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“Dominance and Resistance: Queer Approaches to Text Encoding.”

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This paper considers the potential alignment between a rigidly structured and constraining editorial format, the TEI, and a strategically nebulous collection of identities and politics expressed by the designation of queer. It considers how textual editing practices with the TEI might reflect or engage modes of resistance against dominant structures as theorized by Queer Studies. It then proposes a possible future editorial methodologies that rework dominant structures to center marginalized and non-normative subjects.

This project begins with a self-reflection on my work developing a TEI schema to mark up the homoerotic content that Oscar Wilde edited out of his novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890). I point out how, in my focus on creating a new schema to mark up the text's queerness, I naively failed to notice mutually reinforcing dominance structures across data formats and text encoding practices. To correct that oversight, this paper draws from the insights of Queer of Color's Critique on Queer Studies as a political project that energizes thinking about electronic data formats. Turning to the TEI schema, I examine the debates about hierarchical structures on data modelling. Then, I point to Jessica Marie Johnson's research on the archive of slavery to highlight the structuring modes of recovery work. Johnson's methodology offers a model for reworking some of the more invisible forces that determine historical inquiry and meaning-making. I close by highlighting examples of contemporary editorial projects that resist structural constraints through collaborative and minimalist practices.

## Textual Scholarship and Queer Historiography

I begin with my own trajectory of thinking on the subject. Early in graduate school, I took a course on Textual Scholarship that seemed to ground the heady atmosphere of seminar discussion in the comforting, physical fact of the text–something that takes up space in the world, that I could literally touch. I then discovered that textual editing methodologies like the TEI, which rooted intellectual work in the minute labor of transcription and markup, brought me to think deeply and critically about formal aspects of text. It was at that time that I was introduced to Jerome McGann's Radiant Textuality: Literary Studies After The Worldwide Web (2001), and his position that digital tools in literary scholarship ought to work as "prosthetic extension[s] of that demand for critical reflection" (McGann 2001, 18). McGann's ideas solidified something essentially creative about the critical process, which helped me to form my early conviction that literary analysis ought to build from considerations of textual form.

With this in mind, I pursued genetic editing projects that would allow me to trace the development of a text through its revision history. Here, I turned to Oscar Wilde's manuscript of The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), a holograph draft that he revised heavily before sending it for publication in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine on June 20, 1890 (Calado 2022).[[1]](#footnote-1) Of Wilde's revisions, I focused on those concerning the homoerotic innuendos between the story's three main characters, Basil Hallward, Lord Henry Wotten, and the eponymous Dorian Gray. I marked up these revisions according to four main themes: "intimacy," "beauty," "passion," and "fatality," with the additional values of "inconclusive" and "illegible" for moments that challenged transcription. The theme tags express general patterns for the revisions, including the stifling of emotional tension, physical affection, references to beauty and passion, and to the obsessive and self-destructive effects of infatuation. In addition to marking up conceptual changes to the manuscript, I also noted the physical changes, that is, the presence and number of Wilde's pen strokes as he eliminated spans of text.

I drew together my encoding principles for this project from across the disparate fields of Textual Scholarship and Queer Historiography, who within their own spheres of influence are having what I perceive to be a similar debate about the historian's impulse toward recovery. Until the popularization of the digital editing methods in the 90s and early 2000s, Textual Scholarship tends to privilege the editor as a recoverer or preserver of text, with prominent editors like Ronald B. McKerrow promoting authorial intention as the highest criterion for editorial decisions.[[2]](#footnote-2) Toward the end of the 20th century, this emphasis on authorial intention, which I call the "restorative approach," begins to shift in the wake of new tools that can multiply, rather than narrow, the potential forms that editorial work might take. Here, the work of Jerome McGann, drawing from Donald F. McKenzie's "sociology of text" which challenges the idea a single text could ever represent an "ideal" version, explores how electronic environments open a space for representing textual variation unhindered by the limitations of the codex format. Opposed to the restorative approach of their predecessors, McKenzie and McGann's approach, which I call "productive," subscribes the text to new configurations that explore formal significance. Moving to the field of Queer Historiography, I found an analogous debate between restorative and productive practices. One side of the debate, the "unhistoricists," argue that queerness in the past cannot be scrutinized in the present without subscribing it to a teleology that effectively normalizes its essential alterity, its quality of resistance that constitutes queerness. The historicists, by contrast, maintain that queerness can be traced as a historically situated phenomenon, and requires historical specificity in order to be legible.[[3]](#footnote-3) Offering a solution to the debate, Heather Love proposes a critical methodology that, I argue, evokes the "productive approach." Instead of attempting to incorporate queerness into contemporary perspectives, her method, called "feeling backward," attends to the ways that queerness eludes containment or knowability.

