

Anna T.  
**The Opacity of  
Queer  
Languages**

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Since at least the sixteenth century, individuals who could in today's terminology be referred to as LGBTQ+ or queer have been creating their own linguistic registers. The "closet," for one, is a linguistic formation that only dates back to the mid-twentieth century, as we may be aware. What is perhaps less known is how these languages were produced in the context of the secrecy that the proverbial closet provides, and what parallels within that space can be drawn with Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity and the right not to be understood. Furthermore, Jonathan D. Katz's study on John Cage's tactic of silence and passivity as a political stance continues into an analysis of the role of camp performativity in the success or failure of getting the (coded) message across.

After researching the coining of the expression "coming out of the closet" and focusing on the ways language produces the social space of the closet, I have shifted my focal point on how this linguistically formed locus also generates language itself, which in turn produces or reaffirms social space. Looking deeper into the cultures that surround the closet (and I'm referring to the closet as a production of heteronormativity that is inscribed in social space<sup>1</sup> and which most of us are both inside and outside of at the same time<sup>2</sup>), I started exploring the constructions of the closet as a language-generator itself.

These take the form of slangs (argots, or cants), or dialects, falling under the wider category of lavender linguistics, and they seem to have existed in geographically and culturally unrelated areas. They do not constitute languages per se in the sense that they do not have distinct grammar and syntax, although they do in some cases have a vocabulary extensive enough to allow one to speak exclusively in them. Although falling under the overlapping space of slangs and argots, since these idioms seem to have specific geographic radiuses and are produced and used by particular social groups, they could perhaps also be described as sociolects.<sup>3</sup>

**(At Least) Eight Ways to Speak Queer**

I already knew the Greek "Kaliarda" and the British "Polari" from living in Greece and England and associating with the local LGBT and queer communities. After research to find out if the phenomenon has been wider and appeared elsewhere as well, I discovered the Brazilian "Bajubá" or "Pajubá," the Philippine "Swardspeak," the Indonesian "Bahasa Binan," the South African "IsiNgqumo" and "Gayl" or "Gail," and the Turkish "Lubunca."<sup>4</sup>

The reasoning behind these creations is constant and common: the production of safer

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spaces of communication and contact between members of marginalized minoritarian groups who have traditionally been persecuted or faced legal punishment, or the threat of medical correction.

These communication codes allowed for an easier exchange of information that to some extent shielded group members from potential aggressors: at the same time, these languages did not render group members completely invisible. It is exactly this position between visibility and invisibility – which can perhaps be described as opaqueness – that interests me in relation to the particular political stance of passivity. David Van Leer, an American scholar who researched queer cultures in the US from the 1920s to the 2000s, says that “often minorities speak most volubly between the lines, ironically reshaping dialogues the oppressor thinks he controls or even finding new topics and modes of speaking to which the oppressor himself lacks access.”<sup>5</sup>

Language – being regulated by the state, taught in educational institutions, and used to discipline, inform, educate, or structurally violate, among other uses – is frequently subverted by minorities in an attempt to bypass authority. In this case in particular the “new topics” and “modes” Van Leer refers to are perhaps illegal pleasures, embodied performances, irony, and disguised (or not-so-well-disguised) social critique.

While trying to stay safe and communicate, individual subjects start forming a community based on a common culture. In her essay “Qwir-English Code-Mixing in Germany: Constructing a Rainbow of Identities,” Heidi Minning argues that “the resulting sociopsychological function is one of constructing group membership and a sense of the self as a participant in larger gay and lesbian local and transnational cultures.”<sup>6</sup>

### Lexicon

These slangs with vocabularies ranging from six hundred words (as is the case of Polari) to more than six thousand documented words (as in Kaliarda) and different lifespans (four hundred years and counting in the case of Lubunca, or thirty years in the case of IsiNgqumo), constitute mini-universes where their users freely circulate and through which they are able to connect. They do not only include terms to describe the particular practices/interests of the groups which might be dangerous to publicly describe in a noncoded way. They also include words or phrases to describe everyday household objects, professions, toponyms, and activities. They are patchworks of several other languages, including etymologically untraceable neologisms.<sup>7</sup>

