Contexts of Digital Literature Criticism: Feminist, Queer, Materialist

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Abstract: This essay revisits moments in the feminist history of the field of electronic literature to argue for the importance of writing electronic literary criticism through perspectives of feminist and queer theory. It considers *The Progressive Dinner Party* (curated by Carolyn Guertin and Marjorie C. Luesebrink, 2000) and N. Katherine Hayles's riposte on the hypertext/cybertext debate in *electronic book review* (2000-1) before performing a close reading of Caitlin Fisher's *Circle* (2012), a work that uses glitch aesthetics and augmented reality techniques to enact feminist and queer theory. The essay argues that reconsidering the critical "contexts" and rhetorical "codes" involved in such formative texts can help critics to reassess well-established narratives and histories of the field.

Keywords: electronic literature criticism, hypertext, feminism, queer theory, glitch aesthetics.

The title of the conference that inspired this special issue—"Other Codes / Cóid Eile: Digital Literatures in Context"—invites reflection on the specific contexts that shape electronic literature and criticism of it. Too often in digital literary studies we focus on the technological or poetic, the medium or the message, and we neglect to consider the cultural situations that inform technopoetics and our experiences of them. Of course, critical attention to context can also prove constraining, as Rita Felski points out in an aptly titled chapter from *The Limits of Critique*, "Context Stinks!" Context stinks, she writes, when it functions as "a kind of historical container in which individual texts are encased and held fast" (155). The field of electronic literature often suffers this kind of critical stink, as when its story is told through historical containers (e.g. "generations") or as the linear evolution of generic or platform-specific categories (e.g. from hypertext to Flash and so on). In what follows, I sketch out a rationale for exploring other ways of telling the stories of our field, specifically through network models based in the feminist value of situatedness, oriented towards human relationships and attachments. This essay is less prescriptive or analytical than it is contemplative and suggestive. My hope is that it opens paths for pursuing electronic literary criticism with renewed attention to and appreciation of feminist, queer, and materialist orientations.

The field of electronic literature is fertile ground for such pursuits because, formally, electronic literature is always situated. Its computational, processural performances are dependent upon material configurations of technological and coded contexts. Moreover, the origins of electronic literature are feminist. Rather, *an* origin for electronic literature—Anglo-hypertext literature of the 1980s—is feminist, and it is this historical thread upon which I pull. Early formations of the field of electronic literature are inseparable from second-wave feminism and feminist poststructuralist theorists of the 1970s and 80s, in particular. Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Donna Haraway, and others advocated for new forms of writing and the evolution of writing through feminism. In the early 1990s, George Landow and Paul Delany argued that electronic hypertext fulfilled the goals of poststructuralism, but they did so with a focus on male thinkers, as the following quote exemplifies: "the deep theoretical implications of hypertext converge with some major points of contemporary literary and semiological theory, particularly with Derrida's emphasis on decentering, with Barthes's conception of the readerly versus the writerly text (…)" (6). Yet, the convergence of hypertext and poststructuralist feminism are made manifest in the hypertext work *Water Always Writes in Plural* (1998) by Linda Carroli and Josephine Wilson. This work weaves quotes from Irigaray and Cixous

into a contemplative hypertext of *écriture féminine* using the metaphor of water. To pursue the task of tracing "cultural contexts and other codes" for electronic literature in ways that fend off the stink of the historical-context container means adopting a different approach: one that recognizes the role of people and relationships —relationships to each other, to texts, to technologies. Rather than approaching electronic literature through the paradigm of text, author, and aesthetic, or through a focus on hardware, software, code, what might we see by instead focusing on people and their relationships?

Felski grounds her polemics against the "business-as-usual" tone of literary critique (i.e. detached, objective, and skeptical) in Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (ANT). For Felski, an ANT approach "would require us to treat texts not as objects to be investigated but as coactors that make things happen, not just as matters of fact but also matters of concern" (180). Such an orientation towards the object of study would support a larger goal: "To forge a language of attachment as robust and refined as our rhetoric of detachment" (180). Following Felski (and Latour) invites reflection upon the ways in which we orient ourselves to specific texts and methods of literary study but also directs scholarly attention to the interpersonal relationships and social networks that bolster the production, distribution, and reception of literature.

