“Queer Interfaces”‎

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Since Franco Moretti first drew attention to "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. Clarifying the distinction, Stephen Ramsay points out that, while scientific inquiry aims to describe the 'real world,' the humanities approach observation as a phenomenal experience. Drawing from Lisa Samuels's and Jerome McGann's concept of "deformative critcism," Ramsay frames the constraints of computation as an opportunity for reflection on the ways that critics change and transform the texts under their scrutiny. He reminds us that digital tools function within a larger, rhetorical process: “The understanding promised us by the critical act arises not from a presentation of facts, but from the elaboration of a gestalt, and it rightfully includes the vague reference, the conjectured similitude, ironic twist, and the dramatic turn" (16). However, in continuing to underestimate the role of critical subjectivity in analysis, critics have begun to double down on the pretense of objectivity promised by DH methods. Recently, Nan Z. Da deems Computational Literary Studies ineffective when her own experiments fail to reproduce or verify the results of her colleagues. Her emphasis on the "reproducible" extends Moretti's call from 1983 for a "falsifiable criticism"—both advocating for a methodology that is as reliable and verifiable as the sciences. Though Moretti and Da are starkly opposed on the actual efficacy of digital methods, they both value the objectivity made possible by the machine.

This project interrogates the assumption that the results of using digital tools ought to be reproducible or falsifiable. Instead, it proposes that we use tools in ways that resist the impulses for fixity, correction, certainty, verification. Such a 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 practices and social reading tools. I’m interested in how these methods allow users to mine and/or imagine terrains of affect in queer life writing and compositional forms, such as memoirs, journals, and manuscripts. This examination of 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 interface between reader and text. 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?

As an emerging field, Queer DH is still finding and outing itself, unlike more popular and established Digital methodologies, like Computational Literary Studies. Tracing the current trajectory of Queer DH, Bonnie Ruberg, Jason Boyd, and James Howe point out that “many of the data-driven initiatives that have earned DH its most visible accolades eschew rather than engage topics of difference and identity” (108). In response, these authors constellate some ways that “queerness” might engage DH research practices, focusing heavily on speculative or critical making projects that interrogate the constructed nature of objects and promote play. For example, Zach Blas and micha cárdenas’s transCoder, a “queer programming anti-language,” features programming functions like the “destabilizationLoop(),” inspired by Judith Butler, which “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,” created by Fiona Barnett, Zach Blas, micha cárdenas, Jacob Gaboury, Jessica Marie Johnson, and Margaret Rhee, who reimagine how various components of an operating system, such as interfaces, applications and memory, might work (or not) within an ethos of queerness. The speculative nature of these projects is a necessary step that allows us to imagine the emergence of queered technological contexts, but it also overlooks the ways in which current technological systems already contain elements of queerness. While these projects address what they perceive to be a lack of queer analysis and methods in DH, mine looks to the queerness of our present tools, and to the assumptions about functionality that queerness evokes.

At stake here is the critic's relation to the object of study. Some DH critics have already proposed useful models for reading that emphasize the critic's role in analysis, such as Ramsay's "algorithmic criticism," McGann and Samuel's "deformative criticism," and Johanna Drucker's "Speculative Computing." These approaches are careful to temper the common reductions and rhetoric of "distant reading" by being explicit about the role of critical self-awareness and the constructed nature of data in their analysis. In a parallel vein, Queer Theory has also been exploring new ways of relating to textual objects in ways that do not delimit them. But, unlike DH, it has been forced to contend with affect, particularly negative affect, where it is plagued by what to do with bad feelings that arise when confronting histories of queer exclusion, repression, and violence. According to Eve Sedgwick, critics are compelled to pursue "the heroic, ‘liberatory,’ inescapably dualistic righteousness of hunting down and attacking prohibition/repression in all its chameleonic guises” (10). This logic of exposure perpetuates modes of "suspicious" or "paranoid" reading, in which, according to critics like Sedgwick, Rita Felski and Heather Love, the goal of demystification closes off alternative ways and possibilities for responding to texts. Throughout my project, Sedgwick's idea of "touching/feeling," looking "beside rather than beneath," joins forces with Love's idea of "touching without touching" to offer a model of relationality that resists the temptations to verify, establish, or fix knowledge about queer subjects.[2](#fn.2)

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 deconstructs man and machine as cultural objects to replace them with the image of the cyborg, repurposed to explore the illuminating parallels between cognition and computation. My deconstruction of media and perceptual processes finds 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.

This investigation takes life writing, which includes autobiography, memoir, fictionalized autobiography, biography and roman a clef, as well as compositional forms like journals and manuscripts, as its main focus of study. I use the term "life writing" loosely, without adhering to any conventional criteria of genre, besides demonstrating a writing self or an experimental style that reflects the fragmentary and processural nature of subjecthood. My interest in life writing emerges from a concern with the ways that literary form shapes the coherence of queer identity and engages embodied affects and experience. Woolf's fictional biography, *Orlando*, acts as a fulcrum around which the false distinctions of fictionality and biography revolve. My focus on composition, particularly in the manuscripts and journals of Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf, highlights how writing is an iterative practice that continually calls into question the constructions of embodiment and subjectivity. Readings from what I call the "memoiresque," including 21st century works by Alison Bechdel, Jordy Rosenberg, and Yiyun Li, function as present day examples of life writing that continue to pose fresh problems for understanding identity and affect. A recurring theme in my analysis is the difficulty of categorizing and decoding or encoding queer identity, especially when affective responses to reading get in the way of interpretation, or overanalysis delimits queer subjecthood. My interest in life writing centers on whether it is or will be possible to mark queerness as legible while keeping it dynamic.

The first chapter, "'Touching without Touching:' Toward a Queer DH," 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 but not 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 tool 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)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.

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