Guided by the "productive" approach of Textual Scholarship and Queer Historiography, I set out to mark up information that I suspected would provoke the bounds of the tags themselves. My editorial work on this project unearthed, as I had expected it to, a resistance to the demand for fixity in the TEI schema. The boundedness of the TEI format, which encapsulates data within a structured set of tags, struggled against the porous perimeters of these queer themes in the text. My custom schema engaged the difficulty of this conceptual information with the physical register of Wilde's pen strokes across the pages, which sometimes failed to map with the themes. While some of the editorial were straightforward, for example, that of "intimacy," like when Basil "tak[es] hold of [Lord Henry's] hand" (Wilde 9), or when Dorian's "cheek just brushed [Basil's] cheek" (Wilde 20), others were more difficult. Sometimes, the revisions of intimacy had the attendant effect of mitigating the sense of fatality that surrounds Basil's attraction to Dorian. In one striking moment from the dialogue, for example, Basil struggles to impart to Lord Henry the effect of his passion for Dorian Gray. The original line in the manuscript reads: "Lord Henry hesitated for a moment. ‘And what is that?' he asked, in a low voice. ‘I will tell you,' said Hallward, and a look of pain came over his face. ‘Don't if you would rather not,' murmured his companion, looking at him" (9). In the revised version, Lord Henry "laugh[s]" rather than "hesistate[s]," he no longer speaks "in a low voice," and his "look of pain" is neutralized into "an expression of perplexity." These changes, which lighten a particularly tense display of intimacy, work to obscure Basil's internal suffering, evoking the theme of "fatality." Marking up the number of pen strokes also reinforces the limitations of TEI's nested structure: while the word "look" is struck too heavily to be counted, the word "pain" contains a single stroke. With the TEI, it is impossible to mark the number of strokes for each word without separating this single revision into two instances.

## The TEI Structure

This formal experiment, however "productive" in its refusal against the restorative impulse, now seems insufficient. The more that I work with TEI, the more I come to realize that the problem with its data model goes beyond the boundedness of its elements, and toward a dominating structure that it imposes on textual "data." At the root of TEI's rigidity is its hierarchical document model, a tree structure that propagates implicit power relations between elements in the document: each element within the tree structure subscribes to a power dynamic that defers to the parent element and dominates the subordinate ones. Within this architecture, information is not only encapsulated or bound, it is also dominated by the standards of each governing tag, its syntax, model, attributes, and contents.

In a data model where all elements must conform to a tree structure, there is no easy solution for resisting dominance. Two examples, 15 years apart, serve to illustrate attempts to do so within the TEI community. The first occurs in 2008, when XML researcher Jeni Tennison explains that power relations often remain invisible until conflicts arise, such as that of element overlap. As she explains, "Analysing the way in which the syntactic (sentence/phrase) structure overlaps with the prosodic (stanza/line) structure is one important way in which you can analyse a poem" (Tennison 2008, "Overlap, Containment, and Dominance"). Such conflicts stem from the clashing of different encoding priorities across the structural and semantic readings of the document, where the layers of structure, meter, grammar, and semantics can propagate contentious claims on a single word or line of text. Here, a sentence might overflow to the next line or the next page, or a single word might be part of different metrical feet. These idiosyncrasies, by which poetry can give pleasure through surprise, present a challenge for the TEI. In light of this challenge, Tennison "want[s] to see if we can get away with not having hierarchy as a fundamental part of the information model" (Tennison 2008, "Essential Hierarchy"). In a series of blog posts, she frames the problem as an issue between dominance and containment:

When you’re talking about overlapping structures, it’s useful to make the distinction between structures that contain each other and structures that dominate each other. Containment is a happenstance relationship between ranges while dominance is one that has a meaningful semantic. A page may happen to contain a stanza, but a poem dominates the stanzas that it contains. Tennison 2008, "Overlap, Containment, and Dominance"; emphasis original

Tennison proposes solutions for markup to prioritize containment while also suggesting dominance relationships, one of which is a new (but now unsupported) markup language, "The Layered Markup and Annotation Language" (LMNL). Its central feature involves using a series of ranges that describe start and stop points for an element rather than nesting elements one inside the other. In the example below, the tags are left open to accommodate additional ranges:

[book [title [lang}en{lang]}Genesis{title]} [chapter} [section [title}The creation of the world.{title]} [para} [v}[s}[note}In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth,{note [alt}In the beginning God created heaven and earth.{alt]]{v] [v}the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss, [note}and a mighty wind that swept{note [alt}and the spirit of God hovering{alt]] over the surface of the waters.{s]{v] [v}[s}God said, [quote}[s}Let there be a light{s]{quote], and there was light;{v] [v}and God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from darkness.{s]{v] [v}[s}He called the light day, and the darkness night. So evening came, and morning came, the first day.{s]{v] {para] …{chapter]…{section]…{book] "The Layered Markup and Annotation Language (LMNL)"

This language indicates dominance relationships through layering markers, rather than through a tree structure. Despite this feature, the document object model is considerably less readable than the TEI.