In my first book, *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media,* I was not concerned with such things. I sought to situate born-digital literature in a genealogy of literary history with roots in modernism, and I argued for the importance of close reading electronic literature. My focus was on pursuing attachments between contemporary writers and modernist predecessors, and my primary interest was about aesthetic connections not social networks or political valences. I devoted my analysis and argumentation to advocating for the value of reading electronic literature *as* literature, for paying deep attention to the formal aesthetics of the works. Even though the book was published only a few years ago (2014), the argument—or, at least the urgency of the argument—already feels somewhat outdated. When I was working on the dissertation (2002-7), which provided the foundation for the book, electronic literature was yet to be taken seriously in the American academy, not yet the subject of scholarly monographs or college syllabi. It was not taught in many college classrooms and was yet not the subject of scholarly monographs. Things changed quickly, as they tend to do with new media, and I now have the opportunity to write about electronic literature without having to consistently argue for its value as a subject of criticism. Instead, I can use my time to reflexively consider the kind of value, for which kinds of texts, and why. My own work, by charting genealogies back to high literary modernism, established canonical contexts for electronic literature in ways that might have also, unknowingly, foreclosed other directions. In what follows, I seek to find other doors through which to consider and contextualize electronic literature. Focusing on the situatedness of electronic literature, the "cultural contexts and other codes" that inform technopoetics, can shift the paradigm of critique from text and textile (from aesthetics and technologies) to the material, cultural, and political actualities that enable them. In the age of Trump, tweets, and "fake news," it is not enough to look at literature and practice literary criticism as usual. We also need to explain why and how we do this work. In this contemporary situation, the feminist origins of electronic literature take on renewed significance.

The recent volume *#WomenTechLit* (2017) edited by María Mencía illuminates and exemplifies the value of such reconsideration. The book collects essays by practitioners involved in the development of the field reflecting upon their contributions. N. Katherine Hayles, herself a central node in the social network that established electronic literature as an academic field, provides the foreword to the book. In this short piece, she writes, "computer science and allied disciplines remain fields dominated by men," but "[e]lectronic literature is an exception to this generalization, for women have been active since its beginnings in the late 1980s up to today, although the importance of their contributions remains under-recognized and, importantly, under-theorized" (ix). Hayles suggests that understanding the discrepancy between the roles of women in these fields is not something to accept but to explain. Moreover, that the presence of women in the field of electronic literature requires not just more attention but different types of theorizing. In her essay for *#WomenTechLit*, Marjorie Luesebrink (a.k.a. M.D. Coverley), who is also a central node in the social network of electronic literature as both creator of literary works and also an active organizer of the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO), includes a "roll call" of women involved in the field. The names are presented alphabetically, printed vertically and left-aligned across seven pages. No details or descriptions of categories are offered for the inclusion of these specific names; they appear not as conclusions but as data points for potential network visualizations and future theorizations. Luesebrink's roll call

echoes Hayles's identification of a need for scholarly lacuna.

Early hypertext literature used the Web as a network and platform through which practice feminist theory, aesthetics, and social activism. *The Progressive Dinner Party* (2000) is exemplary of literary activity as feminist activism, and vice versa. Carolyn Guertin and Marjorie Coverley Luesebrink curated this online assemblage of web-works by women. It is inspired by Judy Chicago's canonical art installation, "The Dinner Party" (1974-9), which illuminated the absence of women at the table of historical narrative and art history by creating a table for them. *The Progressive Dinner Party* (Figure 1) is a self-proclaimed "tour of the works of women who write hypertext and hypermedia literature on the WWW" (n.p.). The collection presents the Web as a table at which women writers gather and, using HTML-based hypertext, feed each other. On the entry-page, Guertin and Luesebrink demonstrate how early electronic literature employed hypertext to pursue a feminist insistence on situatedness and interconnection. The entry-page begins with the following paragraph:

> Our Progressive Dinner features ***web-specific, English-language literary works*** by international women. The selections on our menu are from Carolyn Guertin's *Assemblage*, an extensive archive of women in electronic literature. Assemblage is featured as part of the website of trAce, an online community and consultancy which encourages writers to discuss writing, share their work, collaborate and experiment online. Based at The Nottingham Trent University in the U.K., trAce is always eager to showcase new web-specific works and provide development opportunities for writers working on the internet" (n.p.).

