

Queerness in the Conception and Navigation of Digital Humanities

This essay is an exploration of the access and visibility of queer communities within the digital space. The main question explored here is how is queerness navigated within the big tent of Digital Humanities. How all-encompassing is this big tent truly? For this essay, I attempted to use the assistance of ChatGPT. The output, however, was extremely generic with no sources mentioned. The use of AI for this essay is explored more deeply in the last section. As this essay is regarding the current status of queer representation, access and visibility in Digital Humanities, a deep dive into the history of it will not be explored. It is well known that the internet and scholarship around it function under the larger patriarchal nature of society which not only oppresses but erases queer narratives as well as denies access to queer people from participating in the discussion. Add to this the layers of intersectionality and the sheer number of identities encompassed by the label 'queer' (a big tent in itself) and the problem becomes massive and complex.

In *Peering Beyond the Pink Tent: Queer of Color Critique across the Digital Indian Ocean* (2022), Rahul Gairola explores the white and consequently heteronormative composition of the big tent, especially through the subordination to the English language which is still the case. Gairola emphasizes the importance of geographically mapping the participants of the Digital Humanities sphere for their historical and socio-political and cultural context to map the power relations they come from. From mapping their geographies to “read(ing) the human body itself as a cartographic organism”. (Gairola, 2022) A major obstacle in this mapping is the monopoly of companies such as Google which today entirely determine how we imagine the space around us. In the contemporary space, this is also transposed to the representation of android bodies. As Gairola puts it, “As risky bodies that are a nonreproductive anathema to the state, queer bodies face bullying and abuse even in the most ostensibly safe cyber zones.” (Gairola, 2022)

A notable geomapping analysis that Gairola brings up is Anya Evans's analysis of the use of Tinder in West Asia which is emphasized in the current political climate. Evans notes that within the maximum range of Tinder, Israeli users can be found across “Jerusalem (14km), Tel Aviv (45km), Amman in Jordan (75km), and the south of Lebanon (140km)” the brackets indicating the range of search. (Gairola, 2022) Evans goes on to call this an unpleasant reminder of Israeli settlement across the West

Bank often illegally and violently. Profiles of Israeli men within Palestine, Evans states, are records of libido as a tool of Israeli settler colonialism not only moulding the way queer people can appear on and participate in sexual spaces online and in person through online spaces but also the pink washing of Israeli violence. This becomes even more relevant in the current Israel-Palestine conflict.

The essay *Toward a Queer Digital Humanities* (2018) by Bonnie Ruberg, Jason Boyd, and James Howe expands the question of the existence of queer people in the content of digital humanities to the need for a queer digital humanities itself. That is, inclusion arising from the incorporation of diversity not at a content-based level but at the level of the methodology and ontology of the field itself. An important aspect they pick up on is the general consensus of Digital Humanities tools being 'apolitical' which still persists in the masses. The understanding of technology as objective encourages people to believe the censored and propaganda-oriented narratives it spits out. To quote the essay, 'Interfaces structure meaning; visualizations craft interpretation'. (Ruberg & Howe & Boyd, 2018) Important tools to start with here are archives and lineage trackers of queer history such as The Lesbian and Gay Liberation in Canada project, The Centre for Digital Humanities at Ryerson University's Texting Wilde initiative which centers more around discussions about Oscar Wilde from his time in contrast to only considering his work 'objectively', Berkeley's #Identity project exploring identity issues through Twitter (X) hashtags such as #nohomo, among others. A significant field that caught my attention is queer game studies with the generation and analyses of queer games as well as queer experiences in the general gaming world. Gaming is implicitly one of the most highly white, male, heteronormative spaces in technology. Additional projects as suggested by ChatGPT are the Digital Transgender Archive and the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network. (OpenAI, 2023)

