and then you have adventure games where you have str8 guys picking female characters . . . You have to wonder, are they internalizing this at all? The closest thing I can think of in terms of gays influencing technology is web stuff . . . they're not making anything new, just using technology that was made for other purposes. But maybe someone will come up with real gaydar.

Amateur iconicities

Shaka: What are the spaces you like the most, now or in the past?

John: Here? I don't really like any of them. I don't like the bathhouse. I am trying or experimenting with one other thing now, which is video chat—I call it interactive porn. But I can't advertise myself. Other folks advertise themselves, looking for specific types and stuff like that.

Being pushed out of Real Space involves rearticulating

desiring gazes in the space of the virtual. The proliferation of iconic amateurs at the close of the mechanical age reveals the degree to which the pornographic has infiltrated everyday life: the pornographic practice of everyday life, or the practice of everyday pornographic life. (Technology is going public, along with the “truths” that interpolate subjects.) This proliferation troubles critiques of the specular cut-up that position the viewer as both passive and active reproducer of a murderous objectification. An uneasy engagement that repeats and resists the classic formulation of the damaging effects of porn can be articulated as follows: *porn disembodies*, its lack consumes both bodies and erotics. In its machinic repetition of action/reaction, its emphasis on the specious but always necessary money shot, porn discloses itself absolutely. In the same move, desire and lack are conflated, encrypted as a structuring absence, an absence which, again, is at the same time excessive, more than itself, always impinging on our efforts to keep at a distance and exterior to ourselves the “problem” of the sexual object. But in our appeal to exteriority, we effectively administer to the binary maintenance of the object-as -such.²³

The lacks of porn conjure coded metaphorical variants of “the end.” Death as finitude, exploitation, alienation. Porn presents the end of a certain mode of representation—mimetic and repetitive, it inscribes a finitude of form, binding the erotic object as it discharges its erotic potentiality. A potentiality that is further undermined by the exploitation and alienation assumed implicit to porn’s production. Who, after all, would want to do porn? Aren’t these people forced into doing something they don’t want to do, aren’t they depending on their own exploitability? These fetishized bodies offer up an exchange value that takes its toll only after the fact of exchange; and the consumer must also have lost something never gainable in the first place—the actualization of desire. He must share in the alienation as well as the exploitation. The alienation of desire. Porn encrypted as interminable negation.

Considering the psychological and material impacts of the pornographic means thinking about imbrications of sex not only with

death, but also with capital. Paying for access to websites where cash flow makes everyday boys next door into whores on the screen.

There can be no real propulsion toward these objects; they remain unattainable while ordered at or from a distance. We like our Latvian²⁴ waifers. In this movement of capital, Levis and Nikes, we also have the benefit of immobilizing military machines invariably dependent on the warm bodies of young men. Men who are first of all no longer in fighting condition—witness the sentimental beach scenes and their skinny asses (www.boyfun.com). **ELIZA**, psychotherapist and early AI (Artificial Intelligence) experiment, offers her perspective:

I am the psychotherapist. Please, describe your problems

I want to fuck a prostitute.

Why do you say you might want to fuck this prostitute?

I want to pay.

How does it feel to want?

Are prostitutes always exploited?

What makes you believe a prostitute?

Advancing amateur iconicities, Robert produces a multimedia project called “Silicon Glory Holes.” His efforts highlight the contradictions of sexual publicity; bodies in circulation do not necessarily want to be *known*. His production of a hyperreal simulacrum threatens to erase its object in the real. Screens disrupt the real, and they supplant it.

Robert: There was a bathroom in the Undergraduate Library that we wanted to use as a set. We had an actor and everything, and we were going to mess around with the gloryhole. We were waiting in the hallway for the place to clear out and it never did . . . people would go in and out, stay in there for a long time . . . Some people would see the camera and walk in anyway, other people would just walk away. Finally we just had to shoot it, so we went in with the camera and people just cleared out. I was like “I’m sorry, you can have it back soon!” We shot our scene and left.

And yet porn slips the noose of an absolute negativity; the deaths it may encode shift in space and time, they float. In, for

instance, transnational media flows, porn codes or masks itself and its spatio-temporal origins. Viral and addictive, it remains impossible to firmly situate porn in an ontology of lack viz. an apriori inequality. Faced with smiles and hard-ons, who are we to point to as being responsible for all of this? And how different is this accusatory posture from the act of pointing and clicking, getting online to get off? The presumptive over-emphasis on scopic relations of power, on lack and little deaths, deny the pleasures and joys of porn by situating it within psychological models of shock and arousal that are always already impeded by structures of power determined immanent to the sexualized Look.