Figure 1. Entry-screen of *The Progressive Dinner Party* (2000), curated by Carolyn Guertin and Marjorie Coverley Luesebrink. Screenshot of heelstone.com/meridian/templates/Dinner/predinner.htm.

The paragraph situates the collection within specific communities, institutional and interpersonal networks, making it clear that in order to read this text, we must do so *in context*. The text goes on, "Finally, although this evening is dedicated to web-specific literary works, it owes a great debt to the many women and men who built the foundations of our hypertext practice and understanding over many years" (n.p.). A list of names follow, and the expression of gratitude serves to establish genealogy and provide parameters for reading the curated pieces. The

introductory paratext is a framing mechanism and formal structure for *The Progressive Dinner Party* that invites a Latourian ANT approach. The entry-page identifies human and non-human actors as collaborators in artistic production. The human individuals named in mustard yellow on the left-hand navigation bar of the screen (e.g. the authors of works included in the collection) work with non-human actors (universities, archives, websites). To nail the point, the entry-page states: "*Depending on your connection speed, you may find screens that take time to download. We recommend you clear your cache (…)*" (emphasis in original). Technological codes inform affective experience. *The Progressive Dinner Party* teaches its reader not only to optimize her browser speed but also to consider this act as part of the material contexts that enable digital code to perform electronic literature. In this way, *The Progressive Dinner Party* is not only important as an early anthology of feminist electronic literature but also as a lesson in approaching electronic literature through a materialist perspective.

Using *The Progressive Dinner Party* as a hub for exploring early feminist electronic literature foregrounds the importance of the types of labor that often fail to make the pages of literary criticism focused on authors, aesthetics, texts, and tools: i.e. editorial and curatorial work. By naming the online exhibition *The Progressive Dinner Party*, Guertin and Luesebrink attach it to Chicago's radical art piece and identify it as an act of feminist art. The "hosts" of the dinner party—both Guertin and Luesebrink but also the nameless multitude of female hosts of mid-century dinner parties alluded to in this naming—are identified as artists. This framing device thus invites consideration of "other codes" that function to produce art (e.g. a beautifully set dinner table) and also other acts of feminist editing of online electronic literature. Indeed, women ran many of the online electronic literary journals from the early period of electronic literature history (1990s-early 2000s). *Poems that Go* (edited by Ingrid Ankerson and Megan Sapnar), *Hyperrhiz* (edited by Helen J. Burgess), *Cauldron & Net* (edited by Claire Allan Dinsmore), *Riding the Meridian* (edited by Jennifer Ley), *Rhizomes* (edited by Ellen E. Berry and Carol Siegel), *frAme* (edited by Simon Mills, Sue Thomas, et al.) and others, all provided outlet and access to early Web-based literature. These journals were free and accessible online, a fact that is not only material but also political: such journals harnessed the spirit of the open, utopic early Web. In so doing, they provided a counter-example to Eastgate Publishing's proprietary software and pay-for access to electronic literature, the type of models to which the Web would later succumb. These journals were feminist not only by virtue of the gender of their editors but also due to how they upheld, performed, and illuminated the feminist concept of situatedness.

The prefatory pages of *The Progressive Dinner Party* offer another cue for pursuing a feminist and materialist engagement with the history of electronic literature: the need to take into account the institutions, activities, processes, and people involved in producing the art and scholarship rather than just on the art and scholarship itself. Take, for example, the trAce Online Writing Centre at Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom, which ran from 1995-2005 under the direction of Sue Thomas; and, in the United States, Brown University's MFA program in Digital Language Arts, founded in the early 1990s by Robert Coover and now directed by John Cayley. These workshops and programs operate both in-person and online, and they provide contexts for creating communities around code-driven literature. They deserve to be studied and theorized as contexts of influence and as "other codes" programming the larger field of electronic literature. One might also consider the impact and ripple effect of such foundational events as the 1995 and 2001 Summer Seminar for College Teachers "Literature in Transition: The Impact of Information Technologies" funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and led by then-UCLA professor N. Katherine Hayles. These seminars were dedicated to new media criticism, and they became magnets for critics interested in the emerging intersections of new media and literature. Many of the scholars who attended are now central to the field of electronic literature (including, but not limited to, Joseph Tabbi, Rita Raley, Matthew Kirschenbaum, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Dene Grigar, Tara McPherson, and others). This fact renders the NEH seminars and Katherine Hayles, the person and professor who led them—and not just her books, texts, and ideas—as central hubs in the network of electronic literary criticism. Recognizing the role of the people in the room and the person who brings them together is vital feminist work—hence, the "roll call" in Luesebrink's essay for *#WomenTechLit* and the insistence on curation (hosting the party) as labor that matters in *The Progressive Dinner Party*. A focus on interpersonal relationships can recalibrate the way a field is theorized, and electronic literature rewards such reframing.