The problem with TEI, and more deeply, with its parent structure, XML, is that dominance structures are totalizing. This becomes apparent in attempts to curtail this dominance, which results in redundancy and convolution. For example, the TEI Guideline’s suggestions for handling dominance appear excessively elaborate by comparison to more traditional TEI markup. Module 16, on "Linking, Segmentation, and Alignment," describes various methods for encoding information that is not hierarchic or linear, including the use of pointers, blocks, segments, anchors, correspondence, alignment, synchronization, aggregation, alternation, sequestration, marginalization, among others. These solutions work by severing elements into components that have their own hierarchy which can be later recombined into the dominant hierarchy. More suggestions appear in Module 20, "Non-hierarchical Structures," which include: "redundant encoding of information in multiple forms," and "the use of empty elements to delimit the boundaries of a non-nesting structure." Here, information takes different formal configurations which dilute hierarchical coherence required by the TEI.

In a data model where all elements must conform to a tree structure, there is no easy solution for managing dominance. At the most recent annual TEI Conference and Members Meeting in 2022, Elisa Beshero-Bondar and her team reflected on their work developing a <gender> element for the TEI guidelines. Their proposal for a new <gender> element, which is careful to weigh the expressive and theoretical potential for representing gender against the possible risks of reifying normative cultural biases, runs up against the issue of hierarchical dominance. As other projects seeking to encode plural or multiple gender ontologies have explained,[[4]](#footnote-4) these ontologies may take manifold forms, some of which can be contained within a capacious enough set of tags and attributes, such as distinct <gender> and <sex> tags and attributes that mark gender changes across time, as proposed by Beshero-Bondar and her team. Other gender ontologies, however, are too fluid to be separated into distinct categories. In the latter case, the problem goes deeper than the tag itself to test the hierarchical structure of the TEI document model. As Beshero-Bondar and her colleagues explain about revising the existing <sex> element,

Unexpectedly, we found ourselves confronting the Guidelines’ prioritization of personhood in discussion of sex, likely stemming from the conflation of sex and gender in the current version of the Guidelines. In revising the technical specifications describing sex, we introduced the term “organism” to broaden the application of sex encoding. We leave it to our community to investigate the fluid concepts of gender and sex in their textual manifestations of personhood and biological life. Beshero-Bondar et al.

While the new proposed element, <gender>, gives the team some capacity to represent gender as distinct from sex, the tagging structure nonetheless perpetuates a rule that "sex" serves some concept of personhood. The proposed solutions to this problem, which include exchanging <person> for the more capacious <organism> and <entity>, as recently proposed in the TEI documentation itself, keeps intact the notion that "sex" is something a person "contains," that is, sex as something belonging, possessed, or expressed by a notion of personhood (martindholmes 2022).

***Queer of Color Critique and the Archive of Slavery***

For working within systems of dominance, one might turn to Queer of Color Critique for inspiration. Roderick A. Ferguson, who coined the field's name, explains that "Queer of Color Critique decodes culture fields not from a position outside those fields, but from within them, as those fields account for the queer of color subject's historicity" (Ferguson 2004, 4). In the wake of increasing mainstream acceptance, when White queer critics begin to grapple with distinguishing queerness from heteronormative and neoliberal politics, Queer of Color Critique proposes a framework that foregrounds the imbrication of sexuality and race. One central text, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity, by José Esteban Muñoz, frames its intersectional approach as a rebuke of Queer Negativity. What Muñoz describes as the "antirelational turn," perhaps exemplified most famously by Lee Edelman's No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, associates queerness with self-desctructiveness, abjection, passivity, negation, etc., with the goal of resisting gay assimilation into a neoliberal mainstream. Muñoz points out that this frame of thinking builds a politics from a willful blindness toward difference, particularly toward racial difference:

[M]ost of the work with which I disagree under the provisional title of "antirelational thesis" moves to imagine an escape of denouncement of relationality as first and foremost a distancing of queernes from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as the singular trope of difference. In other words, antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference. Muñoz 2009, 11

Framed this way, the antirelational thesis effectively negates the critical work of intersectionality and third-wave feminism that brings multiple minority subject positions into relation and toward political solidarity. Drawing racial and gender minority positions into conversation with sexuality, Muñoz argues, enables new forms of politically-potent collectivism.

