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“Queer Tools”

Since the popularization of “distant reading,” there has been much debate about what digital tools and methods can do for the humanities, and literary studies in particular.[[1]](#footnote-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 quantitative social sciences.[[2]](#footnote-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 address DH research practices, and tends 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.” Created by Fiona Barnett et al, these guidelines describe how various components of an operating system, such as interfaces, applications, and memory function unexpectedly within an ethos of queerness.

Although the speculative nature of these projects troubles the positivist tendencies 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 and encourage queer encounters with text.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this project, the term “queer” operates across three levels. First, on the level of subjectivity, signifying nonnormative sexualities, desires, and embodiments. Second, on the level of physicality, where bodies and media are bound by the constraints of their material instantiation, in the concrete but elusive processes of “mind” and “computation.” Third, in an affective relation between critic and text that offers up alternative reading practices. My project seeks to carve out this queer experience of reading literature by approaching media, bodies, and text as sensuous in their materiality.

In resisting the impulse for fixity, certainty, and verification, I emphasize how digital tools and methods promote experimentation and exploration, and revel in the inconsistencies, errors, and idiosyncrasies of close reading. My analysis looks to the ways that both human minds and computers are prone to making mistakes and misreadings, and uses these ironies to illuminate human-computer interactions. In reviewing various digital methods that engage reading and interpretive processes, such as electronic editing, social reading tools, and archival practices, I’m interested in how the logics and limitations of technology reflect the complexities of identity and engage questions about queer embodied experience and subjectivity. Here, I focus on life writing and compositional forms, particularly memoirs, journals, and manuscripts by queer authors, to highlight the construction and legibility of queer embodiment and subjecthood. How do digital tools allow us to “encode” or “decode” queerness in texts that trouble the stability of a writing self?

At stake throughout my project 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.”[[4]](#footnote-4) These approaches are careful to temper the common reductions and rhetoric of “distant reading” by being explicit about the constructed nature of data and the implicatedness of the literary critic in analysis. In parallel to these developments, Queer Theory has also been exploring new relations to textual objects, resisting “suspicious” or “paranoid” reading practices which attempt to uncover hidden or latent “truths” about queer experience in favor of affective orientations.[[5]](#footnote-5) 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 that resist the temptations to fix knowledge about queer subjects.[[6]](#footnote-6) The mode of “touch” combines lightness with depth—although “touch” is soft, it can leave a mark or impression between critic and object of study. Toward a reading practice that prevents the overidentification or determination of queer subjects,[[7]](#footnote-7) “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. This reading method aims to expose what happens when we use digital media to engage with queer subjects.

Moving from method to matter, “queer” denotes 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.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Smith and Watson's capacious term, “life writing,” which centers on a writing self, leaves out drafting and other more raw and experimental modes 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 include 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 accumulative nature of queer subjecthood and provides a key into reading affective, embodied experience. For example, I explore how the manuscripts and journals of Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, and Katherine Mansfield continually call into question the construction of embodied subjectivity. These concerns with subjectivity extend into fictional works, such as Woolf's Orlando and Djuna Barnes's Nightwood, whose formal experiments stage the false distinctions between fantasy and reality,[[9]](#footnote-9) and culminate in 21st-century “autofiction” by Alison Bechdel, Jordy Rosenberg, Yiyun Li, and Carmen Maria Machado, which continue trouble the line between fiction and biography while also posing problems for keeping subjectivity both legible and dynamic.

My project adopts the cyborg as a figure for queer embodiment that is assembled yet unseamed. Since Judith Butler's seminal troubling of gender in the early 90s, incoherences between sex, gender, and sexuality have constituted queer subjectivity. My project explores how these incoherences reverberate across neuroscientific and new media technical contexts in order to inform human-computer computer interactions. First, I embark on studies of embodied cognition, examining neuroscientific discourses that situate perceptual processes (such as reading) in the body. Within these discourses, I focus on feminist accounts that center bodily difference in understanding cognition. Second, I delve into new media studies, particularly media archaeology, to examine the unexpected idiosyncracies of digital media. Here, I explore the physical processes of inscription, processing, and storage that disrupts our assumptions about digital immateriality, what Matt Kirschenbaum calls “screen essentialism.” Situating consciousness and computation as material allows me to re-imagine Donna Haraway's cyborg as operating across biological-mechanical registers, opening up the illuminating parallels between the body and computer, for example, between neurons and transistors, memory and RAM. Interrogating the ways that certain perceptual and computational processes work across biological and mechanical levels sparks my thinking about human-machine interactions. Here, I speculate on how language marks us, triggers our emotions and memories to create aesthetic, affective reading experiences.

