Filipa Calado

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‘Queer Interfaces”

Since the popularization of "distant reading," there has been much debate about what digital tools can do for the humanities, and literary studies in particular.[1](#fn.1) Although many DH practitioners have been careful to situate their methodologies within the context of humanistic study, there persists an idea that digital methods ought to verify, correct, or establish facts about literature and literary history, similarly to the social sciences.[2](#fn.2) However, within the broad field of "Digital Humanities," an emerging *Queer* DH is upending this assumption. This recent work interrogates some of the ways that “queerness” might engage DH research practices, and tend to center around speculative or critical making projects that emphasize the constructed nature of technical objects and promote play. For example, Zach Blas and micha cárdenas’s *transCoder*, a “queer programming anti-language,” features programming functions inspired by Judith Butler like the “destabilizationLoop()” that “breaks apart any process that acts as a continuously iterating power” (“Queer Technologies / transCoder”). Another project that probes the possibilities of queerness and DH is “Queer OS: A User’s Manual,” which reimagines how various components of an operating system, such as interfaces, applications, and memory might work (or not) within an ethos of queerness.

Although the speculative nature of such projects provokes the positivist tendendies of mainstream DH, allowing critics to imagine the emergence of queered technological contexts where functionality and productivity are not taken for granted, it overlooks the ways in which current technological systems and tools already contain elements of queerness. To this end, my project explores how our current tools resist the impulse for fixity, correction, certainty, and verification. My method values experimentation and exploration, and revels in the inconsistencies, errors, and idiosyncrasies of close reading. It examines the ways that both human minds and computers are prone to making mistakes and misreadings, and takes these ironies as points of inspiration for re-imagining human-computer interactions. I look at digital methods that engage reading and interpretive processes, such as electronic editing, archival practices, and social reading tools. I’m interested in how these methods allow users to mark and respond to queer subjectivity and affect embedded in life writing and compositional forms, particularly memoirs, journals, and manuscripts by queer authors. <subjecthood> My goal with this project is to explore how digital methods and media can be used to engage questions about queer embodied experience and subjectivity. Could the logics and limitations of technology reflect the complexities of identity? How might we “encode” or “decode” queerness?

At stake here is the critic's relation to the object of study. Some DH practitioners have already proposed useful models for reading that emphasize the critic's role in analysis, such as "algorithmic criticism," "deformative criticism," and "speculative computing."[3](#fn.3) These approaches are careful to temper the common reductions and rhetoric of "distant reading" by being explicit about the constructed nature of data and implicatedness of the literary critic in analysis. In parallel to these developments, Queer Theory has also been exploring ways of relating to textual objects without delimiting them. This new trend resists interpretive practices such as "suspicious" or "paranoid" reading which attempts to uncover hidden or latent "truths" about queer experience. According to critics like Eve Sedgwick, Heather Love, and Rita Felski, this logic of exposure closes off alternative possibilities for responding to texts. For these theorists, reading becomes more of an affective orientation rather than an exercise in demystification. Bringing this attitude in Queer Theory to bear on digital methodologies, my project experiments with notions of "touch" and more playful and experimental modes of reading. Here, I pursue "touch," drawn from Love's phrase, "touching without touching," as a critical method that resists the temptations to verify, establish, or fix knowledge about queer subjects.[4](#fn.4) As a reading practice that prevents the overidentificatin of queer subjects, "touch" demonstrates what DH what might learn from queer models of relationality while also animating the haptic and physical experience of engaging with texts in electronic formats where users must swipe, drag, and click their way.

I mobilize the term "queer" as *both* method and matter, denoting not only a reading practice but also a textual corpus that features queer authors and subjects. This textual corpus in particular adds compositional forms to the larger category of what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call "life writing."[5](#fn.5) It makes this addition because Smith and Watson's capacious term, "life writing," which centers on a writing self, nonetheless leaves out drafting and other more crude and experimental forms of writing that interrogate selfhood by posing it as an iterative practice. Therefore, to various examples of life writing, such as autobiography, memoir, fictionalized autobiography and autofiction, I would combine compositional forms of writing like journals, diaries, and manuscripts. Here, I focus on the way that these texts demonstrate a writing self or an experimental style that reflects the fragmentary and processural nature of subjecthood and provides a key into reading affective, embodied experience. For example, my interest in the manuscripts and journals of Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf highlights how compositional writing continually calls into question the construction embodiment and subjectivity. Moving to what I call the "memoiresque," including 21st century works by Alison Bechdel, Jordy Rosenberg, and Yiyun Li, I explore how present day examples of life writing pose problems for keeping subjectivity both legible and dynamic. The formal experiments of fictionalized biography, such as those in Woolf's *Orlando* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*,[6](#fn.6) create a fulcrum around which the false distinctions of fictionality and biography revolve. An important theme throughout this analysis is the difficulty of "decoding" or "encoding" queer identity in these texts.