Studying queerness as a time-bound phenomenon, Muñoz finds the strongest political utility for imagining connections between the past/present and the future, specifically, a future that will never come to be. He asserts that, "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality… We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it in the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (1). Framing "queerness" as utopia that will never come into fruition, Muñoz argues, enables two critical moves. The first is to glimpse queerness as a guiding structure that motivates critical and collective thinking: "Utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward. Utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema" (Muñoz 2009, 97). Second, utopia's unattainability forecloses attempts of incorporation into the mainstream: "holding queerness in a sort of ontologically humble state… staves off the ossifying effects of neoliberal ideology and the degredation of politics brought about by representations of queerness in popular culture" (Muñoz 2019, 22). By virtue of being "not yet here," in other words, queerness can structure modes of being that resist being conscripted into majoritarian systems.

Nearly two decades after its emergence, Queer of Color Critique influences a number of cultural studies methods that foreground race, including Black Feminist Studies. Scholars in this field often work with one of the most precarious datasets in history–that of slavery's archive, which contains "archival violence" not only in the form of records that literally obscure information, but also in the language that cannot approximate experience, and in the discourse that dictates silence (Hartman 2008, 2). In her book, Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World, Johnson takes up a collection of documents written by slave-owning men, traders, and colonial officials to read narratives of resistance in black womens' lives. Her sources consist of official documents, marriage and baptism records from the 17th century, for example, that "often contain incomplete information" which she "bring[s] together in careful and creative ways" (Johnson 2020, 5). Her readings of these documents weave a complicated and nuanced picture of black womens's lives and how they negotiated their own freedom practices within the circumscribed system of white, male, slave-owning dominance in early Atlantic world. Here, Johnson demonstrates two critical methods that resist the rigid constraints that bound her inquiry. The first is a strategy of narration, where Johnson interweaves fragments that, on their own, tell a story of bondage and subjection to power. Rather than reify this dominating narrative, Johnson relates the “ways black women sought out profane, pleasurable, and erotic entanglements as practices of freedom” (Johnson 2020, 12). She frames each chapter with the story of different figure from the archive, constructing for the reader a vivid scene from the woman's life in a way that foregrounds her character and accomplishment. For example, a dinner party by Seignora Catti, "a wealthy merchant in her own right, had leveraged her status as the wife of a European against her commercial savvy and the opportunities and experience of living in the middle ground between the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Wolof sovereigns in the east for her own benefit" (Johnson 16). The notes reveal that the sources for Catti's biography stem from biographical writings featuring Jean Barbot, a commercial agent for a French slaving company based in Senegal. In Johnson's narrative, Barbot functions as a supporting character, a guest at Catti's dinner party who serves to distinguish her graciousness and work as a host. Johnson's method of bringing Catti into the foreground requires more than just assembling fragments from Barbot's biographies; it requires narrating from what Johnson describes at the end of her book as "a deeper well of women, communities, practices, strategies, failures, and terrors that shaped the meaning of freedom and a faith in the possibility of emancipation" (Johnson 2020, 231). These histories, which will never be known, influence stories like the one of Seignora Catti, "the part we are able to witness" (Johnson 2020, 231).

In addition to through and between the fragments in the record, Johnson's critical method invovles re-encoding its silences. Drawing from Hortense Spillers's theorizing on the effects of slavery on gender, Johnson's project works to "rejec[t] discourses of black women as lascivious or wicked, and transmut[e] them into practices of defiance and pleasure for themselves" (Johnson 2020, 10). This work emerges most provocatively in the way that Johnson handles information that is missing from the archive, for example, a census that ignores the presence of black women and girls living in the New Orleans area in the early 18th century. Reading these absences as "null values," rather than absent values or zero values,[[5]](#footnote-5) Johnson reframes the absence of information into resistence, in particular, to "resis[t] equating the missing or inapplicable information with black death" (Johnson 2020, 135). Asserting these null values allows Johnson to index where these women exceed the logics of colonial subjectification:

It is possible to see their absence as evidence of either their perceived nonexistence or lack of importance, or inferior data-collection practices. It is also possible, however, to hear in the register's silence the ecstatic shout of black freedom practices transgressing colonial desires, black people forming maps of kin between towns and countryside, black women loving each other into free states that could not be counted by census officials, much less managed by imperial entities or recorded on manuscript pages. Johnson 2020, 143