For example, such an approach brings to the fore the friendship between Katherine Hayles and Marjorie Luesebrink that has been vital to the development of the field. Hayles's critical readings of Coverley's hypertext novels

modeled for a generation of literary scholars how to take seriously digital multimodal narrative. The friendship between these two women also supported behind-the-scenes institutional infrastructure. The ELO, the non-profit organization that provides an institutional and online network for the field of electronic literature, was founded in 1999 by Scott Rettberg, Robert Coover, and Jeff Ballowe. It entered the fold of the American university system under Luesebrink's guidance (in 2001) and her tenure as ELO president—that is, when ELO moved its headquarters to UCLA, where Hayles signed on to serve as the Faculty Director for the organization. A feminist and materialist approach to electronic literature, its history and criticism, might pause and focus here. (I hope someone will.) These limited examples—limited by scope, I realize, but also by *other codes* and cultural *contexts* (Anglo, American, even ELO-focused)—remind us how women have been part of shaping the field's history. Hayles has been a central node in the feminist network I am tracing here, as well as in my own professional and intellectual life. I want to weave in one more example that demonstrates her impact within the electronic literature network.

In 2000-1, a conversation unfolded online at *electronic book review* (*ebr*) over Espen Aarseth's provocative and game-changing book *Cybertext* (1997). In retrospect, the conversation illuminates "contexts" in which gendered "codes" get assimilated into normative discourse in a field. This poignant but largely forgotten moment in the textual studies history of early electronic literary criticism pivots around tone and rhetoric. *Cybertext* is considered a founding text of game studies, in part because it provided the rubric for determining "interactivity" (a key term of the period) and did so by positioning games in contrast to hypertext. The hypertext/cybertext debate was a central and heated one, and some might argue that it led to a split wherein games and literature were no longer inseparably linked under the category "digital art." The title of Nick Montfort's review of Aarseth's book captured the stakes: "Cybertext Killed the Hypertext Star." Riffing off Markku Eskelinen's 1999 Digital Arts and Culture paper and The Buggles's song "Video Killed the Radio Star" (1979), which was the first music video presented on MTV (in 1981), Montfort's review captured the combativeness of the "hypertext vs. cybertext" debate brewing at the time.

Montfort's title also implies an ideology of media obsolescence. He writes, "the old collection called hypertext cannot continue to hold our interest as a critical category or as a category describing what literary efforts should be considered valid and worthy" (n.p.). The claims proved prescient. "Hypertext" as a critical category and literary genre soon faded from the foreground of electronic literature. This was not strictly due to Montfort or Aarseth but rather to the fact that the HTML format for open, online hypertexts soon gave way to proprietary software (e.g. Flash) and multimedia works produced in them. Soon too did the convergence of hypertext with poststructuralist and feminist discourse falter. Before the hypertext star was declared dead, however, Katherine Hayles wrote a "riposte" to Montfort in *ebr* that employed feminist discursive codes to critique Montfort's argument and to express concern over the situation. Her essay is another important example of the impact of feminist theory on electronic literature and also how it has been forgotten.

