

Digital Textuality Workshop

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Bring:

- snacks
- laptop/charger
- tray? dishes?
- big water bottle
- peppermint oil

Set Up:

- tables
 - snacks
 - PPT
 - GitHub
 - check sound
 - open all links
 - print paper
-

I. Housekeeping ::

- + Welcome
- + Please Eat Snacks & Ask Questions
- + There Will Be Some Flashy Things
- + Gather Contact Information

II. Introduction ::

This workshop will consist of the following:

1. A brief (and inevitably inadequate) survey of the background, history, and context of electronic literature
2. Screenings of digital text work
3. Opportunity for participants to experiment with creating own digital text work

All of these materials will be available on GitHub, and with your permission, I hope to combine the work that we generate today in a “digital zine” that will serve as an artifact of this afternoon.

Critic and theorist Friedrich Kittler said, “*Writing in the age of media has always been a short circuit between brain physiology and communications technologies—bypassing humans or even love.*”

Sometimes I describe my current digital humanities studies as a “degree in worrying”—worrying about the future of books, the role (and damage) of the human, the commodification of data, the sustainability of digital mediums, the health and accessibility of our knowledge, what might be mediated (our humanity? love?) by a screen.

But despite all of the worry, I am presenting this material from a place of hope; as technology hurtles forward, often in private, corporate hands, and in a time when the book is no longer the final destination for text, the digital realm inevitably holds a significant future for writing, which requires us to complicate our understandings of and distinctions between language, knowledge, information, and literature.

Text in digital spaces is still very human, but in a way that requires us to open up beyond ourselves; with this comes the opportunity to challenge hierarchies of knowledge, develop unprecedented modes of access, and consider what Mary Beard calls, “*some old-fashioned consciousness-raising about what we mean by ‘the voice of authority’ and how we’ve come to construct it.*”

How can we open ourselves up to the possibilities of text in a digital space, in a way that is meaningful? Informed? What are its implications? Impacts? Limitations? Possibilities?

III. [Brief] History of Electronic Literature ::

I’d like to begin with a quick skim of the genre of electronic literature, which— because it was (is?) a genre with defined boundaries— is a helpful touchstone in considering digital textuality at large.

I would also like to mention the caveat that due to the constraints of time, a glaring omission in the topics covered today is that of sound; the relationship between electronic literature and the history of text and sound is significant and formative, but also—alas— a monumental can of worms that shall remain unopened for today.

[SLIDE]

Katherine Hayles defines electronic literature as, “*generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitized, [and] is by contrast ‘digital born,’ a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer.*”

[SLIDE]

Even before the computers that we know today existed, as early as 1930, writer Bob Brown said that the time had come “to rid the reader of the cumbersome book,” taking it upon himself to create a reading machine that would impart text to the reader in a rapid and abbreviated form.

[SLIDE]

Jump to the 1960s and 70s, when the creation of personal computers allowed literature to expand into the electronic realm. One of the first works of electronic literature is often cited to be *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1975-1977) by Will Crowther, importantly establishing gaming and gamification as a significant component of electronic literary potential.

[SLIDE]

In 1984, the computer Racter wrote *The Policeman’s Beard is Half Constructed*, marking the first machine-generated novel.

[SLIDE]

1995 brings us to Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and electronic literature's embrace of the hyperlink, often on mediums like Storyspace or Twine, with an abundance of hypertext works operating on an interactive narrative form, "choose your own adventure" style, echoing the interactive and nonlinear narrative predecessors like Joyce, Borges, and Calvino.

[SLIDE]

Gradually, electronic literature came to encompass the following:

- E-books
- Hypertext
- Animated poetry (flash, etc.)
- Novels in the form of emails, text messages, or blogs
- Poems and stories generated by computers
- Conceptual blogs and websites
- Parody and "hactivist" websites
- Computer art installations with textual aspects
- Chatterbots
- Twitterature

By the early 2000s, electronic literature was definable and listable, with accepted and established forms that have survived in varying degrees.

Elena Pierazzo writes, "*it takes the detachment provided by another medium to understand the previous one*"; so at this point, I would like to ask— *what is a book?*

IV. What is a *book*? What is *textuality*? What is *digital textuality*? ::

Thomas Vogler says, "*Although the history of writing might have to include anything from the cave walls of Lascaux to ancient stellae, to a computer disk or skywriting, our definition of the book must be narrowed to records in portable form.*"

Fair enough. But isn't everything on our phone a record in portable form? Is your Fitbit app a poem? Are your browser bookmarks a novel?

Hayles states that, "*digitality has become the textual condition of twenty-first-century literature*"; therefore, to me, *electronic literature* doesn't seem to be a large enough container for this digital textual condition within which literature has become inextricable from the abundance of ways in which text occurs in digital spaces.

Structuralist and post-structuralist ideas of *textuality* demand that we assess all attributes of a textual object, from its material to its placement of words to authorial intention and the reader's reception. Therefore, *digital textuality* seeks to consider these elements of a text, regardless of digital platform; and most importantly, informed by locating a digital text amidst *all* digital texts, regardless of "literary" value.