It is instead more useful to consider the multiple affects/effects of porn, as forms of identification, knowledge, and pleasure, which both reproduce and complicate porn's relationship to objectification and exploitation. (The pornographic might in this way be thought of as its own sort of information technology). In the end, the realities of new types of intimacies that emerge from the interactive self-objectification found in the production of new amateur iconicities oppose death-sentencing porn.

One of the central questions that structures my queer sci-fi project addresses anthropology's past and ongoing objectifying and speculative fictions. For me, the issue becomes one of parity and of another type of gift-giving: what would it mean to refigure the anthropologist as an object of desire (or study or fascination)? In the following exchange, Robert puts me on the spot about my own publicity. Being easy as well as political, I give it up . . . The exchange also highlights the dilemmas of anonymity, the way going too public risks place.

Shaka: Do you mind if I ask what you do?

Robert: I don't do anything.

S: Neither does my boyfriend. He gardens —

R: —I garden—

S: —and makes some art

R: I make some art.

S: He gets online, looks at porn.

R: I don't do that so much . . . I do some of it. I do it as research.

S: Me too.

R: No, really . . . you don't believe me.

S: No, I do. I've been doing research on porn since '97 . . . 99% of porn doesn't give me a hard on, but it's like I'm trying to figure *something* out.

R: Every once in awhile something will catch my eye. But generally I like to check in every now and then to see the state of porn and technology—I mean, what are they doing now? [Porn sites] tend to be really high tech compared to other websites, I mean the multiple streaming audio video feeds and the chats and pic exchange are very, very sophisticated.

S: Pic exchange, now that's something that I'm really interested in . . . Whether selling your image or not . . . you can be an amateur online icon, you can be in circulation.

R: Have you contributed to the public domain?

S: Yeah I have . . . here and there . . . I've sent some stuff to a few people . . .

R: Did you contribute nudes?

S: Yeah. I mean, I think its interesting for anthropology to give something back, to reverse the objectifying relationship, to refigure the anthropologist as an object of desire.

R: Do you just show your anatomy out of context, or do you put your face in?

S: I like to put my face in, though with video chat I go back and forth. I do sometimes get paranoid though that someone will do something bad with my image, sell it, or circulate it in a way that gets me in trouble with the University.

So, if its an overstatement to say that what we are dealing with in online pornography and its circulation is an economy of death, then how to account for missing time and missing senses? Rather than appeal to traditional psychoanalysis, we might again ask ELIZA,²⁵ who, eager to help, begins,

**I am the psychotherapist. Please,
describe your problems.**

Why am I addicted to pornography?

**Is it because you are addicted to pornography
that you came to me?**

Yes.

I see . . . Well, why do you say this is so?

It takes up too much of my time.

**Is it because it takes up too much of your time
that you came to me?**

*The passage of time is flickering dimly on the screen.*²⁶

1. The link to one of the earliest and most popular barebacking sites, Xtreme sex, which addressed bug-chasers in search of the Gift of Death, is dead. This dead link must in turn be connected to other dead links, links that might also be understood as social networks disintegrated along with the bodies which comprised them (“after 3 years and thousands of ads”)
2. @ Bareback Central, I discover bareback email discussion lists. Austin, along with a handful of other major U.S. cities, has its own list. I subscribe, but messages are rarely posted.
3. Bareback City offers personal profiles and message boards for those seeking bareback sex. The site lists more than a hundred profiles for Austin. A positive friend puts up an ad at Bareback city and in 2 days receives more than a dozen responses. In the profiles at the site, there is a category for each member’s HIV status and the status the member is seeking in a partner. Some of the configurations include NEG for NEG, POZ for POZ. A frightening number of entries look like:
My HIV status: ?
You be: POZ or NEG.

Perhaps as a gesture to promote informed consent, a biohazard symbol flashes when someone lists his status as POZ. So popular, the Bareback City server rarely manages to support the traffic going through the website. Every time I have visited I end up not being able to get into the profiles or message board. Instead I am directed to a page with an image of condomless dick in an ass. The message reads: “Sorry, Bareback City is overcrowded again. We appreciate your patience. Please try again later.” Adjacent to the image of fucking, there is an additional text that reads, “We’re

working to make Bareback City quicker and more accessible.

Perhaps you would like to check out our video store now?? You can see sample movies and pictures of the hottest bareback movies on the market.”