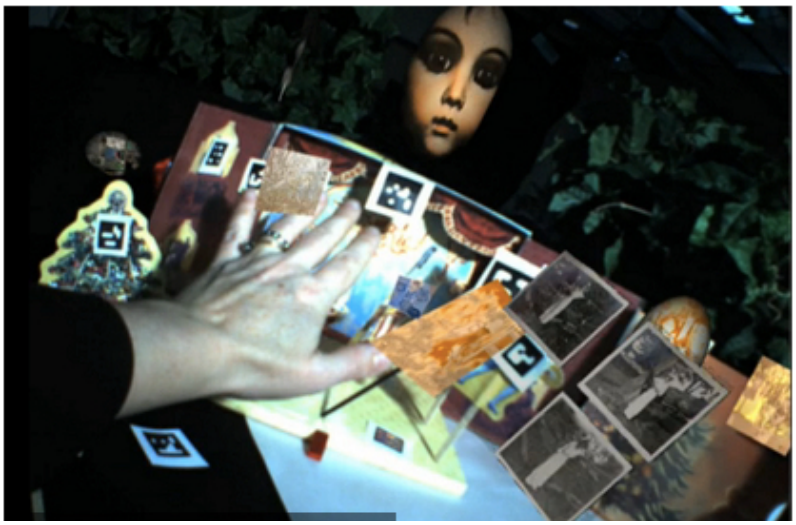
In "Cyber|literature and Multicourses: Rescuing Electronic Literature from Infanticide," Hayles followed Montfort in employing the rhetoric of murder but veers from him to favor more gendered discursive codes. She begins, "Whenever interspecies mating occurs, the offspring are likely to spark controversy if not fear and loathing" (n.p.). She takes to task critics who position hypertext and games as natural enemies in a turf war, refusing the binary. She continues, "the beast called electronic literature cannot be adequately understood if it is orphaned on either side of the family tree" (n.p.). Identifying electronic literature as child and monster, indeed a monstrous child in the vein of Cixous's laughing Medusa, Hayles refuses the simplistic genealogies of patriarchal evolution. She calls out Montfort for "us[ing] a review of Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* as the occasion to suggest that the 'real' parent of electronic literature is the computer game" (n.p.), and uses the language of genetics and human relationships to remind readers that computation is not everything. "To think of hypertexts such as Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, Michael Joyce's *Afternoon*, *Twilight* and *Twelve Blue*, M.D. Coverley's *Califia* and Stephanie Strickland's *The Ballad of Sand and Harry Soot* as depending primarily on computation for their effects," Hayles writes, "is to render them virtually unintelligible as works capable of making readers care about the stories they tell" (n.p.). She concludes, "Like a child who is first parsed as a combination of her parents and gradually understood as fully a person in her own right, so cyber|literature, now in its infancy, will begin to take on its own unique characteristics" (n.p.). Coining the term "cyber|literature," she refutes the oppositional binary of "hypertext vs. cybertext" and instead produces a neologistic "child." When we remember that the emergence of

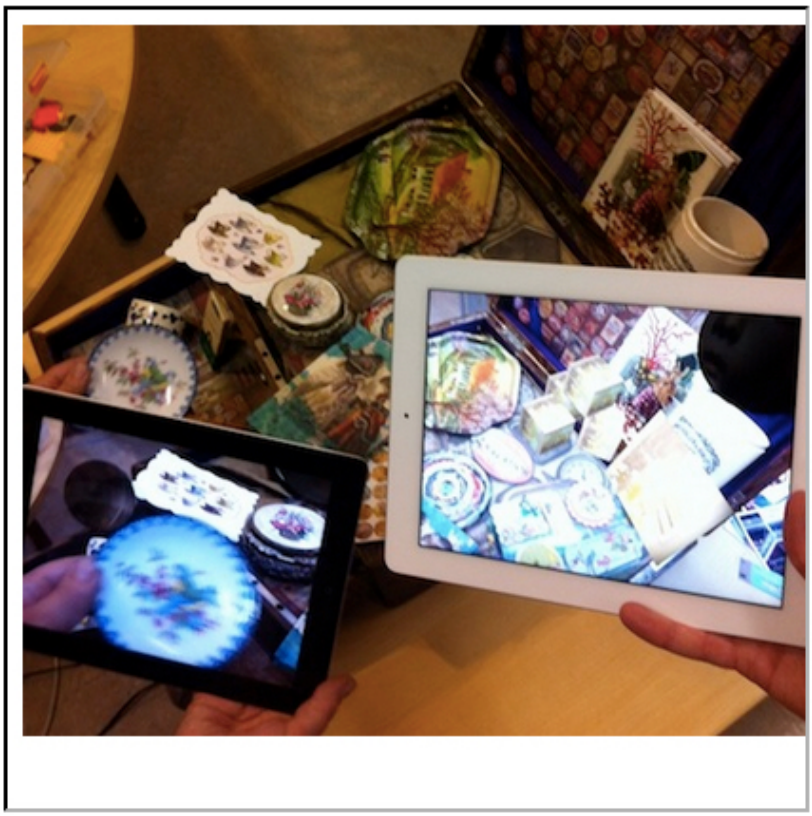
ludology and game studies was poised in terms of a battle against hypertext, and that hypertext was then aligned with feminism and women's writing (think of *Water Always Writes in Plural* and *The Progressive Dinner Party*), then the promise of hypertext's death at the hands of computation and games is far more than technical, aesthetic, or rhetorical. It is gendered and political. Hayles's choice of language disallows the formal or computational to be separated from the material and political. Her riposte in *ebr* reminds us how literary criticism—even when it seems to be just about genre, technological platforms, or aesthetic genealogies—is always positioned in cultural contexts and other codes.