My emphasis on queer relationality as a critical method for working with digital media naturally leads me to theorizing about the unexpected interactions humans have with their world. Here, I'm interested in the potential for queer digital tools to facilitate aesthetic encounters between reader and object. By opening up the way we use the digital tools to considerations about our embodied experience with them, we expand our understanding about human-compuer interactions beyond traditional knowledge structures and discipline boundaries. To fully explore models of knowing based on feeling, I turn to new media, new materialism, and disability studies. Thinkers as ranged as Steven Shaviro, Jane Bennett, John Durham Peters, and Mark Hansen, offer models that prioritize sensuous and aesthetic experience over epistemology. For example, Steven Shaviro, who draws from Alfred N. Whitehead's concept of “prehension,” argues that feeling is the primordial form of experience, where humans are compelled to speculate or “think outside [their] own thought” in the form of aesthetic semblances (155-6). Moving to disability studies, Victoria Pitts-Taylor draws the concept of “mis/fitting” into models of embodied cognition in order to present disability as a temporally and spatially specific attempt at connection (or “fitting”) between the human body and its surrounding world. In concretizing the interactions between man and machine as aesthetic and sensory, these models complicate the easy encoding or decoding of queer embodied experience. To this end, my project looks at electronic editing schemas that mark elusive subjectivities, digital annotation tools that visualize affective responses to reading, and archival digitization efforts that animate the past.

Each chapter of my project takes up a different aspect of digital media to explore a facet of this central question: How do our current digital tools facilitate queer encounters with literature? This examination addresses various digital tools across reading, editing, teaching, and archiving, to push against the idea that these methods are somehow more objective, rational, or verifiable than traditional practices. My first chapter asks what digital methods have to learn from Queer Theory, and lays out a model of relationality that guides the rest of my project. My second chapter turns to a popular editing standard for text encoding, and posits how this method might encode embodied experience. My third chapter describes a classroom experiment with a social annotation tool that visualizes nonverbal and affective responses to reading. My final chapter explores how archival practices subvert existing structures of knowledge and access, and point to the ways that digital media engages theories of queer temporality. Though these chapters range over a variety of tools and areas of study, they are constrained by an investment to seek out queerness with our existing digital methodologies.

The first chapter, “Reading: 'Touching without Touching,’” lays out what Digital Humanities methodologies might learn from Queer Theory. This chapter looks at specific reading practices by Eve Kosofsky 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 from the Digital Humanities, including distant, surface, and post-critical reading, and deformative, algorithmic, and speculative criticism. I pay particular attention to how digital formats and interfaces might facilitate queer critical methods, and I speculate on the intimate process of engaging with literature on a computer, where users can manipulate and transform text in virtually infinite and unique ways. Comparing three very different kinds of digital projects based on text manipulation, including the text analysis web application Voyant-Tools, the text encoding archive, Women Writers Online, and a hypertext novella by Caitlin Fischer, These Waves of Girls, I explain how these tools work alongside the reader’s intuition, in what Jerome McGann calls a “prosthetic extension of that demand for critical reflection,” by which the reader is able to feel her way through the text (18). In particular, I find that the haptic and exploratory activity of working with these tools enlivens the reading process by allowing the reader to play, experiment, and imagine new connections to the textual object.

