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Experimental Inhabitations

As the practice of knowledge production is increasingly organized through algorithms, digital humanities practitioners Matthew Gold and Lauren Klein (2019) ask the pressing question: “What is the role of the digital humanities in the charged environment of 2019, and how can digital humanists ally themselves with the activists, organizers, and others who are working to empower those most threatened by it?” Implicated in this question is a worry over technological infrastructures, which predict and sometimes also produce the future through datasets from the past, perpetuating invisibilized biases within automatized knowledge systems, while at the same time framing the future they produce as new, different, better (Chun 2016; Haraway 2016; McPherson 2012, Pfotenhauer and Jasanoff 2017). With predictive media sets structuring areas of the social (such as job applications, housing, or policing), the worry is that automatization has ended any possibility of intervention in the form of critique. My contribution picks up on Gold and Klein’s intervention and discusses the supposed novelty of algorithmically produced information alongside the current reconfiguration of critique towards the “affirmative”, read as creative, experimental, positivistic, new. It is the historicity that both of these developments share that gives me pause: Not only is, as Wendy Chun (2008) has argued, any claim to “newness” already an acknowledgement that the object will one day be old. Just like the claims to algorithms’ technological newness, the suggested promises of creativity and experimentation that characterize the field of digital humanities run the danger of negating the ideologies and histories of differentiations that have made possible their emergence – to say something is new is to wilfully forget how it builds upon the old, drawing a boundary and performatively relegating the existing to the past.

The term “digital” has come to replace many a notion of innovation, but it has come to be understood predominantly as a form of disembodied, automatized and thus immaterial infrastructure and information. At least since the domestication of the internet in the 1990s, this includes the utopian promise of globalized access to universally applicable forms of knowledge. This hinges predominantly on the function of “digitization” – of making things “virtual”, and in this way appear immaterial. Katrin Passig and Alex Scholz (2015) argue that the digital is not a new phenomenon, but is instead a way to contrast the analogue, understood as fuzzy, flowy continuities. Indeed, looking at the digital etymologically, digitization needs to be understood first as a process of enumeration and, as Manuel de Landa (1997) has argued, “standardization” –
based on a reduction of complexity and the minimizing of variation. A digital value, in this understanding, is unique and contained – there is no fuzzy overlap between two “digits”. Digits are discrete, like the “digits” I can identify metaphorically through the individual fingers on my hand, from where the word etymologically departs. Where there is a finger, there is a digit, a digital value, ranging, on any distinct hand, from one (or even zero, but what makes a hand a hand?) to (maximum) five. In between each finger, there is nothing. A digital signal, too, is made up of a series of digital values: it basically consists of zeroes and ones, or variations of the same. The values themselves are thus approximations, they are variations of a unitary figure, of the number 1. Similarly, binary code puts itself in opposition to analogue flows, it cuts continuities and sorts them into an oppositional relationship between zeroes and ones. In a world where everything is categorized, fuzzy concepts are contained within the digital as either the one or the other – as binary, discrete data. This process is not only central to the present ever since the 1990s but must be seen as part and parcel of Western modernity since its initial encyclopaedic fetish of knowledge production without ambivalence. It is precisely this documentation and standardization, so central to the democratizing thrust of the *Enlightenment* (cf. Weibel 2005), which in its representation tends to gloss over the “fuzziness” that marks lived reality. In a logic that sees only sharp edges, digitization and effectively the digital creation of information degenerates to a “solutionist” proposition that no longer focuses on complexities of a problem, but proposes categorization and counting as unbiased, objective creation of fact. That these practices of differentiation are in no way new or apolitical but rely on a history of subjugation, violence, and colonial control, is invisibilized within automatized query responses such as search results, social profiling, and algorithmic recommendation systems (cf. Noble 2018), while being presented as universal, objective, more rational than its human users.

One example that reveals the underlying specificity of the universal and objective – what Simone Browne calls “prototypical whiteness” (2010) – is the automatized flagging of vernacular language associated with black and brown folks more readily as hate speech, especially when pointing out the specificity of whiteness. The demarcation of difference draws a political line, as it differentiates (e.g. Blackness) from a normative ideal – a quite specific overrepresentation of the supposedly universal – whiteness as the prototype. At the same time, algorithms functioning in this prototypical mode assign categories of race, gender, and class to quotidian practices that deviate from normative whiteness, thereby enabling an increasingly larger disavowal of bodies that are categorized as other (Nakamura 2015). This has deep-set effects on the framing of certain bodies as safe, as belonging, while others are marked as a danger or threat as they indulge in practices associated with Blackness. In this way, any form of sociality is pre-empted according to
pre-existing biases and the outcome of datafied knowledge becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. While the profiling algorithms “see” difference, they accept them as given and assume from the beginning already differentiated bodies, not as historically shaped inequalities. This may seem like a stark contrast to 1990s cyberlibertarianism, which believed that the internet would create a space freed of discrimination. But what this logic eradicates is merely the specificity of who has bodies, as cyberlibertarianism projects the internet as the space of the mind in a modernist binary of (white male) mind and (othered) body (cf. Morais dos Santos Bruss 2021). But while these practices shape power relations with very real consequences, they also point towards the slippages that algorithms cannot compute. As scholars such as Haraway, Hayles and others have shown, computing is intricately connected to world making, for better or for worse.