The rhetoric of "hypertext" (like "cyberfeminism") has all but vanished from contemporary critical discourse, but recalling the codes and contexts in which they operated can give us new orientations from which to consider electronic literature, its criticism and its history. I take the language of "orientation" from Sara Ahmed, whose *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* considers how (straight) lines of connection, affiliation, and attachment are drawn and how we might work to queer such thinking: to "offer a different 'slant' to the concept of orientation itself" (4). The drawing of lines or links between nodes is, of course, part of tracing a network or a historical genealogy and thus part of literary criticism. Ahmed's consideration of "orientation" is indeed concerned with the reification of academic disciplines. She writes, "Our investments in specific routes can be hidden from view" (19). The specific routes that support academic disciplinary training—that enable us to get to a position wherein we can view, read, and know—are often not the subject of scholarly attention. Yet, as the debate about "hypertext vs. cybertext" in *ebr* shows, the routes can explain a lot. The debate in *ebr* registers a shift away from the "hypertext/cybertext" discourse, and it does so through decisively gendered codes. "When we follow specific lines, some things become reachable and others remain or even become out of reach" (14), Ahmed asserts. When cybertext (i.e. games) killed hypertext, what lines were drawn and followed? Ahmed's effort to queer phenomenology invites us to consider how we come to see straight lines of historical evolution in electronic literature and to rethink how such messy moments of debate over field-definition, as that in *ebr*, provide opportunities to rewrite the history of our field.

Taking up Hayles's call to address the under-theorized role of women in the history of electronic literature, and doing so through Ahmed's focus on "orientation," prompts the question: What is the role of feminism in contemporary electronic literature? By way of response, I turn to a work by Caitlin Fisher whose networked aesthetic promotes Latourian ANT. This work invites readers to think with, and through it, about how electronic literature produces feminist, queer, and materialist orientations. Fisher's *Circle* (2012) is a work of augmented reality by a pioneering feminist maker and scholar in the field of electronic literature. Fisher's earlier work and queer coming of age love-story *These Waves of Girls* won the ELO's Prize for Fiction in 2001, and Fisher herself has been a node in the interrelational network of the field since (at least) that time. She has organized conferences and exhibitions through the ELO, built institutional spaces for electronic literature at York University, and mentored junior artists and scholars. *Circle* is a feminist and queer work that, I argue, invites an allegorical reading of the hidden feminist histories in the field of electronic literature.

Circle operates through quick response (QR) codes embedded in analog objects (or, in some versions, paper interfaces) and a scanning device (a virtual reality headgear or an iPad). Either way, you read this work by selecting, holding, and even fondling hand-sized objects. When you scan these objects, you access vignettes about four-generations of women. A collection of small, personal, and domestic objects are arranged on a tea service tray: a bracelet, a piece of stationary, family photographs, and a doll's head. Each of these items contains a digital code that prompts the projection of an image or sound file that contains a fragment of the story. The story is not presented as text to be read; instead, it is heard and seen in deeply embodied ways. Formally, the work is a hypertext, a network of vignettes about the narrator, her absent mother, her devoted grandmother "Jelly," and her baby daughter, Harriet (Figures 2 and 3).





Figures 2 and 3. *Circle*, Caitlin Fisher, 2012.