My interest in affect draws me into studies of consciousness, where I look at cognitive and embodied perceptual processes and what they might reveal about the reading experience. Here, I pose a variety of parallels between human and computers in order to speculate on what happens in the interface between reader and text. An important figure for this project is the cyborg, that human-computer engagement offered up by Donna Haraway which embodies the blurring of boundaries between human and machine and does away with the old dualisms of natural/artificial and mind/body, man/machine, etc. My project repurposes the cyborg to explore the illuminating parallels between cognition and computation. Here, I reveal many points of intersection between the biological-mechancial, such as neurons and transistors, memory and RAM, that are used to spur our thinking about human-machine interfaces. I also focus on the role of misrecognition and misreading across perception and computation. These forays into media archaeology and studies of consciousness bring me to the boundary between the material and the immaterial, to the gaps in our knowledge about how our machines and minds works. In tracing the relationship between the material and the immaterial, I speculate on how words mark us, trigger our emotions and memories to create aesthetic, affective reading experiences.

The first chapter, "Reading: 'Touching without Touching'" lays out what Digital Humanities methodologies might learn from queer theory. It looks at specific reading practices by Eve Sedgwick and Heather Love, which question the proper relationship of the critic to the object of study. Sedgwick's ideas about "touching/feeling" and Love's notion of "touching without touching" pose queer modes of relationality that do not presume full connections as prerequisite for analysis. This chapter engages these techniques with various critical methods, many from the Digital Humanities, such as distant, surface, and post-critical reading, and deformative, algorithmic, and speculative criticism. I pay particular attention to how digital formats and interfaces might harness queer critical methods, speculating on the intimate process of engaging with texts on a computer, where users can manipulate and transform texts in virtually infinite and unique ways. Examining two digital projects, a text analysis and visualization web application called Voyant-Tools, and a hypertext novella by Caitlin Fischer, *These Waves of Girls*, I reflect how these tools work alongside the reader’s intuition, in what McGann calls a “prosthetic extension of that demand for critical reflection,” by which the reader is able to feel her way through the text. In particular, I question how the haptic and exploratory activity of working with these tools might enliven the reading process by allowing the reader to play, experiment, and imagine new connections to the textual object.

The second chapter, "Editing: Encoding Identity," examines two contrasting ideas—the instability of queer identity and subjecthood against the limitations and fixities of computational methods. How do the abstractions and structures of digital formats struggle or fail to mark the complexities of embodied experience and identity? To answer this question, I first review the relation between queerness and negative affects like loss, failure and shame. Then, I explore how TEI (the Text Encoding Initiative), an encoding standard or "markup language" for electronic editing, struggles to portray the complexity of the data it represents. Here, I demonstrate how TEI might be used to mark up the manuscript of Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, which was repeatedly edited by Wilde in ways that minimized homoerotic content. I question how TEI as a markup standard enables editors to register such revisions, given the hierarchical structure of XML (TEI's parent language) and the availability of relevant "tags" for marking up manuscripts. I bring my investigation into conversation with other critics who have stumbled across productive failures with their own deployments of TEI. For example, Pamela Caughie's attempts to encode gender in Lili Elbe's memoir, *Man Into Woman*, turn the issue of technical difficulty back to the difficulty of pinning down sexual identity, leading her to question whether "ontologies [can] ever capture the complex, multi-layered, dynamic nature of gender identities” (1). Throughout my conversation about Dorian Gray, I bring up examples of 21st century queer memoirs that experiment with alternative ways of figuring queer identity and subjecthood. This chapter ends by emphasizing the complex question of gender ontology and sexual identity, which are never fully legible despite our tools.