What then of knowledge production, when algorithms are employed to replace the author figure, what of situating knowledge within non-human systems? In The History of Science and the Practices of Experiment, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger suggests that laboratories as spaces of social experiments are both “the signpost of modern science” and “not lieux-publics” (2001: 51). Thinking together the histories of technology as applied science and its entanglements with power politicizes this latter distinction of artificial, private space, from supposedly natural “public” space. In fact, Rheinberger accentuates that the space of the laboratory is itself the result of the creation of expertise and an institutionalization of exclusionary methodologies. Against the colonial backdrop of experimental practices such as craniometry, eugenics, and the colonial census, as racialized drives of the differentiation between private and public itself (cf. Osucha 2009), the notion of the laboratory space becomes constructed as one that the othered body does not have access to or control over. The “privacy” of the laboratory, expanded to the social, needs to be understood as constructed by power hegemonies rather than actual spatial segregation from the “lieux-publics”. If indeed experiments have always taken place in public, albeit a public that made decision-making exclusive to certain (racial, material) formations of the human, then the networked condition only expands this social laboratory to more humans and non-humans (lest we forget that the internet, too, is not a public space). The emancipatory potential of Rheinberger’s concept of the experiment then lies in a critical adaptation of his commitment to coincidence in his insistence on reassembling the old, the embodied, in the hopes of finding, or rather, rearticulating, the “new”.

In a world driven by computation all coincidences would seem meticulously calculated, for algorithms cannot, factually, produce randomness. And yet, incidents such as #metoo have shaken gendered relations on a planetary scale, opening up the discourses on structural gendered inequalities and human behaviour in a way that quota and policies never could – possibly, by
accident. Such slippages are not new in articulation or form, nonetheless, they seem to produce a new sense of urgency that can be made productive politically. I want to suggest that this happens through ‘accidental’ networks, which expand the spaces of knowledge (production) beyond the colonial project of differentiation (or, by all means, digitization, in its earlier sense) that is inherent to common computational infrastructures, to address yet again the shared precariousness that defines most lives on earth.

The question of the experiment (as the basis for knowledge production) is thus implicated in the question of who and what is recognized as a viable participant in the production of knowledge, in the boundaries of what is understood as “public space” and the politicized distinction of knowledge producers and subjects of the experiment. An emancipatory notion of the experiment that would contribute to the cause of digital humanities practitioners mentioned initially, I argue, lies in an experimental practice that affirms embodied genealogies within the digital and plays with the multiplicities these necessitate, resulting – possibly – in a democratization of the “private” space of digital infrastructures. Feminist media practitioners are experimenting with such modalities of inhabiting the digital in what Wendy Chun has called a “shadowy presence” (2016) in the most quotidian ways. These “experiments” do not follow traditional experimental parameters of positivistic knowledge production but instead engage with the everyday, the quotidian, the non-teleological, the multiple, and it seems that it is here, that scientists are surprised.

The Afrofuturist collective *Hyphen Labs*, for example, is attempting to recalibrate experiments in a way that cares for the subject, instead of merely understanding it as something from which to extract “found facts”. One of *Hyphen Lab*’s projects was to create a virtual reality scenario entitled “Neurospeculative Afrofeminism”. A number of technological gadgets accompany this experiment. Putting on VR-glasses, the user finds themselves in a hair salon, embedded in an environment commonly connoted with Black female solidarity, philosophy, and politics. According to the collective, this setting represents a “[n]eurocosmetology lab where black women are pioneering techniques of brain optimization and cognitive enhancement”. Engaging with the VR experience the user inhabits the body of a young Black woman who can go on to explore the speculative future of “[B]lack women pioneering brain research [...] through the culturally specific ritual of haircare.” After receiving *Octavia Electrodes* as hair extensions, the user is taken on a journey through the virtual multiverse, passing embodied, aesthetic and symbolic references to Afrofuturists such as Octavia Butler (of course, the namesake for the electrodes/hair extensions), but also materials that reference the lived realities of systemic violence of Black and People of Color, such as the *Ruby Cam* earrings, which include tiny cameras that scan and record...
the user’s surroundings in a practice now commonly referred to as sous-veillance. Another object called Hyper Face functions in the way of anti-surveillance clothing, as the scarf increases the number of potential faces to be detected by biometric recognition software through a confusing pattern of face-like objects – an urgent reference to BlackLivesMatter and their critique of police surveillance. Hyphen Labs’ strategy is one of ongoing research, of mindfulness, in the hopes of reclaiming futurity:

Everywhere that we show NeuroSpeculative AfroFeminism, we also do research. So we’re doing cognitive impact testing to see whether or not virtual reality can be a tool for decreasing prejudice and bias. It’s been shown by a number of different neuroscience labs that if you put someone who is not, let’s use a black woman for example, in the body of a black woman, and give them control or agency over that avatar, it’s been shown to decrease a prejudice or bias toward someone of that color or that nationality. (Mercer and Baccus-Clark 2018)

The hope of the HyphenLab experiment, it seems, is one of constructing new relational ties between individuals through embodied technologies rather than representations. Explicitly, they hope to mobilize more people to care about anti-Black violence, even if they are not themselves Black. But the invitation to “inhabit” the black avatar also shows awareness of the difficulties of navigating the sense of ownership over embodiment. Instead of giving the user complete control over the Black female body, Neurospeculative Afrofeminism invites users into a world shaped by Black scientists, as well as anti-Blackness. The user can identify with the Black female avatar, can move her head and reach towards objects. But the narrative of the VR experience follows a predefined script, which minimizes the potential for appropriation and violent or intrusive treatment of the avatar-body and its/her representational Blackness. The user “must” put on the Octavia Electrodes, she “must” pass the Afrofeminist researchers as they go about their work. The VR experience creates a controlled-yet-experimental environment, in which the user’s experience is co-produced through the body she momentarily inhabits. The question then is not whether the experiment allows for new knowledge, but how being in the world within a body shapes the way we come to know it.

Lisa Nakamura has pointed out the difficulties of seeing virtual reality, or technologies in general as what she calls “empathy machines” (2018), as that which will enable the (white) public to engage with those at the periphery of humanness, making those bodies, to some extent, consumable. While this may increase the intelligibility of Black existence within experimental

environments, such a practice does not displace the notion of categorization – this option is a wayward one, “a queer resource of black survival, [...] a beautiful experiment on how to live” (Hartman 2019: 314). In this reading, Hyphen Lab’s project can be understood as asking questions about the reconciliation of design (as experimental, affirmative practice) with critique, as the project reveals the embodied and situated conditions of what counts as knowledge, as experiment, as experience. While these inhabitations run the risk of appropriation and the “pornotropic” (Spillers 1987) exploitation of Blackness, this argument is complicated in the face of its alternative: the exiting of quotidian, common, or “innovative” digital infrastructures. As Sarah Sharma has argued, the limited conditions of being are part and parcel of existence for the majority of humans on earth, and exiting necessarily means leaving (raced, gendered, situated, embodied) others behind. The imagination of exiting problematic infrastructures can only be “an exercise of patriarchal power, a privilege that occurs at the expense of cultivating and sustaining conditions of collective autonomy” (Sharma 2016). Sharma proposes that care, relationality, and solidarity are the exact opposites to exiting the embodied condition of knowledge production. In this sense, experimental inhabitations may be the only way to responsibly navigate the precariousness of the human condition, which disproportionally befalls raced and gendered bodies. As Sharma reminds her audience, “women’s [and in this scenario especially Black women’s] exit is hardly even on the table, given that women have historically been unable to choose when to leave or enter inequitable power relations, let alone enter and exit in a carefree manner” (Sharma 2016). Despite the possibility of violence, then, I read these experimental inhabitations as producing a cultural narrative that proposes a multiplicity of time, space, and histories that go beyond prototypical whiteness and insist on situatedness of knowledge production in technologically co-produced environments.

Experimental inhabitations, as I read feminist digital projects such as Hyphen Labs, thus necessarily include both revealing and obscuring. As Caroline Sinders argues, they allow those already drawn in by data to be “transparently opaque” (2019), to be present, but not fully exposed. These inhabitations are experimental, precisely because they do not have explicitly formulated political outcomes but carry the hope to re-open the futures that predictive media is habitually foreclosing. In doing so, they counter the modern (positivistic) experimental practice of standardizing bodies through data, by revealing the embodiments within data instead. To date, digital feminism has predominantly been discussed in relation to social media activities and hashtags. And it is vital that these conversations continue, as these are the spaces where there is little attention to the quotidian violence of prototypical whiteness (and maleness), precisely because they are so unremarkable. But projects such as Hyphen Labs show that incorporating
other architectures beyond social networking sites can represent, create, and alter existing narratives of embodiment and collectivity before these architectures become domesticated and invisible as common sense. These projects are defined by their openness, their processual nature, and a non-teleological practice that does not predetermine outcomes but welcomes coincidences. Of course, the most exciting experiments continue to require the framing of art or the (monetary) backing of research institutions. But these instances show that it matters who is envisioned as a knowledge producer, who gets to define the boundaries of the experiment. Embodied VR performances such as “Neurospeculative Afrofeminism” do not omit but accentuate the historical lineages of oppression and violence that continue to relegate their performances to the margins. In this way, these practices express the hopes of reclaiming futurity from pre-emptive and automated knowledge production by suggesting a feminist intersectional interrogation of the digital that inscribes the body and practices of care into the invisible layers and forgotten histories of computational culture.

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Works Cited


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