Methodologically, transparency in data generation and interpretation is vital. Information generated by technology will only be viewed critically by the masses if it is instilled into the general consciousness that these processes are in no way objective. For instance, a series of articles titled *A Queer History of Computing* (2013) written by Jacob Gaboury notes the importance of laying bare the assumptions made around the genders and sexualities of people in records. Though a fabrication or speculation of the history around and leading up to these figures, Gaboury openly admits to

piecing together a narrative rather than uncovering the truth. Such a methodology takes heavy note of the historical absence of conversations around queer communities especially in implicitly patriarchal fields like computing. Another concept I came across is Blas's transCoder which is an unexecutable coding language that plays with loss and failure and is meant more as a critical tool. While this is conceptually interesting, I believe that a true inclusion of the masses in queer methodologies will require the democratization of everyday tools at a fundamental level, focusing on usability and efficiency.

A fascinating parallel drawn by Rita Raley in *Interferences: [Net.Writing] and the Practice of Codework* (2002) is the fear of code spiralling out of control referred to by her as “anxieties about [the] intrusion, contamination, and uncontrollability” of code is likened to the fear people have regarding queerness gone unchecked. In contemporary times, this parallel can be extended to the fears of sentience in Artificial Intelligence. The traditional method of data mapping, according to Ruberg, Howe, and Boyd is based on a one-to-one relationship between concepts. The fact that queer is a reclaimed term and many people may subscribe to multiple or none of the related labels makes it imperative to create nonbinary meaning-making processes.

This argument is broken down in more detail in *On Language, Gender, and Digital Technologies* (2022) by Tim Unwin. Though the reflection on gendered terms and pronouns for technology and associated fields is a historical analysis, it is extremely relevant in contemporary times. Languages around phallic structures of the ‘male’ USB sticks and wires plugged into the ‘female’ (receiving) sockets reinforce gender binaries by fetishizing tech objects. The term used for the number of users of the internet in a country is ‘penetration’ which imposes oriental gender norms of Western penetration onto ‘female’ weaker countries susceptible to colonization. The analysis he does of Latin root languages with their masculine pronouns for technological objects like a cable or a microphone or computer or a mobile phone is the same for Sanskrit-derived or influenced languages such as Hindi. While the word itself may not be gendered it is referred to as such through the verbs and adjectives used to refer to it.

A quite generic output regarding the challenges and possible steps in the future was part of the ChatGPT-generated text. It touched on the challenges of biases in representation, privacy concerns of queer identities, their access and inclusion in

digital spaces and the Digital Humanities field. In terms of potential reform, it simply defined concepts like intersectionality, activism and social change through collaboration and cooperation, the need for education and outreach, and greater integration of queer studies into the mainstream rather than as a specialized subfield. (OpenAI, 2023)

The point of digitizing all information especially into a linked data or RDF format provides a great opportunity for the restructuring and reorienting of historical context. Digitizing heritage opens up a wider access for mass participation despite the rigid academic and corporate gatekeeping at the monopolistic level of the ‘owners’ of this information. In *Opening The ‘Black Box’ Of Digital Cultural Heritage Processes: Feminist Digital Humanities And Critical Heritage Studies* (2020), Hannah Smyth, Julianne Nyhan, and Andrew Flinn warn that while this opens possibilities of mainstreaming queerness, normative narratives themselves are a ring of power and control. As they put it, “The so-called ‘democratisation’ of heritage through digitization and digital technologies is also fraught with caveats and requires a critical eye towards the processes at work in the mediation of digital objects that is true for all digital cultural heritage”. Pioneering efforts in technology as expressed by the terms “Frontier technologies” or “Fourth Industrial Revolution” are touted as the new age of inclusion and progress, but are on a basic level self-representations of the pioneers behind it (generally the West) as unquestionable heroes who will sustain their status quo. (Unwin, 2022) The so-called growing acceptance of queerness in these spaces at the mercy of rainbow capitalism can just as easily be reversed as long as the existing power structures are maintained. Another association he negates is the equation of digitization to accessibility, as the digitization can and does still remain within the reach of money and privilege. Several intersectional queer histories are not first-person accounts but an appropriation of third-person accounts of those lacking access by those who may never fully understand the nuances of the situation of the former.