The third chapter, "Teaching: Social Annotation," questions how digital annotation tools might facilitate embodied interactions with text. To begin to answer this question, I examine biological processes of perception and analogies between man and machine. I take the figure of cyborg to explore biological-mechanical intersections in order to re-present the human as a creative machine, a thinking/feeling machine. This human-computer engagement, rather than reduce the differences between humans and machines, allows me to explore unexpected affinities that emerge in the interface between reader and text. Interrogating the ways that certain perceptual and computational processes work across biological and mechanical levels sparks my thinking about human-machine interactions. I take up social annotation as a test case, examining a particular digital annotation tool that I've modified for purposes of engaging preverbal and nonverbal responses while reading. This chapter ends with a close reading of Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes’s novels, to see how their prose evokes some of the perceptual processes involved in reading and writing as well as how digital annotation practice helps readers to recognize these processes. I highlight how these writers' formal strategies engage cognitive, affective, and embodied reading processes.

The fourth chapter, "Queer Displacements: Feeling Backward / Feed Forward," explores how displacements across our understanding of media, perception, and language affects our engagement with literary objects. Here, various displacements between how we see/experience digitized literary and cultural objects and how they work/function offer a model for thinking about how we interact with these objects. In digital media, there is a central displacement between what we see on the screen and what is inscribed in the computer’s hardware—what Matt Kirschenbaum refers to as the levels of formal and forensic materiality. Within neuroscientific debates about consciousness, the central displacement is the “explanatory gap," or the idea that the physiological processes of the body, such as the neurons firing in the brain, cannot explain the quality of sensation that is being experienced by each individual. With language, displacement inheres in the stubborn instability of the signifier, which is passed through words, syntactic structures and sound in order to signify. This chapter examines how the digitization practices of textual objects engage these displacements to open up our experience and interpretation of them. I look at the examples of the Lesbian Herstory Archive digitization efforts and "Comparing Marks: A Versioning Edition of Virginia Woolf's 'A Mark on the Wall,'" a digital resource of print witnesses of Woolf's short story across time. I find in these examples an occasion for thinking through how emergent perceptual experiences (Mark Hansen's idea of "Feed Forward") might contend with backward looking or negative affects of queer theory (Love's model of "Feeling Backward").

Endnotes

[1](#fnr.1)These theorists take different stances on whether DH tools facilitate a more objective, or what Franco Moretti calls “falsifiable," method of criticism, where graphs and other visualizations might answer questions about literary history and form, or a more “speculative” mode, championed by Johanna Drucker, who purposefully skews graphical metrics in order to reflect the ambiguity and partiality of the data they represent. In between these two extremes, there are theorists like Andrew Piper and Ted Underwood, who temper the reductions and rhetoric of "distant reading" by incorporating close readings and explanations, or Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein, whose attempts to recover emotion and emobodiment are a direct indictment on data science as an exclusionary discipline.

[2](#fnr.2)Recently, Nan Z. Da deems Computational Literary Studies (CLS) ineffective when her own experiments fail to reproduce or verify the results of her colleagues. Her emphasis on the “reproducible” in CLS extends Moretti’s call from 1983 for a “falsifiable criticism”: both advocate for a methodology that is as reliable and verifiable as the social sciences.

[3](#fnr.3)See Stephen Ramsay, *Reading Machines: Toward an Algorithmic Criticism*, 2011, Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels, "Deformance and Interpretation," in *Radiant Textuality: Literary Studies after the World Wide Web*, 2001, Johanna Drucker, *SpecLab: Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing*, 2009.

[4](#fnr.4)Though Sedgwick focuses on reconceptualizing traditionally negative affects (like shame) into creative resources, and Love prefers to dwell in the painful past, giving inconsolable characters full reign over their own darkness, both critics look at touch as a new way of making connections between the critic and object of study.

[5](#fnr.5)Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define "life writing" as "a general term for writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical" (4).

[6](#fnr.6)Barnes's *Nightwood* is not traditionally considered to be a fictionalized biography, though it is widely accepted as a roman à clef in which Barnes herself takes the character of Nora Flood and her former lover, Themla Ellen Wood, is Robin Vote.

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