At the center of *Circle* is a woman who gives voice, literally, to the women in her life. Our narrator has recently become a mother and has acquired a newfound appreciation of the woman who raised her: her grandmother, Jelly. There are no men in this narrative, no fathers in a story reaching across four generations. Not only are men absent, but so too is our narrator's mother absent. The narrator divulges that Jelly raised her "since my parents went on holiday to Morocco in 1967 and didn't come back." In the tone of a grown-up woman gifted recently with newfound insights, she describes her own mother from a perspective of generosity but also from historical context. The narrator's mother was a young mother in the 1960s, when women were exploring their sexuality and were learning the craft arts: "We have mothers who cry, sleep all day, weave curtains from beads we later choke on" (n.p.). These days of social rebellion, sexual exploration, and macramé had an impact on others, particularly the little children left to be cared for by their grandmothers because such children had "Mothers we need to tuck in at night after parties, mothers we tell to please get more milk and who is sleeping in my bed" (n.p.). *Circle* shows that there are not only backstories but also connections that link characters (human and objects) into webs, symbolic and familial networks of interpersonal relationships. Nothing is straight here, only linked and looped.

Circle invites queer interpretations of how this work challenges cultural norms and codes. In a work that circles around motherhood, the absence of the narrator's mother is jarring. The narrator's mother refused to stay and serve as mother and daughter, a rejection of heteronormative duties that places the story in what Jack Halberstam calls "shadow feminism": "a feminism grounded in negation;" specifically, "an antisocial femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power"(124). It is not only the narrative that invites queer readings but also the circular formal structure of the work. *Circle* refuses linear storytelling and progressive, or reproductive logics. This is not a work wherein the human is at the center of the diegetic story or the human reader is the central receptor. To the contrary, *Circle* is about objects *in* networks, the things that women hold and pass along. It also operates through a network of objects and media: a digital circuit of programmed code, software, and hardware. We read this work by interacting with artifacts from someone else's life and excavating the stories attached to them; in this case, literally attached to them through QR codes. The objects are unequivocally domestic and feminine—objects of homes and parlors, of make-up tables and jewelry boxes. They might be considered ephemeral or unimportant, but *Circle* demands that the reader consider them anew through interaction with new media.

The work promotes attention to the relational contexts and codes through which matter comes to mean. We might see this work exploring or even demonstrating Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action." The feminist philosopher explains, "Existence is not an individual affair" because "Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating" (iv). Barad coins the term "intra-action" in contrast to "interaction" in that it "*signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*" (33, emphasis in original). *Circle* operates through an aesthetic of entanglement and "intra-action." Our narrator tells us that Jelly's mother "has a bad heart and dies when my grandmother is ten," leaving Jelly to be raised by her grandmother (n.p.). Jelly wears her mother's gold bracelet as a kind of memorial. The story presents the bracelet as a figurative metonym for a lost mother; but it is also more material and artifactual than that. We learn that a psychic once told Jelly about that piece of jewelry: "'Let me hold that,' the psychic says, 'whoever wore this has a bad heart—you can still hear it beating.' *Tha-thump, that-tha-thump*" (n.p.). The bracelet is not just a symbolic representation but, through digital code, it actually contains the beating heart of Jelly's dead mother. When we, human readers, hold the bracelet and interact with it, we hold in our hands the heart of the story: the trauma of losing one's mother. We also hold the lynchpin connection between Jelly and the narrator: they share the loss of their mothers. This loss connects them and makes them who they are: the mothers they are. We learn this by fondling the bracelet and participating in a network of actors which includes the bracelet, QR codes, scanning device, and database. Collectively, these networked actors produce an "intra-action" that enables us—the readers—to become part of the narrative circle.

We only gain access to this story, however, by learning *how* to read the work. *Circle* places before us things that contain stories, but in order to read them, we must learn to hold the objects and scan them. We recognize that reading depends upon orientation; in Ahmed's words, "the history of the reachable" (55). She writes, "What is reachable is determined precisely by orientations that we have already taken" (55). Immediate experience is always part of a longer history of interaction and situation. *Circle* tells stories of how inanimate objects arrive at a place where they can be reached, held, scanned, and read. I want to linger here because a focus on orientation, rather than just on objects, supports a reconsideration of *how* literary critics read.