For instance, Polari consists of English,

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Italian, Yiddish, and Mediterranean Lingua Franca (a composite itself),<sup>8</sup> while Kaliarda is made up of Greek, English, Italian, French, Turkish, and Romani.<sup>9</sup> Bajubá or Pajubá seems to have its roots in Africa and is based on several Bantu and Yoruba African languages outfitted with Portuguese syntax.<sup>10</sup> SwardSpeak is a mixture of Tagalog, English, Spanish, and Japanese.<sup>11</sup> Lubunca consists of Turkish, Romani, French, Greek, English, Armenian, Arabic, Italian, Bulgarian, Kurmanji, Russian, and Spanish.<sup>12</sup>

The multicultural linguistic loans seem to indicate a certain degree of mobility on the part of the speakers, who seem to have come in contact with foreigners beyond their immediate border neighbors, perhaps through working the seas, or through unsuccessful attempts to find better employment options abroad, but also due to dealing with sailors and seamen as sex-workers themselves. And as Paul Baker says, we shouldn't throw out the possibility of the use of foreign languages as a way of coming across as more sophisticated and well-traveled.<sup>13</sup>

Much like the several spatiotemporal paradoxes that surround the closet, the languages that could be its product seem to predate it in certain cases. Furthermore, who speaks or spoke these languages long before the emergence of any contemporary understanding of homosexuality, the homosexual, and notions such as trans\* or queer becomes an even more sensitive topic in light of queer modes of communication.



### Social Queetique

As I can only fully access Kaliarda and to a certain extent Polari, one of the things I have noticed is their lack of political correctness (or any sense of self-censorship for that matter), and the pejorative terms used for both those who are socially looked down on by society (including the speakers themselves) and their oppressors alike.<sup>14</sup> This seems to indicate a certain adoption of the mores of the general population in





addition to their own, no matter how contradictory the two may be.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the words for an effeminate homosexual or the receptive partner in penetrative sex are always pejorative, and the same cannot be said of the terms for the insertive partner.

The word “Kaliarda” (καλιαρνά) itself has only negative meanings: “mean, ugly, weird,” with the verb “kaliardevo” (καλιαρντεύω) meaning to speak ill of someone.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, there are pejorative terms for other groups that seem to already be looked down on by Greek society, and for whom there already exist several offensive terms, like for the out-of-towners, the obese, the old, and the non-able-bodied. At the same time, there are plenty of derogatory terms for legal, religious, and political authorities. This points to the counter-cultural elements of the subculture that to some extent could be the result of the constant friction with said authorities.

It seems that at least by allowing for a mocking of those seen as oppressors, or by placing themselves somewhere other than the lowest position in the social hierarchy, queers can afford a moment of pleasure that derives from their deviance itself and their organizing around it.

So beyond the importance of a safer space, and the practicalities of communication between precariously living subjects, another element of these languages is the proximity they produce between the speakers, and most importantly the moments of humor and joy they allow for. For instance, small moments of pleasure among fellow deviant subjects seem to be the case with much of Kaliarda and the way it is used, which sadly remains untranslatable. I can only guess that this might well be the case for some of the other languages as well.

As Elizabeth Freeman suggests, we might be able to glimpse in our archives “historically specific forms of pleasure” that have not been institutionalized, and a deeper look at queer language can definitely provide a confirmation of that.<sup>17</sup> Sara Ahmed states:

To be happily queer might mean being happy to be the cause of unhappiness (at least in the sense that one agrees to be the cause of unhappiness, even if one is not made happy by causing unhappiness), as well as to be happy with where we get to if we go beyond the straight lines of happiness scripts.”<sup>18</sup>

Kaliarda also manages to make a somewhat humorous social critique with terms like “the Vatican” (Βατικανό) to mean a gay men’s brothel; a word referring to London that

translates as “faggville”/“sisterville” (αδερφοχώρι); “Moutsemeni” (Μουτσεμένη), a word referring to the Virgin Mary as having been naively tricked; and “smartasses’ gangbang” (φαεινοπαρτούζα), referring to a political party; and the Acropolis being referred to as “tourist trap” (τουριστόφακα).<sup>19</sup> Such social critique is not unique to queer slangs though; it is a phenomenon common among subcultural languages, as the same is true for hobo slang, spiv cant, magkika and so on. Paul Baker writes that in “‘anti-languages’ the social values of words and phrases tend to be more emphasized than in mainstream languages,” a phenomenon termed “sociolinguistic coding orientation,”<sup>20</sup> while Nicholas Kontovas points out that

the slang of marginal groups betrays an alternative sociolinguistic market, in which the value of markers from the majority market is neither intrinsically positive nor negative, but reassessed based on an alternative habitus which is particular to the field in which that group interacts.<sup>21</sup>

