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Other Codes / C id Eile: Re-thinking Context in Digital Literature

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Abstract: Introduction to Hyperrhiz 20 special issue: Other Codes / C id Eile, edited by Anne Karhio and  lvvaro Sei a

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The contributions to this *Hyperrhiz* special issue emerged from papers delivered at the first Galway Digital Cultures Initiative conference titled "Other Codes / C id Eile: Digital Literatures in Context" in May 2017. The two languages in the title, Irish as well as English, were not included simply for the purpose of local flavor, but were meant to alert prospective speakers and the audience to consider "context" from the first encounter with the title's own medium, that of literary scholarship itself. The hegemony of English as global academic *lingua franca* continues to coexist, particularly in the growing field of digital humanities, with the dream of universal language, reflected in our approach to the code of programming languages. It builds on the fantasy that the lack of ambiguity and the algorithmic accuracy of code could translate into better and faster reading and interpretation methods, untainted by human biases and limitations. This issue has been tackled by many, including Jessica Pressman in *Digital Modernism*. Her opening keynote at the conference was the basis for the first essay in this special issue, and Pressman stresses that her research perspective has profoundly changed since the publication of the much-quoted study, which was a balancing act between traditional literary scholarship in English departments and emerging poetics in the digital domain. Pressman's take on the history of feminist electronic literature is a radical departure from the approach adopted in her first book. Yet her previous work has continuing relevance in the context of Galway, a gateway to the Irish-speaking Connemara Gaeltacht which is under increasing pressure from the nation's majority language. The city is thus an appropriate reminder for scholars of digital literature on how their field rests on a still often unacknowledged illusion of finding a position free from the complex realities of literal and figurative losses in translation.

The variety of ways in which the contributions to this volume have approached the idea of "context" appropriately reflects the ethos that informed the initial call for contributions to the conference. The call emphasized a number of questions relating to cultural, but also institutional, historical, and aesthetic frameworks of digital literary production: How do the transnational, technological and aesthetic aspects of digital literature manifest themselves in specific works, at particular historical moments? How do global networks adapt to local circumstances? How do new and experimental forms of literary and artistic expression challenge or accommodate national traditions and canons? What is the relationship between individual talents, literary communities, and institutional frameworks in the new media environments of the twenty-first century? While many interpreted "context" in the perhaps most established sense within literary studies, as cultural, social, ethnic, racial, gender, geographical, or historical contexts, a not insignificant number of contributors also addressed questions of context as the formation of related formal and aesthetic approaches, as the emergence of creative communities across geographical or cultural borders, as networked

practices in the transnational digital media environment, or in terms of literary margins and forms of resistance in the peripheries of established forms of cultural production. This special issue is thus a demonstration of how the continuing relevance of alternative sociocultural viewpoints is inseparably entangled with issues of aesthetic ambition and experimentation, and the different forms of literary production that various technological platforms remediate, generate, and question.

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The selection of papers from the “Other Codes / Cóid Eile” conference gathered in this issue of *Hyperrhiz* blends three forms of essay writing: short and long theoretical essays, and artists’ statements on their creative practice. The issue is structured as four thematic threads: “Expanding Criticism,” “Moving Texts,” “Networked Communities” and “Interfaces.”