The second chapter, “Editing: Encoding Embodiment,” examines the instability of queer identity and subjecthood against the limitations and fixities of computational methods. How do the abstractions and structures of digital formats register the complexities of embodied experience and identity? To answer this question, I examine how one might edit, or “encode” manuscripts, diaries, and autofiction that display queer struggles with subjecthood. First, I explore TEI (the Text Encoding Initiative), an encoding standard or “markup language” for electronic editing, and its method for handling complex textual data. Here, I use TEI to mark up Oscar Wilde's manuscript of The Picture of Dorian Gray, which was repeatedly edited by Wilde to minimize homoerotic content. How might editors approach the rigidity of encoding standards in order to address embodied experience present in tonal shifts, elisions, and revisions over time? Throughout my conversation about Dorian Gray, I bring up examples of modernist diaries by Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield to multiply the alternative figurations of queer selfhood. Finally, in an example of 21st-century autofiction by Yiyun Li, Dear Friend, from my Life I Write to you in your Life, I show how these figurations of queerness endure over time and across subject identities. This examination finds that queer experience is 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, taking up the figure of the cyborg. This figure of human-computer engagement allows me to address the unexpected affinities that emerge in the interface between reader and text. Taking social annotation as a test case, I examine a particular digital annotation tool that I've modified for purposes of marking prediscursive responses to reading, by which I mean the reactions and sensations that occur prior to articulated response. As a digital component of my dissertation, this annotation tool is built to resist the tendency of other annotation tools (and educational technology solutions more generally) to track, quantify, and assess student performance. Instead of having users type their comments, my tool offers a highlighter in primary colors, red, yellow, and blue. Due to their very low opacities, these colors can be layered, one over another, to create secondary and tertiary color combinations. When used with a social reading context, I imagine that the color layerings will create a “heatmap” of different reactions to the text. This pedagogical experiment hypothesizes that alternative reactions to reading will materialize in the color mixtures, in the alchemy of dissonances that layering creates. I run experiments in reading Virginia Woolf's Orlando, Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood, and Roland Barthes's Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes. I examine how annotation might harness cognition, affect, and embodiment as formal strategies in these texts.

The fourth chapter, “Archiving: Feeling Backward / Feed Forward,” explores queer temporality's connection to new media in order to disrupt typical notions of the archive. How do displacements across our understanding of media, perception, and time affect our experience with literary objects in the archive? How might new media animate the past? Here, various displacements between our encounter with digitized literary and cultural objects and their functionality offer a model for thinking about our interaction with these objects. I embark on a deep reading of digital media, exploring the central displacement between what we see on the screen and what is inscribed in the computer’s hardware—–what Matt Kirschenbaum calls the levels of formal and forensic materiality. I consider these levels of digital materiality alongside theories of temporality and perception from queer theory and new media studies. What does queerness as anticipatory (José Munoz's “not here yet”) or backward looking (Heather Love's “feeling backward”) have in common with ideas about new media changing our perceptual experience of the world (Mark Hansen's “feed forward”)?[[10]](#footnote-10) My deep reading of computer hardware and software evokes the temporal and sensory displacements from queer theory to offer possibilities for animating the archive. This chapter considers a community archive, the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn, New York, alongside 21st-century autofiction with archival themes by Alison Bechdel, Carmen Maria Machado, and Jordy Rosenberg. How do community archival practices and digitization efforts change our assumptions about what counts as “archival”? This examination of 21st-century autofiction refigures the ideas of archival preservation and animation in print, demonstrating how these authors write through enduring (im)possibilities of writing the self.

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1. These theorists take different stances on whether DH tools facilitate 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, theorists like Andrew Piper and Ted Underwood, temper the reductions and rhetoric of “distant reading” by incorporating close readings and explanations, and Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein, recover emotion and embodiment to indict traditional data science as an exclusionary discipline. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The elasticity of the term “queer” has been critiqued since Judith Butler's invocation in 1993 that “queer” must “never be fully owned but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage” (19). One dominant redeployment in the early 21st century, summarized by David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Munoz, orients the transgressive associations of the term (which previously attached to transgressive sexualities) around the political urgency of global issues such as neoliberalism, the war on terror, migration, the environment, etc. More recently, Kadji Amin approaches the term as “sticky with history,” rather than fluid and multiple, to re-anchor “queer” to its affective and political moment of its emergence in the 1980s and 90s (181). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to critics like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Heather Love, and Rita Felski, the logic of exposure closes off alternative possibilities for responding to texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Heather Love and Kelly Caldwell theorize that the pain and suffering in by queer subjects is irredeemable, that the bodily and psychic costs of homophobia cannot be alleviated or redressed. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Both Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Heather Love discuss “touch” as an affective orientation for critical analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 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, Thelma Ellen Wood, is Robin Vote. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mark Hansen's concept of “feed-forward” considers how new media expands perceptual reaches across new environments while marginalizing the direct apprehension of objects. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)