Both Baker and Kontovas point to the specificities of the social universes these languages produce, which much like the words themselves are borrowed, reappropriated, and creatively adjusted to reflect the ever-changing needs and positions of the speakers.

The overlapping of marginalized groups that operate with those slangs offers an interesting insight into their intersectionality. Circus performers, sailors, prostitutes, and criminals, for instance, also used Polari. Polari also incorporates elements of Thieves’ Cant from the seventeenth century and Hackney rhyming slang.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Kaliarda – used primarily by (trans\*) sex workers and “effeminate homosexuals,” according to researcher Elias Petropoulos – is also spoken by actors. It has borrowed and loaned lemmata from magkika and rebetika, two different slang varieties used by other Greek subcultures.<sup>23</sup> Pajubá, apart from being used by the LGBTQ and queer community, is used by *Candomblé* practitioners.<sup>24</sup> Although all of the above categories are in one way or another marginal, perhaps illegal, with intense minoritarian traits, and although socialization between them could explain this transcultural permeation of terms, it definitely evokes the issue of intersectionality within single subjects as the reason that terms traveled so widely within large communities of “deviants” and “outcasts.”

### Opacity – Some Passivity

Subjects do not become invisible when talking in

these languages; they can actually attract more interest from the public. But at the same time, the content of their discussion remains somewhat sealed and opaque. It is through this practice, which is not vocal (although it is verbal) and which does not actively disrupt the status quo (and yet builds an alternative social space), that passivity is generated as a political action. I am referring to passivity not as a synonym for inactivity, but rather as a variety of tactics that manage to subvert norms in ways that are not initially intended. While such cultural productions (language, music, dance, performativities, etc.) are not created with the intent to take over or substitute normative or mainstream culture, as other “active” modes of questioning would, they are forms of resistance. They refuse to be assimilated and “normalized,” choosing instead to produce an alternative that provides a safer space of expression and which – by the way – also has the potential to mock and subvert the norm.

As Jonathan D. Katz says in reference to John Cage’s silences: “Closeted people seek to ape dominant discursive forms, to participate as seamlessly as possible in hegemonic constructions. They do not, in my experience, draw attention to themselves.”<sup>25</sup>

Thus, finding opaque ways of resisting seems to be a somewhat efficient option. The mannerisms and vocabulary of these slangs are flexible and made to be customizable so they can better serve the speaker.

Creation and use of queer slangs is not a forceful destabilization of the status quo and the official/mainstream languages, but at the same time, using them is a refusal of complete silence. Silence here refers both to not speaking and to not speaking audibly against the regime. Queer slangs remain in a rather liminal space between inactivity and straightforward revolutionary action. It is a form of creative resistance, a way of producing a parallel social space of expression whose existence might in some ways indirectly affect the mainstream as well, without that being the primary concern or objective behind them. These languages, when used in the vicinity of outsiders, are indeed audible but not transparent; they remain opaque, allowing the nonspeakers to identify the speakers as belonging to a certain group, but not being able to pinpoint what group that is. This creates a rift in the homogenous social fabric.

Katz addresses a similar paradox when he speaks of the irony in the work of John Cage, a composer who made the loudness of silence his hallmark:

Irony’s distinction between what is said and what is meant opened up a space of

otherness that was not understood as specifically oppositional. As a “readerly” relation, irony is recognized, not written, understood not declared. And irony would prove to be a means through which resistance could figure in a culture of coercion.<sup>27</sup>

Cage used silence as a means to not be silent/silenced, and in a very similar manner queer subjects opt out of mainstream modes of communication and produce a separate sonic space with with a specific membership.

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All images courtesy of the author.