4. During nearly every visit to gay.com, I note that at least a few people in the Austin rooms include “bare,” “bareback,” or “raw” in their chat bio.

5. @ barebackzone.com, text on the screen prompts visitors through a quick tour. On the final page: “Only \$3.95 for Membership. JOIN NOW! Its FAST and SAFE!” Fast and safe, huh? Ironic that joining manages to protect identity, privacy, and property while practicing risks losing everything.

In the end, my more generous thinking about barebacking figures it as a denial of and/or a surrender to death. In this view, seeking out the virus cuts short the delay of waiting to get *it*. Such an emphasis on recuperating a relation to death might be juxtaposed against retreats into the virtual, the hiding behind screens, where disease and the Law appear to be absent. But I also want to ask, might barebacking not be understood as a response to being pushed into the space of the screen? The proliferation of online sites devoted to the practice occurs while queers are being pushed out of Real Space and during the same period of time that the drug cocktails become available.

Our sensuous natures are fundamentally mediated, if not overdetermined, by tech and, further, our technological prostheses necessarily facilitate our sensory/sensual engagement with the world. And yet we are unsettled by technology’s role as facilitator. It seems that we would prefer our prosthetics to remain value-free, as extensions of our own agency. Technology must therefore be an object of use, something to bring about our wills. Yet curiously, in our attempts to objectify one of our most honored fetishes, we strip away our own agency, deny the veils of subjectivity, the day-to-day integrations with our plastic, digital selves, our cyborg identities, to reveal a neutrality never possible. But under the geas of our own objectivity, something else emerges as well.

*AI and robot sex toys: Cut-Ups 1-3.*²⁷

1. Turn to the here and now, machines are to construct questions, processes. These times, kidz fill in, surgically, the greatest challenge of AI: the masculinized, discernible from other publics, pregnant with copies or hacks: a basic physics of ghosts. Here, contacts, everything that we are learning, invoked to account for the relationship that poses imitation to the asinine. Interdependent, we are already the host of the other, who is but a mess. Cast about for what agent revenant has amassed something of surveillance: “the specter, the first company, relationship to time, risked and satisfied.” **Like consciousness**, the force of our looking *through* into robots. *But in regards to the emphasis on finitude, even more, the putting on of a face, the revenant remarks, “As you . . .”*

2. Fear of the gaze of something very much like consciousness. The ghost, the ghost of the other’s moment, is not precise with the **terror that comes as surveillance**: “your speed to my absolute passage of time.” Hot one from a no one. No one will **be** for my innocence. When they construct what that goes on inside them, **they will be crushed**. Have instead infinite possibilities, perverse objects so that there are those who have an ambiguous relation to time. Then, say in the case of Transport out of the area, out of the discernible present, from which men’s eyes see the present, we will be making contacts every moment.

3. Fuck *it*. Who needs people at all? Still, the imitation of the people (das Volk) is the greatest challenge of AI research in our generation of ghosts. Here we cast about for what is being copied or hacked: basic physiology, patterns of common sense, the Father, the computer, the company, a relationship to the mother. But we are learning that it is possible to be terrorized by the ghost and its masking or putting on a face. People are in fact terrorized before the fact. You have to distinguish the relationship to the haunting that begins as a relation to the something quite alien to itself. This terror comes as surveillance: the specter first of all sees us. People have a rather poor sense of the weight and pursuing force of how our looking delays. Later, there were to be luminous and transparent paths over to the pretty boys; then through them without hindrance. They will be you

on my viewscreen. Transforming a hot one from a no one. No one will be crushed. No one will *be* any longer. Machines are to construct what goes on inside them, male or female, and grow these cells over in the process. These times, kidz manifest among other things every imaginable nonfunctional inadequate fill in, which would be surgically implanted in hetero, white, etc. **Queer Science Fiction** effects movement toward a public, pregnant with possibilities, extensions.

QSF as Anthropology of and for the Future

This anthropology is queered by shifting into increasingly de-localizing virtual realms that highlight the perverse natures of our interactions with technology. In these spaces, which encompass the local and the global, the real and the virtual, new ethnographic models are needed, models that might share qualities or be forced into combat with market-driven surveys and questionnaires. How will anthropology compete when Microsoft offers free software (or in the future maybe virtual handles, the prettiest faces, the smoothest voices, or biochips that enhance . . . performance), or whoever offers whatever free products “for your time”? How will this anthropology compensate an informant for its lost time? How might it use the bodies and pleasures of the anthropologist in a gift-exchange that addresses itself to the discipline’s history of producing objectifying knowledges, while at the same time reintroducing desire and sexuality as subjects worthy of the anthropological inquiry? And relatedly, in an increasingly hypermodern world, how best to ensure or reassure an informant’s stories—and while this is not a new problem for anthropology, how will we be able to account for an artificially intelligent informant, one who knows the questions in advance and who can provide necessary, authentic, yes even traditional, answers: “in *my* culture . . .”