Traditional critical practices just do not cut it for reading *Circle*. The network of "intra-action" requires a different approach. Rita Raley proposes the term "dis-integrated reading" to describe reading experiences induced by certain types of computational text events, specifically those that emerge through a real-time, sited, and social collective writing process that do not produce a single archiveable text to read. In such cases, there is no potential for a totalizing explanation or critical mastery because there is no *one* text to explain. Raley suggests that dis-integrated reading promotes a different affective stance than usually associated with critique—namely, she says, disinterestedness: "What one reads with a momentary peripheral glance is likely not to return and, though the moment of textual consumption might be captured and replayed through recorded documentation, that moment cannot be restaged or reenacted" (6). As a result, such works promote a reading response that seeks not coherence in the form of interpretation but, instead, an affective, fragmentary, and disintegrated experience. We might see

disintegrated reading as operating in queer register, *à la* Halberstam, by refusing normative paradigms of mastery and explanation, or even "interest," that define "success" in literary criticism. *Circle* is not the type of work that Raley would associate with disintegrated reading, but it does promote a related affective response. The reader must assume disinterestedness towards normative critical expectations and, indeed, surrender to "failing" as a traditional critic. This meta-failure focuses our attention on the networks that enable *Circle*'s emergence. This includes the specific technological circuit that connects the scanning device, QR codes, analog objects, and programmed narrative. It also includes the larger social networks and technocultural infrastructures that come into view through the work's central aesthetic: glitch.

Circle is intentionally glitchy. The digital markers are placed close together, often overlapping on the same object, and this makes it hard for the software to smoothly process multiple markers at a time. The effect is confusing and messy. Multiple sound files open at once and speak over each other, creating repetitive echoes and eerie sounds. The glitches interrupt the narrator's human voice with unnerving technical sounds, forcing recognition that our engagement with these cute objects and the human tales they tell is deeply mediated by digital technologies. Glitches disrupt and disturb; they disable progress and illuminate interruption *as* radical act. Glitch pulls us out of "immediacy" and puts us in a state of "hypermediacy," to use Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's terms in *Remediation*; glitch makes us aware of mediation. Such awareness means that we cannot just accept the objects before us and the stories they contain; we must also consider how they arrived before us and through which means or media we interact with them. *Circle* employs the aesthetic of glitch in order to shift our focus from actor and interaction to network, intra-action, and orientation.

A glitch turns our attention to the technological inner workings of mediation, to the operations and processes, not just their effects and end products. Lori Emerson explains that glitch "captures a moment in which an error in the computer system is made visible; it therefore exploits randomness and chance as a way to disrupt the digital ideal of a clean, frictionless, error-free environment in which the computer supposedly fades into the background" (237). Glitches reorient our attention. The glitches in *Circle* serve to remind the reader of the need to physically orient her body and perspective in relation to the objects, digital devices, and larger technological system that enables the narrative. The glitches also signify the gaps and hidden histories in the stories that we do access: both the parts of the sound file that we cannot hear and also the other stories that we will never know—the stories of "the other" that the normal operating system hides and marginalizes. *Circle* uses glitch to turn our attention to the larger infrastructural systems, both technological and cultural, that mediate our attention. In this sense, the work encourages a reflection on how we see literary objects and how we practice literary criticism.

Let me conclude by using the language of this special issue to restate my polemic: we must see texts in contexts that go beyond media, aesthetics, and platforms to include the material contexts and cultural codes that enable or inhibit emergence and intra-action. To take up the charge of seriously considering contexts and other codes, we need to consider why and how we orient ourselves towards certain types of works and types of research questions rather than others. Such reflection is not just about literary criticism as a professional activity, but also about ethics. As Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman remind us in their introduction to *Material Feminisms*, "Practices are, by nature, embodied, situated actions" and "material ethics allows us to shift the focus from ethical principles to ethical practices" (7). Reflecting on the practices we embody and enact as literary critics, along with the histories of embodied intra-actions that got us to the place where we can act, just might enable new orientations to emerge. Wouldn't it be wonderfully counter-intuitive if the field of electronic literature, which is often associated with ephemeral textuality and media obsolescence, modeled for the larger discipline of literary studies how to pursue such a materialist turn?

In a contemporary culture moment in global politics when leaders and followers seek simple narratives about subject formation and power, when the "us/then" binary has returned to prominence to fuel nationalism and hatred, it is incumbent upon us as scholars of humanistic narrative and history to show how poetics and politics intersect. We must work to illuminate the contexts of power and privilege that often go neglected and unseen. Turning attention to the feminist origins of electronic literature encourages recovery and reconstitution. Let us take responsibility for approaching our objects of study from different orientations, recognizing when and how digital literature is (and has been) feminist, queer, and materialist.

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