While art is made in order to be public and communicated (at least in most cases) – and Cage’s art was very much so – these languages are supposed to be communicated within certain limits, those of the social space they help to produce. I think the way they operate in producing rifts in wider society is by the casual, perhaps accidental moments they engender. They don’t need to be translated, and one does not need to be fully aware of the speakers’ subjectivities, but the sheer fact that certain nonconforming individuals are speaking an unfamiliar dialect might be all it takes to create the impression that there is a very much present, active, and creative community producing its own subculture, and that might already be enough.

These queer languages do not produce new, politically informed revolutionary terminology. But they are very much present, occupying a terrain between explicit action-oriented politics and compliance. They operate under cover of opacity and empower the marginalized, giving them space for existence, expression, and safety. Queer languages are anti-authoritative and as such, according to Katz says, “they reveal the power of the individual to construct meaning unauthorized by dominant culture – and all the while, under its very nose.”<sup>28</sup>

It’s not by accident that during the Greek military dictatorship of the late 1960s and early

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'70s, popular satirical theater used Kaliarda as a way to avoid censorship. For "precarious" words, they substituted Kaliarda words, introducing these words to a general audience and letting this audience figure them out for themselves. In the UK a few years earlier, between 1965 and 1968, a BBC radio show that aired on Sunday afternoons and addressed the "entire family" featured two out-of-work camp actors who used Polari at a time when homosexuality was still illegal in the UK.

Kaliarda is nontransparent not only because of its neologisms and semantically altered Greek words, but also because it is spoken very fast. The words acquire meaning and specificity thanks to the contextualization offered by performative gestures and body language. Kaliarda is seen as the quintessence of camp performance, which itself is often referred to as a method of resistance that, according to David Halperin, resists the power of the system from within.<sup>29</sup> As Nicholas De Villiers writes:

In an insistence of "Camp" as a *queer* strategy of political resistance Moe Meyer clarifies his use of the term in the following way: "What 'queer' signals is an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts."<sup>30</sup>

I think queer languages could be one of the answers to De Villiers's questions in the preface of his book: "What if we were to look at speech as nonrevelatory, outside the parameters of confession and truth, the humanist desire for reflection, and the ideal of transparency? What if we were to attend to its opacity? What would such an opacity look or sound like, and what would be its function?"<sup>31</sup>

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Author's Note: While writing this text I tried to create some tables with examples of words and expressions, transliterated and translated from Kaliarda and Polari into English, but I realized it was not going to work, and perhaps it was okay that it did not. What I was forcing was a transparency that didn't want to be there. What I was trying to accomplish (and miserably failed at doing) was beautifully commented on by Celia Britton, who says that camouflaged language can only be understood in a way that respects its opacity and does not reduce it to transparency:

For the reader, too, opacity means that the text can never be grasped as a whole, that is, as a wholly known and therefore circumscribed entity. Instead, the areas that remain opaque mean that its borders are left undefined and open. Reading thus becomes similar to "errance" (see chapter 1), in the sense that "the wanderer [l'errant] ... seeks to know the totality of the world and knows already that he will never

accomplish this and that herein resides the endangered beauty of the world ... He dives into the opacities of that share of the world to which he has access."<sup>32</sup>

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1  
Michael P. Brown, *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* (London: Routledge, 2010).

2  
*Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991).

3  
Slang is defined here as “a kind of language occurring chiefly in casual and playful speech, made up typically of short-lived coinages and figures of speech that are deliberately used in place of standard terms for added raciness, humor, irreverence, or other effect; language peculiar to a group; argot or jargon: thieves slang.” Argot is defined here “as a specialized vocabulary or set of idioms used by a particular group: thieves’ argot.” See <http://www.thefreedictionary.com>

4  
In this article I will primarily be focusing on these, and not on other forms of “slangs” that include only a handful of neologisms or semantically altered or reclaimed words, of which there are many worldwide serving diverse communities.

5  
David Van Leer in Nicholas De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 21.

6  
Heidi Minning in *Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language*, eds. William Leap and Tom Boellstorff (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 624.