While such a gesture might seemingly threaten the integrity of literature as a whole, I believe that it is, in fact, the only way for literature to grow and deepen in a digital age— and that we do have the tools to do so.

We often hear lamentation about the “death of the book”; fears that electronic mediums will replace physical texts, that libraries will become obsolete and the masses will collapse in illiteracy.

While I do believe that physical books have a long and robust future ahead of them (one in which I know I will remain an enthusiast!), let us speculate— if the death of the author made way for the birth of the reader, what might the the death of the book be making way for?

Amaranth Borsuk points out, *“the fact that an e-reader is not tethered to a specific text serves as a handy reminder that the term book commonly refers interchangeably to both medium and content, regardless of our acculturation to the codex.”*

So what is this immaterial quality of *book*? What is the impulse, the affect, the soul of what drives us to make physical books, and how does that manifest in digital space? How can we locate it amidst an excess of digital text? How can we choose to *navigate* rather than *classify* and *exclude*?

Therefore, my conception of digital textuality graciously includes electronic literature, but also extends its welcome to:

- digital editions
- digitized text
- social media
- printed text informed by the digital
- all digital publications
- text mining / textual analysis (sentiment analysis; limits of standardization, redefined relationship between quantity and quality)
- journalism, visualizations
- DATA (text as, language as, literature as)

Borsuk also points out that *“Text’ itself has become a verb.”* Writing, reading, and literature are no longer static; and certainly, change and ephemerality and unpredictability challenge the stability of boundaries, sequence, and centralization that our human brains tend to favor.

[SLIDE]

V. Tan Lin ::

For a moment, I would like to reflect for a moment on the work of contemporary conceptual poet Tan Lin. In order to wholly understand what Lin’s work has to offer digital textuality, I’ve found it valuable to align his work with the scholarship of posthumanism, which Cary Wolfe describes as “a historical moment in which the decentering of the human” is inevitable and, to a posthumanist, necessary. To Wolfe, considering the world through a posthuman lens is ethically urgent due to the fact that “the human occupies a new place in the universe, a universe now populated by what I am prepared to call nonhuman subjects....” which demands, “an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited.”

In a world of excess— excessive information, excessive bodies, excessive violence, excessive destruction, excessive creation— it is impossible for humans to progress, insulated from their effects on the world around them. In order to meet Wolfe’s ethical imperative, humans must learn to think bigger and beyond themselves. Humans, decentered.

Traditional humanist values prioritize taxonomies, organizations, and putting things in their proper place; we can recognize *a book* as a humanist impulse— an allocated site of order, preservation, and answers. Aside from procreation, a book is our closest approximation to recreating our own self— to quote Claire Colebrook, “A book has the capacity to extend the spirit or sense from which it emerged well beyond the author’s life.” A book is the timeless transfer of contained knowledge from author to reader, and the traditional humanist reader expects certain goods from this transaction: familiar textual markers (exposition, rhyme, catharsis) and a sense of satisfaction (whether narrative resolution or poetic affect). It is often alarming to readers when these indications of textual hospitality are absent.

The “containability” of a book is also comforting; Humanism provides specific conditions and expectations for containers (whether books or bodies or words or language or architecture or genre), and, in certain ways, a book is the ultimate humanist object as a controlled site of answers. However, “to contain” means both to carry and to limit. If a book— the ultimate humanist container— were to find peace with the impossibility of excess, how could humans learn about ourselves from our relationship with books?

Sayan Bhattacharyya et al. suggest that, “The notion of treating text as a collection of fragments out of which meaning will be made through a subsequent, algorithmic re-constallation of the fragments... can seem antihumanist.” I’ve come to witness a lot of *worry* when it comes to certain kinds of computational or ambient poetics— that say, a piece of poetry created with a textual analytical tool like Google n-gram is less poetically “valid” or “meaningful” than a poem written by a human with pen and paper. While there will always be a place for lyric— and I’m saying this as someone who deeply loves poetry— it is critical to recognize that the majority of language in our society is used in fleeting excess— and fragmentation becomes necessary in navigating excess. Then how can we pick up the fragment, and value it? Communicate about it? Find meaning in it?

[SLIDE]

Tan Lin’s *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking* (which I’ll now refer to as *7CV*) has existed//exists//will continue to exist in many forms: a PDF iteration was made available in 2004 on Lulu.com, followed by a physical iteration published by Wesleyan University Press in 2009. It was a collaborative performance as part of the EDIT event series at the Kelly Writers House in 2009. It includes many ancillary products available online (among them, a critical reader, a Google translated Chinese/English version, an appendix, &etc.). Parts of the book appear in video form. The text includes a foreword by Laura Riding Jackson [which is to say, *7CV* includes a photocopy of Laura Riding Jackson’s foreword to her own 1986 book]. Instead of a book, Lin refers to the work as an “airport novel musical poem painting film photo hallucination landscape.” It is confusing! And infinite! In the print edition, the colophon is printed on the outside; the bibliography is randomly in the middle; you’re never sure what is “original” and what is found language; things are repeated across the different print and digital iterations to the extent that the reader always uncomfortably feels like they’re missing something.