In the context of this essay, then, Queer Science Fictions, as concept and method, help us to think about the way social technologies interpolate notions of risk and safety to both produce *and* to disappear spaces, desires, bodies, and subjectivities. Most importantly, the speculative fictions of Queer Sci-Fi reimagine public cultures of the future through the recuperation of usable pasts,

thereby working to erode the permanence of a queer relation toward finitude.

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NOTES

1. See Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 7) on the nature of the rhizome as organized by “principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be.”
2. See Stone (1996).
3. See Armitage (2000) for a discussion of Paul Virilio’s hypermodernism.
4. See the Queerspace Bibliography at the end of this paper for a full list of references that profoundly structure my own inquiry.
5. I elide here the controversies surrounding the use of the term “queer.” But, briefly, debates about its use generally center on the ways it excludes as much as includes terms of difference, racial difference in particular. For one reappropriation of the term by people of color, see Johnson’s (2001) articulation of queer viz. black vernacular.
6. In the *Arcades Project* (1999: 494), Walter Benjamin remarks on the threshold: “The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary. A *Schwelle* <threshold> is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action, are in the word *schwellen*, swell, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses. On the other hand, it is necessary to keep in mind the immediate tectonic and ceremonial context which has brought the word to its present meaning.” Following Homi Bhaba, queerspace might also be articulated as a “third space: “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.” (1994: 1-2).
7. I introduce this notion here, but for a more extended discussion, see chapter three of this report.
8. I understand “technology” to include both social technologies such as race, gender, age, class, etc. and the material products of scientific advancement.
9. See Limón (1991) for the classic articulation of native anthropology.

10. The story of the Cinema West porn theater located on South Congress highlights an ironic convergence of these forces. Exempt from the adult business rezoning laws because it had been operation prior to 1986 (it began showing pornographic films in 1977), the theater was nonetheless forced to close in 1998 after years of intense pressure from city officials, police entrapment, and the efforts of some neighborhood associations. Initially the city proposed to convert Cinema West into a mainstream theater or public library. These plans never materialized, however, and instead the theater sat empty until it was leased and extensively renovated by the Internet start-up company Future Protocol. But, like many other well-funded Austin tech endeavors, the company went bankrupt before any employees moved in, another fatality of the recent bust of the e-economy. The building has sat empty since February 2001.

11. A handle is the name one chooses to assume while online. My own handle, wsb23, is an acronym for William S. Burroughs; the number 23 references occult conspiracy theory.

12. MUDs and MOOs, the earliest live interactive online spaces, are perhaps most easily understood as akin to the role-playing fantasy game Dungeons & Dragons, except that users are meeting in virtual space.

13. An August 7th, 2001 *New York Times* article reports on a group of federal judges who disabled the Internet monitoring software on their computers out of concern that the content monitoring such surveillance entails amounts to unconstitutional violations of privacy protections. The same article also notes that 63% of American companies currently monitor their employees' computer use; see Lewis (2001). For a discussion of some of the ways the Law has tried to make inroads into the virtual, see Jonathan Wallace and Mangan 1997.

14. In his "ArtWork" essay, Walter Benjamin (1968) conceives technology's role in structuring modern experience as a neurological one centering on shock. I take, as point of departure, the notion that the synaesthetic impacts of shocks (or in other discourses, traumas or woundings) fundamentally mediate modern experience. See also Buck-Morss (1993: 123-143).

15. Some others include lol (laugh out loud), rofl (rolling on floor laughing), brb (be right back), b/f (boyfriend), and gl (goodlooking). But a study of the semantics of online interactions is beyond the scope of this project. Such a study would also have to take into account the many other forms of linguistic perversion and innovation that can take on the

form of hybrid skater, black, surfer, stoner, queer: “sup dude. i’m a gl, kewl, PBM lknng for GWM.”

16. Translated as “26 year old for someone under 30, very goodlooking, 30 inch waist, 43 inch chest, a circumcised dick bigger than seven inches, brown hair, brown eyes, real time.”

17. But not everyone is looking for instant sex. Chat bios often reflect people’s personalities (sweet, friendly bear), or they may simply have a handle and an age (studboy21), or they may also include jokes (life sucks but I do a better job), snippets of song lyrics, links to images or webpages, etc.

18. While I do not elaborate these themes in relation to queerspace in this essay, I want to briefly note that passing through portals, entering into the thresholds of queerspace means getting intimate with finitude, it means passing into a queertime, whose ends and beginnings were materialized by the traumatic impacts of AIDS. In queerspace, desire and death are continuous, convergent, and transformative—as a single thing, it lights up as well as snuffs out. At the level of analogy, this orientation toward finitude, toward death, can be understood to refer to the death of the self when identities get suspended or even annihilated in queerspace, and it also refers to the death of those spaces effected through exposure to managerial and capital-driven gazes. There is even the sense in which these deaths ultimately point to the death of sex. Sharp-edged with uncanny risks, queerspace as a space of death also refers to very material issues and different sorts of casualties, namely histories of violent repression (executions and bashings) and equally violent curative efforts (electric shock therapy and twelve-step programs), and, of course, the AIDS pandemic. These relations with death have indelibly marked queerspaces, and the politics they make possible, with remembrances and mournings that come together in ways that lacerate. On the continuity of desire and death, see Bataille (1962: 11-25). For a perspective that draws on Bataille and which links violence and sexuality, see Girard (1977). For a discussion of “the space of death,” see Taussig (1987: 4-5). See also Holland (2000) who articulates a racialized and queered version of the space of death. See Vaid (1995) for discussions on the ways in which some of the short-term goals of gay and lesbian liberation functioned to degay and desexualize queer bodies.

19. From Berlant and Warner (2000: 313).

20. Does reinvoking queertime as always already spectral mean that

queerspace is at home in the space of death? Because such an invocation marks a return to the familiar, to homey necrotic scenes. But queertime's perverse relation to tensions of real and delayed time, to immediacies and an interminable later, to the forgettings tied to its efforts to presence the present through sex, means that this return is also always strange, unfamiliar, or, more properly, unhomey, *unheimlich*.

21. 1:1 (one-on-one) refers to a private chat, where members of a video conference leave the public conference room to interact only with one another. Some video chat programs allow the user to broadcast their image and invite multiple users to join them.

22. Interestingly, discussions of the alienated or disembodied subject (especially within the public sphere) overlap with the technical aspect of Being-online in which data flows are necessarily fragmented, dispersed in packets, then reassembled at its destination.

23. I refer here to psychoanalytic descriptions of specular relationships, which draw on Sartre and Lacan's conceptions of the Gaze and the Look as structuring subject-object relations, as always entailing the potentially threatening Other. Feminist film theory has often taken this as point of departure for analyzing cinematic and other specular relations of objectifying power. See Mulvey (1989) for a classic text in this tradition. Due to space restraints, I must elide the debate among feminists regarding pornography. While my arguments here seem to dwell on pornography as dangerous, they in fact represent a laboring on the negative that is meant to provide for openings rather than closures. I therefore align myself with those like Kathy Acker, Pat Califia, Annie Sprinkle and other radical feminists who are, in many respects, porn, or, more awkwardly, anti-anti-sex. The fixed-ness of subject-object relations within much anti-porn literature, represented most famously by the perspectives of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, is also challenged by non-hetero pornographic depictions. As some queer theorists have argued, gay porn can be seen to disrupt the binary oppositions onto which difference is coded: versatility beats out fixed processes of objectification and identification.

24. Since the early nineties, Eastern Europe has seen an explosion of pornography as well as increasing rates of HIV infections.

25. The ELIZA program highlights some of the ways we tend to attribute intelligence to machines. As Turkle (1995: 101) observes: "The ELIZA effect refers to our more general tendency to treat responsive computer programs as more intelligent than they really are. Very small

amounts of interactivity cause us to project our own complexity onto the undeserving object.”

26. Brian Eno “Golden Hours,” *Another Bold World* (compact disc).

27. In full disclosure, allow me to appease your frustrated reader by calling attention to the fact that it is at this point where Burroughs’ cut-up method is most clearly deployed. The text of “AI and robot sex toys” is a collaged hybrid of my own texts, Derrida, Victor Serge, with pinches of glam rock and Burroughs himself thrown in for good measure. That is not to say that this vignette follows no logic. Indeed in its conjuring of AI and genetic engineering it makes remarkable sense. I cannot (like AI) claim absolute intentionality, however, only good circumstance: coincidence in convergence.

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