7  
Elias Petropoulos, *Kaliarda* (Athens: Nefeli, Athens, 1971); Nicholas Kontovas, *Lubunca: The Historical Development of Istanbul's Queer Slang and a Social-Functional Approach to Diachronic Processes in Language*, Master of Arts in the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University, December 2012; Paul Baker, *Polari – The Lost Language of Gay Men* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

8  
According to Paul Baker, who has conducted extended research on Polari, Cant, a secret language used by criminals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, evolved into Polari via Parlyaree, a slang used by the “despised category” of actors which evolved in the late eighteenth century. The latter also seems to be employed by circus people who used words from “backslang, rhyming slang and gypsies.” According to twentieth-century lexicographer Eric Partridge, circus people also used Italian and Mediterranean Lingua

Franca terms. There are also references to “Grafter’s Slang” (by Philip Allingham) which includes Italian, Romani, and Yiddish words, and which Partridge classified as Parlyaree.

9  
Petropoulos, *Kaliarda*.

10  
Interview with Paulistano Juliana Correia de Xaquino conducted in June 2013, and with Carioca artist Pedro Costa conducted on October 2014. Traces found in Antonio Gomes da Costa Neto’s “A Linguagem no Candomblé: Um estudo lingüístico sobre as comunidades religiosas afro-brasileiras” as well as articles in the blogosphere, e.g., by Eloisa Aquino, a Brazilian-born zinister <http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/pajuba-the-secret-language-of-brazilian-travestis-elisa-aquino/>.

11  
Reinerio A. Alba, “The Filipino Gayspeak (Filipino Gay Lingo),” 2005 <http://www.ncca.gov.ph/about-culture-and-arts/articles-on-culture-and-arts/articles-on-culture-and-arts/article.php?i=289&subcat=13>. Sonny Atencia Catacutan, “Swardspeak: A Queer Perspective,” University of the Philippines Open University, *MMS121 Multimedia and Popular Culture*, 2013–14.

12  
Kontovas, *Lubunca*.

13  
Baker, *Polar*.

14  
As a native Greek speaker with a certain proficiency in English and a significant degree of immersion in those cultures (as ambiguous a comment as that may be) after having lived in Greece and England, I believe I am capable of understanding the cultural context and the role this plays in understanding the specific references, the humor, and the “tone” of those slangs. I don’t think I would be able to fully appreciate these slangs had I only known the official languages without having been immersed in the culture. The other six slangs remain inaccessible to me, leaving me in the position of a mere researcher/observer.

15  
Nicholas Kontovas, a researcher who is the only one so far (October 2014) to have published in English a thorough study of Lubunca, claims the same to be true of it. For more information on Lubunca see Nicholas Kontovas, *Lubunca*, *ibid*.

16  
Petropoulos, *Kaliarda*.

17  
Quoted in Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 151.



18  
Ibid.

19  
Petropoulos, *Kaliarda*.

20  
Baker, *Polari*, 13.

21  
Kontovas, *Lubunca*.

22  
Baker, *Polari*, 13.

23  
Petropoulos, *Kaliarda*.

24  
According to Pedro Costa, who first encountered Pajubá words in Umbanda's *terreiro* (spiritual place of the Afro-Brazilian religion), these words derived from the religious sphere. According to Eloisa Aquino, it was the need of queers for a more liberal religious practice that pushed them to borrow words from *Candomblé practitioners*.

25  
Jonathan Katz, "John Cage's Queer Silence or How to Avoid Making Matters Worse" <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzWorse.html>

26  
Of course, many slang words have made it into the mainstream, and the mainstream doesn't even know they are using gay slang, tricking the breeders into speaking in a gay tongue and communicating in notions that either didn't exist before, or that were rebranded by the poofers. Such cases have been well documented in both *Kaliarda* and *Polari*, with terms like "tzouss" (τζουζ), "ntana" (ντάννα), "kolobaras" (κωλομπάρας), and "bara" (μπάρρα). In mainstream English there is "naff" (an acronym for "not available for fucking," often used in a derogatory manner towards heterosexuals), which refers to something tasteless.

27  
Katz, "John Cage's Queer Silence."

28  
Ibid.

29  
[Camp is] "a form of cultural resistance that is entirely predicated on a shared consciousness of being inescapably situated within a powerful system of social and sexual meaning that resists the power of that system from within." David Halperin quoted in De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, 20.

30  
De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, 16.

31  
Ibid., 5.

32  
Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 153 and 156.

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