The first thread, “Expanding Criticism: Locating Other Contexts for Digital Literature” presents ways for expanding the critical frameworks operating in the discourse of digital literature with essays by Jessica Pressman, Julian Hanna, and Sam Cutting. This section therefore fittingly opens with Pressman’s reassessment of the history of digital literature criticism by focusing on feminist and queer theory in “Contexts of Digital Literature Criticism: Feminist, Queer, Materialist.” Pressman departs from Rita Felski’s critique of the notion of “context” as a box container in order to let gender and materialist theories permeate and resituate our assumptions. Pressman problematizes the way we tell the story of the field we participate in, to others but also to ourselves, by drawing attention to the pivotal role women always have had in the creative practices and theoretical approaches to digital literary arts in the United States—from the formation of a field to its institutionalization. For most of us, Pressman’s argument will not be Sara Ahmed’s “feminist killjoy,” but it will surely unsettle some. This is why Pressman’s essay couldn’t be timelier. Digital literature needs more diversity and representation—more women, more ethnic diversity, more queer approaches, but also more sociopolitical and class diversity. Are discussions around digital literature and scholarship to remain dominated by white, Western academics? The institutional and cultural background of contributors to this special issue does not break free from such limitations, however the aim is to draw attention to how the contexts and narratives informing them can be made visible—and that to recognize the narratives and positions of others, we need to become aware of our own. Furthermore, independent artists and theorists, those working outside the “ivory tower” of academia, need to be called upon. They must be invited to join forces with an ever-growing community that gravitates around conferences and festivals promoted inside academia, but which the academia can also help by recognizing their position in professional circles that do not hold to the same rights and duties, costs and salaries. Both these communities can broaden their own views to other contexts if they communicate mutually and generatively.

By revisiting the feminist history of digital literature and opening up the space for discussion on the under-representation of women in the field, Pressman’s essay can clear a path for further spaces for discussing under-representation. This can also help direct attention to hitherto neglected genres, such as the manifesto. In “Future Shock’: Manifestos in the Digital Age,” Julian Hanna takes a deep dive into the prolific and fragmented history of the manifesto as a cultural and political form. Hanna reflects on the reemergence of the form in the contemporary media landscape by looking at digital manifestos as proponents for revolutionary change. This “return of the manifesto” in digital culture is further explored in a project titled “Words in Freedom” by Hanna, Simone Ashby and Sónia Matos, a generative database “manifesto machine” that aims at creating “tools of change.” A manifesto also prompts the closing essay in this section by Sam Cutting. In “Reading with/through Donna Haraway: Towards a Cyborg Ethics of Reading the Contemporary (Digital) Literary Text,” Cutting reevaluates Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” to approach the feminist and ethical dimensions of cybernetic organisms applied to reading practices of literary texts. This “cyborg ethics of reading,” Cutting argues, allows for a relocation of literary criticism from a political and ethical viewpoint that encompasses print and digital media. Thus, Cutting offers another way to consider context or “situatedness” by examining the “networks of association and affinity” within which literary texts emerge and circulate.

The second thread, “Moving Texts: Migration and Translation,” assembles a critical essay by Anna Nacher and

two artists' reflections by María Mencía and Judy Malloy. This section addresses how the phenomena of migration and translation as moving texts are situated in and entangled with various literary, socio-political, and technological systems, and how forms of digital storytelling and poetics expand, diminish, or complicate the resonance of human experience. The contributions adopt three different angles as they examine how past and current regimes of oppression force human beings to move in space, and how literature and technology can go beyond testimony in order to reimagine, resituate and rescue narratives, memory, loss, and the experience of exile. In "Migrating Stories: Moving across the Code/Spaces of our Time," Anna Nacher elaborates on poetic transmedia storytelling at the intersection of fiction and reality. Nacher analyzes creative works that reimagine the documentary form by weaving narrative and poetics with data harvesting mechanisms and visualization. These works reflect on the theme of "migration and movement across borders" and are shaped by various media, data inputs and outputs, which, Nacher argues, "carry narrative potential" based on dynamic fluxes that bring a new life to documentary art as cultural form and practice. Poetic narrative and documentary form are also at the heart of María Mencía's creative work. In "The Winnipeg: The Poem that Crossed the Atlantic," Mencía reflects upon the creative process behind the making of her digital artwork. This online, interactive, transatlantic, and multilingual artwork touches upon all the topics of this thread: it is formed by documentary moving texts about refugees fleeing the Spanish Civil War to Chile, including the author's grandfather, who were forced to migrate and to translate their new lives in space, time, and language. As a polyphonic piece that addresses the translation of codes and textual forms between different platforms, historical moments, and forms of expression, it connects with Judy Malloy's reflection in her *As if the Memory Was a Song: From Ireland with Letters*. In "Conveying Diaspora in a Polyphonic Electronic Manuscript," Malloy guides us through a series of online notebook entries to recreate untold Irish-American histories, including her own family history, with poetry and music. Malloy uses a variety of artistic forms, platforms, and sources to consider how fragments of personal and cultural memory shift, travel, and re-emerge within a digitally mediated literary work that draws on obfuscated stories.