[SLIDE]

7CV is built upon the unpredictable contexts in which it might be read. It proudly wears the mark of the digital (its leveling of linguistic value between poetry, narrative, library standards, and programming code), and was created in inDesign, MS Word, Photoshop; its language is informed by that of digital spaces, and thus, facilitating a relationship between 7CV and posthumanism includes a triangulation with the digital. There are several specific aspects of 7CV that I would like to briefly identify as significant to digital textuality through the lens of posthumanism:

- **Originality:** 7CV deeply questions our value of originality and the function of copyright (see *The Joy of Cooking* featured within the title, reproduced scans from other texts, quotes, misquotes). Lin even refers to the free Lulu PDF edition as “a massive act of self-plagiarism.” Found language is fundamentally collaborative, as it embraces the histories and agents that have touched the language, reinforcing posthumanism’s embedded multiplicity of existence. There is also humility in relinquishing authorship and ownership, which in a way gives the reader permission to engage with the text on their own terms.
- **Humor:** In order to think or feel beyond ourselves, we must recognize our insignificance. Insignificance is absurd; often, we laugh when faced with absurd insignificance.
- **Humility:** An extension of embracing both unoriginality and humor, but specifically in regards to ambient literature— Lin sas, “I wanted to suggest that maybe we could read a novel like recipes in a cookbook or an episode of a reality TV series, or a controlled vocabulary system, or a restaurant review on Yelp.” Lin invites the reader to absorb the text as a plant, animal, or machine might, letting it wash over. The reader/listener/viewer is placed in the ambient position, listening rather than interpreting, located within a greater context.

In allowing ourselves to find and feel the poetry in digital linguistic spaces, then we are also increasing our ability to find and feel the political. Again, we can feel the weight of labor, intention, and cost in a heavy book; we cannot feel the weight of labor in a digital space— the digitization factories in India, the server farms in Latin America, the desperate, underpaid gig economy of Mechanical Turk, the environmental tolls of data centers. It is imperative to find and feel the network of what constitutes a digital space, a posthuman space, as a way to begin to feel the implications of our digital moves and our digital future.

Our ways of thinking and feeling need to grow broader (as posthumanism asks us to do) to include digital spaces of excess in order to consider viable ways of moving forward.

VI. Screening/Viewing ::

1. Jodi
2. YHCHI
3. Judd
4. Krissy Wilson
5. Page and Screen
6. Satterwhite

Johanna Drucker writes,

“The “book” of the future will combine reading and writing, annotation and social media, text processing and analysis, data mining and mind-mapping, searching and linking, indexing and display, image parsing and distant reading, in a multi-modal, cross-platform, inter-media environment. Pages will be temporary configurations based on calls to repositories and data sets. We will “publish” our data trails as guidebooks for the experience of reading, pointing to milestones and portals for in-depth exploration of stories, inventories, and the rich combination of cultural heritage and social life in a global world. The display will take advantage of the n-dimensional space of the screen in ways that combine multiple design visions.” (8)

7. Alyssa Moore

8. Tan Lin

VII. Activity ::

- + share GitHub page
- + welcome to collaborate
- + digital zine @ end

Spend the remainder of the workshop using the following tools & considerations to generate some kind of digital text work— it can be silly, use found language, be an extension of something else, be collaborative— just spend some time playing with the affordances of a screen and what they might mean for a digital text.

Tools:

- Code templates
- Voyant (word cloud, poem, etc)
- Twitter
- Scanning, screenshotting
- Physical form to be digitized
- Creative citations
- Hyperlinks
- Anything on your phone
- Code grab

Considerations:

A digital text is:

- porous
- fluid
- pulsing (alive?)
- malleable
- collaborative
- boundless, yet bounded
- recursive
- half baked vs. porous

- both draft and final at the same time
- fragmentary
- unstable
- ephemeral
- ACCUMULATION, MULTIPLICITY, SIMULTANEITY, NONBINARY, NONHUMAN

→ What intimacies can the digital provide?

→ How would this be different in a book form?

→ What is the lifespan of what you are creating? How will it die? How does this inform its creation?

→ How do you engage with text in digital spaces in your daily life?

→ What is a digital reader/user's physical relationship to their text? To your text?

→ What boundaries are you working within? Rejecting?

→ Which digital practices— literary, and non— is this work informed by? Responding to?

>> “I had a couple of different laptops... and one of them had a slider bar. I could slide the screen brightness down to almost nothing, so I was sitting in complete darkness. The screen would have just the tiniest hint of phosphorescence and a faint crackle of static electricity. I thought, This is an option Dickens did not have.” - Nicholson Baker

>> John Cayley remarks, “The surface of writing is and always has been complex. It is a liminal symbolically interpenetrated membrane, a fractal coast-- or borderline, a chaotic and complex structure with depth and history.”

>> “So what is beyond the book is still the book.” - Edmond Jabès, “Sand,” *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion*