*Note to the diss workshop:*

This excerpt is the introduction to the first chapter of my dissertation, tentatively titled “Queer Tools.” This dissertation as a whole takes a critical look at digital tools from a humanities, and particularly Queer Theory, perspective. Each chapter explores a specific digital tool (like text analysis, text encoding, social reading, and archiving) to see how it facilitates a reading methodology that engages Queer Theory.

This chapter sets up the discussion between Queer Theory and DH by looking for parallels in the way digital humanists approach "text as data" and queer theorists approach subjectivity and affect. The main section of the chapter focuses on text analysis, showing how the distance required in “distant reading” evokes queer theories that suppose a critical distance between reader and text.

The purpose of the intro (below) is to start off the conversation with two close readings of major texts in my argument, to give the audience a sense of how the digital and queer are entwined. I begin with the concept of “touch” as an entry point for the ways we talk about digital media and queer subjectivity, and as the chapter goes on, I return to these two texts to deepen my reading of them.

My main concerns have to do with clarity and coherence. This topic will be new to most readers, as there’s currently a divide between people who do Queer Theory and Digital Humanities. I’m coming to Queer Theory from a training in DH, but I’m hoping that this will be accessible (and interesting!) to people in both groups. Here are my specific concerns:

* The opening two paragraphs are pretty dense, and the first one is particularly so. I'm not sure how I can get into my subject without covering all of this theoretical ground at the outset. I'm wondering, most of all, **if you're able to follow this argument** (does it make sense to you?) and also, **do you buy it?** The diss in general is striking out into a relatively new area (Queer Theory + DH), so I'm a little insecure about the plausibility of my project in the way I’ve framed it here.
* **What are the terms/concepts that I need to explain further?** Major concepts like "queer subjectivity" and "data" will be elaborated at length later on in the chapter. But I still want to know where you feel like I'm not giving enough information.
* **Are the close readings compelling?** Do they make you want to read more?

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## Thanks for reading!

-Filipa

## Queerness, the Digital & Touch

*No sooner have I written this than it strikes me as an avowal of the imaginary; I should have uttered it as a dreamy speech which seeks to know why I resist or I desire; unfortunately I am condemned to assertion: we lack in French [and perhaps in every language] a grammatical mode which would speak lightly [our conditional is much too heavy], not intellectual doubt, but the value which strives to convert itself into theory.*

Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 55.

If digital humanists and queer theorists are going to find some common ground, they might start with *touch*. Touch is a means of interfacing with the world, an encounter between subject and object, which signals a problem of access[[1]](#footnote-1) that applies to both electronic media and queer subjectivity. Associations between the digital[[2]](#footnote-2) and touch expand from numerical computation (the ten "digits" of the hand) to signify the haptic connections made through the intermediaries of mice, keyboards, and touch screens. Crucially, these intermediaries demonstrate that humans engage with electronic data at a remove, through layers of computation, abstraction, formalization[[3]](#footnote-3). Matt Kirschenbaum explains that “[d]igital inscription is a form of displacement. Its fundamental characteristic is to remove digital objects from the channels of direct human intervention” (*Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* 86). Moving to the context of queerness, touch similarly points to a problem of access. Like digital media, queer subjectivity has been theorized as legible by and through the framework of formalization–specifically, through a heteronormative power structure that delineates the queer subject for the purpose of reconsolidation. As queer theorists like Judith Butler have shown, subjectivity is constructed through discursive and performative processes:[[4]](#footnote-4) "Where there is an 'I' who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that 'I' and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will" ("Critically Queer" 18). At the intersection of the digital and queerness, then, the phenomenon of touch indexes our grasp of the subject as a construct, a formalization.

This examination harnesses the formal qualities of both queer subjectivity and digital media. It supposes that the parallels between data and queer subjectivity might coalesce into an approach toward reading, which engages queer subject matter and digital media through the matrix of touch. Touch is an approach toward reading that provides alternative possibilities and pathways for sensation. My reading will demonstrate how touch offers a means of knowing based on feeling, which works by abstracting sensation beyond the readily sensible. This process of abstraction compensates for the constructed nature of queer subjectivity by exploring queerness as emergent[[5]](#footnote-5) within digital media. My readings will surface new forms, *queer forms*, that evoke digital materialities and aesthetics as formalizations of the immaterial.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Two close-readings will serve to demonstrate that queerness is concerned with touch, and more precisely, with *a desire for touch* that is continually frustrated. Though one is from a digital source and the other from print, both examples demonstrate a self-conscious and critical stance about its own form, a key component of what I will later elaborate as *queer form*.

The first text, entitled *These Waves of Girls* by Caitlin Fisher, figures touching as desire quite literally, with touch being the means of pursuing desire. This "hypertext," an electronic text format that links "nodes" or pages within an associative structure, enacts desire by tempting the reader to click through the various episodes of the story in order to achieve narrative closure. *Waves* is an autobiographical account of the author's sexual coming-of-age, which unfolds in a series of interconnected vignettes that recount Fisher's adolescent experiences with men and women. Despite winning the 2001 Electronic Literature Organization Award, this "hypertext novella" draws criticism for a formal structure that complicates a straightforward reading experience. Through the profusion of hyperlinks, which connect one node to the next in ways that disrupt temporal and causal relations, this hypertext frustrates the reader’s desire for narrative coherence. One critic argues that the use of hyperlinks “present[s] a baffling range of choices for movement which actually led to a stifling of movement altogether” (Pope, “Significance”).

[[Link to Video](https://gofilipa.github.io/qt/chapter_1/)]

The disorienting feeling of reading this text is an effect of its form. The conventional reading practice of turning the pages in a codex dissolves in the distracting and technical complexity of a narrative that requires effort to traverse. Episodes do not have a discernible chronology or progression, and clicking on the links between nodes disrupts any sense of coherence. While the desire for narrative closure is continually frustrated by the work's form, in another sense, this fragmentary structure exactly constitutes its appeal, for it compels the reader to chase an elusive understanding of sexuality, as the text continually defies the reader’s expectations about the narrator's motives. In one repeatedly linked node, aptly titled “erotic,” the words “and it was the most erotic year of my life” march across the screen like ticker tape (“And it was…”). This node is accessed through two different sources, both featuring sexual episodes between the narrator and men. In a novella that largely consists of stories about the narrator’s sexual history and fantasies with other women, these nodes are unusual, checking the reader’s expectations about the narrator’s identity and desire. The accumulation of seemingly capricious sexual episodes disrupts the relationship between cause and effect, scrambling the reader's sense of direction across the text. Other moments in the text create a similar dissonance from the associations the narrator's motives. One occurs in the last node of the “beam routine” episode, when the narrator is about to perform gymnastics to placate a man that she brought home. The link reads “I don’t want to have sex,” and it leads the reader back to a familiar episode about "Jennie Winchester":

I’m in bed with Jennie Winchester and I realize she wants me to undo her pants. She needs to be home by 11:00 and needs to leave my place by 10:45. I’m kissing her but opening my eyes at intervals to catch the clock. At exactly 10:43 I unbutton her Levis and shove my hand inside, barely undoing the zipper. “I’m in bed…”

As the reader familiarizes herself with the events of the story, she is always losing context. Now the reader experiences this familiar node in a new way that casts its former meaning into doubt. What is the connection between this episode and the phrase, "I don't want to have sex"? Why is the narrator watching the clock? Because the character's desires have been muddled by the unpredictable connections between episodes, what at first seems straightforward now appears to support alternate readings. The reader’s confusion in navigating through *Waves*, in re-interpreting fragments that had been previously integrated, reinforces queer identity as something elusive, a condition that is not fully intelligible. Clicking (*touching*) her way through the narrative, the reader is repeatedly reminded of her removal from the distance from the narrator.

For queer subjects, touch and the desire for touching has always been a frought experience, which can in turn activates a sensorium of affects. In my second example, *The Confessions of the Fox* by Jordy Rosenberg, the main character exhibits a troubled relationship to touch which partly constitutes his subjectivity. Beginning in eighteenth century London, this story follows Jack Sheppard, a young transgender male as a wily thief amid a group of "rogues." Before the official pathologization of nonnormative desires and identities, Sheppard struggles to articulate his difference, what he calls his "*Something*:" "This something that set him apart from other coves [men]. Something that had caus'd him to dress his own chest in taut bandages… pinching at his ribs, throttling his every Breath to a forced shallow bird-sipping of the air" (33). The hesitance toward self-identification extends from the main character to the narrative's genre, which unfolds as historical fiction overlaid with contemporary fictional memoir. Sheppard's story is discovered in the present day United States by Dr. Voth, a rueful academic who is also transgender. Voth, who immediately recognizes the historical significance of Sheppard's manuscript, proceeds to annotate the document with relevant references and increasingly, his own tangential anecdotes. In one scene of the manuscript, Sheppard is having a romantic moment when Voth relates his own episode about a former lover:

She opened her legs a bit, twitched them open, really. I caught my breath, audibly.

"Oh my god," she said, "you're such a lesbian."

She didn't mean it cruelly. And she didn't mean that I wasn't passing as a cis-man, either. Although, since according to her we'd fucked the night before, she knew exactly how un-cis I was.

She meant that she saw something about the quality of my desire: that I could feel her even before I touched her. And that this was part of what it meant to be—or to have been, before my tits became property of the California Municipal Waste Department—a lesbian. That a woman moving in your line of sight could have an effect that was total, atmospheric. That you could be hesitant, incapable, and not particularly interested in establishing a line between touching and seeing. That you would indulge a dead love, dead in the eyes of the world, and valueless. A love that choked and burdened the mind, that might even be the very foundation of melancholy and despair. But, oh Reader, looking at a woman you really get a feel for the way that fire is a phenomenon of touch. And my point is, if you have every been a lesbian, you will not even have to touch a woman to know that. 169

Here, desire is characterised not by the search for satisfaction, or the success of establishing contact, but by the sensual fullness of a lack. The experience of desire, of craving, wanting, needing to touch the desired object stimulates the imagination and amplifies sensations that would otherwise be replaced with more "direct" modes of contact. The lover's reference to Dr. Voth as "such a lesbian" brings this distinction about physical and imaginary contact to the realm of identity, reinforcing the interplay between imaginary and real when it comes to touch. Though Dr. Voth is not a lesbian, the term fits because it signals not a gender or sexual identity but a sensuality that is more concerned with the potential of connection rather than verifiable contact. The appellation hinges on the role of the imagination in activating certain sensations–"total," "atmospheric"—that supercede those in the actualized world. Therefore, Dr. Voth's visual fancy takes on connotations of the fanciful. But this does not mean the sensations resulting from this desire are any less palpable. On the contrary, such a desire maximizes physical experience: it is a desire for something that, because it cannot or will not be fulfilled, amplifies the fullness of that desire. This mode of desiring is what characterizes queerness in the text. Here, touch, or the lack of touch, defines a peculiarly queer subjectivity.

In both *Waves* and *Confessions*, queerness is constituted by a troubled relationship to touch, reinforcing queerness as something that cannot be grasped or is beyond grasp. In *Waves*, touch is the continually frustrated means for traversing the narrative: clicking her way though the nodes, the reader fails to grasp the arc of the story or the intentions of the narrator. In *Confessions*, denying touch casts queer identity as something beyond categorization. Maintaining the gap between sight and touch stimulates the senses beyond what's possible within normative expectations of sexual desire. This condition of inaccessibility gestures at an affect of suspension or displacement that is central to the experience of queerness, an affect that I call the "untouchable," which we now explore in depth.

This is so good! I definitely want more! The first two paragraphs you were concerned about presented no problem to me at all. I appreciated that you laid out the theory so matter-of-factly at the outset, without belaboring it too much or getting too bogged down in references. It made it very easy for someone not in the field to understand and follow. I also think the close readings you chose are compelling, and definitely support the ideas you’re trying to explore. The only thing I want more of is the idea you get to at the very end of this section, about how queerness is constituted by a troubled relationship to touch. It’s super interesting, and it complicates the premise you start out with, that touch is foundational to both DH and queer theory. I’d love to hear more about that complicated (non) relationship. I also think you could signpost that point earlier. I don’t think you need a major aside or to radically alter any of your close readings, but I think more explicitly acknowledging it for each text would be helpful, just so that the moment when you synthesize both texts is less of a reveal and more of a natural progression. So good though! Super interesting, can’t wait to read what comes next!

1. By "access" I mean knowledge, the notion that we can exhaustively know the subject (queer subjects & technology) beyond a cultural construction. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The root of the word digital, "digitus," originally comes from the Latin word for finger or toe, and in electronic media, it refers to a counting system based on ten digits. Digital computation runs on numerical data called "bytes" which can take a value between 0 and 255, although computer language, at the most rudimentary level, is based on "bits," a binary counting system that represents the polarity (North or South, translated into 0 or 1) of magnetic traces on a hard drive. (and include quote from Sadie Plant's *Zeroes and Ones*) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [to be expanded in depth later in the chapter] My approach toward data emphasizes the different levels of digital materiality, what Matt Kirschenbaum calls "formal" and "forensic" levels of materiality. The formal level is what can be seen and interacted with on a computer screen, such as the interface, icons, and windows. The forensic is the level of the nanoscale, what cannot be seen, which is the hard encoding and electronic activity in drives, circuits, and chips (Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [to be expanded in depth later in the chapter] My understanding of Queer Subjectivity draws from Michel Foucault's theorizations of the constructedness of sexuality and Judith Butler's points about the incompleteness of subject formation. According to Foucault, "Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or an an obscure domain which knowledge tries to gradually uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another" (*History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* 105-106). Butler asserts that "the impossibility of a full recognition, that is, of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one's social identity is inaugurated and mobilized, implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation" ("Critically Queer," 18). [this note needs to work harder to link Foucault & Butler] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [this footnote needs to be integrated to the main text?] José Esteban Muñoz defines queerness as "a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present… Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (*Cruising Utopia* 1). Muñoz here indicates an imminant quality about queerness, which is situated within the present. Because queerness is "not yet here," it calls for something else, for something that "allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present," opening a space for emergent affects. In other words, queerness expands a sensibility of feeling to include sensations beyond the immediate, the readily sensible. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Data, at the fundamental level, is a series of optically invisible (but very physical) traces on a magnetized surface, which assume virtual form on the screen. Kirschenbaum explains that "a digital environment is an abstract projection supported and sustained by its capacity to propagate the illusion (or call it a working model) of immaterial behavior: identification without ambiguity, transmission without loss, repetition without originality" (*Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*, 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)