Usage of Chatgpt for Essay

I adopted a comparative strategy for the use of AI in essay writing. On the one hand, I gathered up the information I had from the readings initially listed under the literature review section of the research proposal. These can also be found in the bibliography at the end of this paper. On the other hand, I input the following prompt into ChatGPT, ‘write an essay on the current state of queerness in the field of Digital

Humanities'. The final essay incorporates some aspects of the AI-generated text. An obvious limitation to the latter is its outdatedness of having the latest information up to only January 2022 with the real-time updated version being paid access. The generation of an outline for the same topic of the essay through ChatGPT created an extensive structure for the essay. My next input of simplifying it for a simple 2000-word essay did not significantly reduce its highly specific nature. While the structure is a good starting point, it cannot be blindly accepted ignoring the individual requirements of various disciplines. Additionally, unless explicitly asked of it, ChatGPT does not produce a bibliography for its generated content.

For grammar and spell check purposes, I would prefer the use of more manual tools such as Grammarly rather than AI because AI often tends to misinterpret context and 'correct' parts which did not require correction such as the usage of colloquial terms. Additionally, the form of English it prioritizes comes with an elitism of what is acceptable. For instance, a country like India which was colonized by the British for two centuries and is now culturally overtaken by American pop culture (as is the rest of the world) has generated its own usage of English called Indian English. This is also recognized by Google and can be seen as one of its language options. However, AI automatically leans towards American English or can be set to British English destroying other expressions of the language representing decolonized cultures. Tools like Grammarly have the same system but I would rather manually approve every correction than generate a corrected version.

Despite fully understanding the difference between the creative output of a person and the limited combinations of writing produced by a machine, it is only human to rely on an easily generated text for assignments and reports. I believe that a researcher will pour their heart into writing about a subject they are passionate about for the betterment of society, but when the same activity becomes an obligation under the larger academic and corporate structure the tendency to rely on AI becomes significant. In the long run, this will create an inevitable reliance to the point of degradation of writing skills which will be impossible to avoid under the structure of deadlines and the superiority of academic jargon over personal expression. It is also antithetical to the formulation of completely new concepts as it produces permutations and combinations of existing knowledge. This is highly unsuitable for dynamic and

even volatile topics of human unpredictability under the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

References

- Fiormonte, D., Chaudhuri, S., Ricaurte, P., & Gairola, R. K. (2022). Peering Beyond the Pink Tent: Queer of Color Critique across the Digital Indian Ocean. In *Global Debates in the Digital Humanities* (pp. 36–55). essay, University of Minnesota Press.
- Fiormonte, D., Chaudhuri, S., Ricaurte, P., & Unwin, T. (2022). On Language, Gender, and Digital Technologies. In *Global Debates in the Digital Humanities* (pp. 298–305). essay, University of Minnesota Press.
- Gaboury, J. (2013, February 19). A Queer History of Computing. Rhizome.
<https://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/feb/19/queer-computing-1/>
- OpenAI. (2023). ChatGPT (Version GPT-3.5) [Large language model].
- Raley, R. (2002, August 9). Interferences: [net.writing] and the practice of Codework . electronic book review ' digital futures of literature, theory, criticism, and the arts.
<https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/interferences-net-writing-and-the-practice-of-codework/#>
- Ruberg, B., Howe, J., & Boyd, J. (2018). Toward a Queer Digital Humanities. In E. Losh & J. Wernimont (Eds.), *Bodies of Information Intersectional Feminism and Digital Humanities* (pp. 108–131). essay, University of Minnesota Press.
- Smyth, H., Flinn , A., & Nyhan, J. (2020, August 23). Opening The 'Black Box' Of Digital Cultural Heritage Processes: Feminist Digital Humanities And Critical Heritage Studies. Taylor & Francis.
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429777028-22/opening-black-box-digital-cultural-heritage-processes-hannah-smyth-julianne-nyhan-andrew-flinn>