The contributions to the section "Networked Communities: Designing Resistance" adopt yet another viewpoint to the notion of other codes and contexts, and consider how digital literature can not only thematize but also tactically resist and critique frameworks informed by proprietary and corporate technology. In "Literary Forkbombs: Interventionist Conceptual Writing in the Age of Amazon," Karl Flender provides an in-depth reading of Traumawien's *Ghost Writers* project. By exposing the inner workings and purposes of Traumawien's tactical and creative appropriation of Amazon's selling platform, Flender muses on intervention, protest, and art as "interface-specific literature" that renders visible the infrastructures of free labor that big tech conglomerates commodify and capitalize on. Jeneen Naji, in "The Art of Machine Use Subversion in Digital Poetry," focuses on digital poetry as its own "art world." As a networked and collaborative community, digital poetry's artistic practice, Naji argues, subverts the common usage and functions of digital platforms and their technological affordances on the Internet. Resistance is addressed through the notions of "machine use subversion" and the repurposing of technology for poetic uses, considered against the backdrop of experimental poetry and interventions with technology as resisting the established frameworks of traditional forms and practices. Designing resistance through manipulations of code and software is also at stake in Odile Farge's essay "In the Beginning was the Software Tool..." Grounding her arguments in a series of interviews with writers and programmers, Farge explores the importance of not just relying on software as an opaque tool, but more importantly coding as a means for developing expressive digital literary works and expanding the practitioners' imaginary. For, as Farge points out, reflecting and acting upon the importance of coding as "an act of resistance" can bring humans together, develop communities that are critical of our entanglement with pre-given technologies, and foster an understanding of cultural diversity through the sphere of "digital humanism."

The fourth and last thread, "Interfaces: Embodiment and Authorship," looks into other codes in embodied interfaces, language, and the digital domain through three different perspectives. In "Contextualising 'his voice': Disrupted Utterance in a Digital Material Interface," Mark Leahy locates his own sound performance work in the context of embodied notions of utterance through machinic processes and "found material" in

social network sites. Leahy does so by contrasting theories in linguistics, music, and technology, while at the same time questioning issues of authorship, identity, body, and voice as they are split and reassembled by machines in the presence of the audience. From another point of view, Caleb Milligan's "Locked in Translation: 'Digital' Literature and the Embodied Frameworks of Language" revisits the polysemic nature of the term "digital" through the lenses of queer and materialist theory. In doing so, Milligan develops a critical framework of the 'digital' as an always-embodied and haptic encounter with literary works as he considers interfaces as points of contact and exchange. This angle allows Milligan to navigate and analyze print, film, and computational works by Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Dziga Vertov, Luis Buñuel, Annie Abrahams, and John Cayley. Finally, Siobhan O'Flynn's "Media Fluid and Media Fluent, E-Literature in the Era of Experience Design" considers the future of digital literature in the context of experience design. O'Flynn problematizes the notion of "text" to show that transmedia works encompass a level of fluidity that is dependent on design, the effect on, and the affect of users. In this realm, disciplinary boundaries do not really reflect the expanded notion of how narrative evolves in works developed with Twine, virtual reality, or 360° video. Therefore, by addressing digital literary studies' "challenge [in terms of] discipline specific hermeneutics," O'Flynn offers a concurrent analysis on how embodied interfaces frame digital artworks through the prism of design and mediated storytelling.

We hope that these essays will generate debate, ripostes, and further criticism in the rapidly growing field of digital literary studies and born-digital creative practice.

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