Tracing histories of what could have been, but what is not recorded, because it does not fit into dominant systems of quantification, Johnson describes the radical seeking of "joy and pleasure, g[iving] birth, mother[ing] spaces of care and celebration, and cultivat[ing] expressive and embodied aesthetic practices to heal from the everyday toil of their laboring lives" (Johnson 10). By virtue of not being counted, Johnson argues, these women show "where they exceed the bounds of colonial power" that is based on the quantification and commodification of black life. These null values allow Johnson to frame "blackness not as bondage… but as future possibility" (Johnson 2020, 10).

***The Future of Editing***

By way of conclusion, I will highlight two recent TEI projects displaying encoding practices that, like Johnson's work on slavery's archive, resist rigid structures of dominance. For, as Amy Earhart points out, editorial practices are bound by structures deeper than the TEI data format. The obstacles that prevent many text encoding projects from succeeding have to do with the absence of strong institutional support and funding. In what follows, I look at how two projects take what Earhart describes as a "DIY approach" that defies the structural constraints of both the institution and the data format (Earhart 2010, 314).

The first project, the Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection, based at the University of Florida, is an electronic archive of personal correspondence and other documents related to Eartha M.M. White (1876–1974), the founder of the Clara White Mission and a leader of Jacksonville, Florida's African American community. Beginning in a classroom in 2016, this project continues to grow through the collaborative effort of students, faculty, staff at UNF, with recent efforts being made to expand into the Jacksonville community more broadly. To facilitate collaboration on the project, they share their TEI documents on GitHub, an online space for publishing digital work (used primarily for collaborating on open software), and offer detailed, step-by-step intructions for new editors to get started with text encoding. The introductory guide to the archive, which is written for all levels of experience, indicates that this project draws significantly from a non-specialist and community knowledge.

The second project, The Peter Still Papers, based at Rutgers University, collects and publishes correspondence (1850-1875) relating to Peter Still's attempts to purchase freedom for his wife and children in Alabama, and includes letters by William Lloyd Garrison, Horace Greeley, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. This "Documentary Edition" makes selective use of tags based on the TEI-Lite model, with the goal of bringing out a particular narrative among the papers:

Our intention with the markup has been to produce a rough idea of the aboutness of each letter, and not to count every reference to a person or a place. Consequently, the persName and placeName tags have been used selectively…. in the personography file, we have made an attempt to include only those people who were significant in Peter Still’s world, namely family, friends, and people who helped or hindered him in his mission. The Peter Still Papers 2015-2022, "About"

Their minimalist tagging scheme reflects an inventive approach toward the structural limitations surrounding the creation of the archive: first, the scope of the documents themselves, none of which are written in Still's hand reflect what editors describe as "only one side of a conversation, punctuated by many gaps and omissions" (The Peter Still Papers 2015-2022, "About). Additionally, like the Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection, this project draws from a range of skillsets, specifically from non-specialists in American history, as "no member of the project team is a historian by training, nor expert in the period in question" (The Peter Still Papers 2015-2022, "About).

Both archives work within limited structures–both institutional and informational–toward collaborative and community-oriented encoding approaches. Though they do not directly deal with queer subjects, they demonstrate that resistance is not just another formal experiment, where non-normative bodies challenge subscription into a oppressive mainstream. It is a political project that foregrounds that which cannot be incorporated into a mainstream identity.

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1. See Wilde and Frankel, pp. 40–54, for a more complete accounting of the preparation of the typescript for publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. McKerrow's position was subsequently developed through the work of Walter W. Greg, who expanded the critic's purview beyond the single copy-text, and then to Fredson Bowers and Thomas Tanselle who proposed an eclectic editing practice that could distill authorial intention from multiple sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For instance, Valerie Traub's argument that the term "queer" loses its descriptive value if applied ahistorically: "Queer's free-floating, endlessly mobile, and infinitely subversive capacities may be strengths–allowing queer to accomplish strategic maneuvers that no other concept does–but its principled imprecision implies analytic limitations" (Traub, 2013: 33) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Thain, "Perspective: Digitizing the Diary–Experiments in Queer Encoding" and Caughie et al, "Storm Clouds on the Horizon: Feminist Ontologies and the Problem of Gender". [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Johnson here draws from Jacob Gaboury's work on resisting compulsory identification in social media. See Gaboury, Jacob. "Becoming NULL: Queer Relations in the Excluded Middle." Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory. 28:2, 2018. pp. 143-158. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)