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# Becoming Digital, Becoming Queer

*H. N. Lukes and David J. Kim*

## The Grit and Glamour of Queer LA Subculture gritandglamourla.com

One of the recent developments from the open-ended call for a “critical turn” in the digital humanities has been the noticeable decline of both utopic and dystopic predictions about the “future of the book,” or the “future of the humanities” writ large. In place of those prognostications, state-of-the-field discussions have attended to alternate genealogies and origins of computational and/or digitally mediated forms of scholarship. The preponderance of essays from scholars in black studies as well as feminist and queer theory in the “Histories and the Futures of DH” section of the latest edition of *Debates in the Digital Humanities* reveals more than mere growing diversity of DH scholars and projects.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, it perhaps signals the shared investment by DH and minoritarian modes critique in imagining alternative critical genealogies and speculative futures. Specifically, the striking decline of the 1990s term *cyberqueer* suggests that it may be time to reconsider how the “digital” and the “queer” have always shared both a mutual critique of traditional research methodology and brick-and-mortar containments of culture and history *and* a necessary investment in utopian modalities of “becoming.”<sup>2</sup>

Informed by these various invocations of “becoming” in the DH and queer theory, David J. Kim and H. N. Lukes started as co-instructors of an undergraduate course on queer LA offered in the Critical Theory and Social Justice Department at Occidental College in Spring Semester 2016.<sup>3</sup> Lasting a semester, this queer digital humanities and community-based learning course resulted in the beginnings of a continuing Scalar book/archive/exhibit called *The Grit and Glamour of Queer LA Subculture*.<sup>4</sup> The project explores the possibilities of DH’s practice and ethos of “modeling” and “making” for pedagogically actualizing a certain intimacy with the concept of “world-making” central to José Esteban Muñoz’s notions of “ephemera as evidence” and “utopia” that have been foundational in queer archival discourse and method.<sup>5</sup>

We decided to document queer LA less in terms of identity than through Dick Hebdige's idea of subculture as a function of "style."<sup>6</sup> We attempted to construct chapters that reflect the overlapping communities, identities, and media of each subcultural style that our course homed in on with our local interlocutors. Scalar afforded us the opportunity to embed mapping, scanned ephemera, original photography, audio from oral histories, and original as well as archival video alongside descriptive and analytic writing collaboratively produced by the instructors and students.

While this course started research in established institutions like the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archive, we reoriented our project midstream around smaller, "unprocessed" collections, as students were afforded the rare opportunity to interact with our community partners and take in firsthand their relationship to queer archives and subcultures in LA. We found a vast, raw collection at REACH LA, an HIV/AIDS prevention nonprofit that has been active in South LA for nearly three decades, and whose work includes organizing various "ball" events that have been a mainstay in LA's "house" and drag scene. From collecting oral histories with our collaborators in Silver Lake, we received anecdotal accounts of HIV/AIDS and gentrification, as well as a cache of physical ephemera from an underground lesbian/trans/gender-queer club. These collections are featured in our most complete chapters, "#Ovahness" and "The Swish Alps."

A less complete chapter on gay motorcycle clubs (MCs) features photographs from the Satyrs Motorcycle Club of Los Angeles, which we found in transit from local LA collectors to the ONE Archive. The beginnings of a queer LA punk chapter took up the technologies of fan culture by blending the practices of bedroom wall postering, 1990s "zining," and internet searches of favorite bands to make a gallery, whose objects speak to and for the sullen teenager's alternative forms of social communication. Our plan is to fully develop those chapters and include new chapters on other queer LA subcultures through future iterations of the course at Occidental and with faculty partners at other universities.

As more fully discussed in our introductory essay embedded in the project site, we are still evaluating the process and the details of logistics and execution. In many ways, our course fell into the pitfalls that Ryan Cordell warns about in his essay "How Not to Teach the Digital Humanities."<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, we assigned too much. No one student took up the multitasking that our combination of DH, traditional archival research, and critical theory demanded, even as each contributed and excelled in some areas. We presumed that our

“digital native” students would care about the *form* of DH, when in fact they became intoxicated with the *content*, as well as analog archives and archival practices, some bringing us “living archives,” including a walking tour with the renowned queer LA historian Stuart Timmons, who died shortly after and to whom our project is dedicated.<sup>8</sup>

It is also precisely this level of intimacy with the likes of Timmons and the access to the sites of subcultural queer formations that fueled our experimentation beyond the bounds of certain “best practices” in digital pedagogy. In miscalculating the scale of what can be achieved in a semester, our stubborn (and perhaps utopian) overcommitment to student-faculty-community collaboration is reflective of the “sympathetic research imagination” described by Rachel Buurma and Anna Levine in their account of their DH course and collaboration, *Black Liberation 1969*.<sup>9</sup> To compensate for its “generalist” framework, they argue, liberal arts education emphasizes the process rather than the product of undergraduate research, wherein students are asked to “think like” research university specialists in their fields of study, such as anthropologists and literary critics.

We, too, asked students to “think like” academic queer theorists through our assigned texts. But we also asked them to think *like* and *with* the community archivists we have come across through various materials, sites, readings, and meetings. In this process, the Scalar platform functioned as its developers have intended by facilitating not only the aggregation of web-based content and its subsequent display/sharing but also, crucially, how the students creatively approached and shaped the archive. As is evident both emotively and scholastically in the reflective essays by two students, Adrienne Adams and Daniel Calzadillas-Rodriguez, whose labor for *Grit and Glamour* continues, this process of archival-making/world-making attends not only to the value of documenting and preserving ephemera but also, perhaps more importantly, to the development of a “writerly relationship to ephemera.”<sup>10</sup>

The importance of creatively documenting queer Los Angeles through its subcultures with the archival and storytelling capacities of DH convinced professors, students, and our community partners alike that *The Grit and Glamour of Queer LA Subculture* should eventually reach the largest possible audience. We include notes on our own DH pedagogical process in the introductions to the Scalar text, with the understanding that others at different colleges and universities may do the same in the future. As *Grit and Glamour* develops from a multicampus pedagogical exercise into a living public archive, we hope that these “process” documents may peel off from the digital public humanities project and yield an important pedagogical dossier on its own.

## Notes

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1. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, eds., *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
2. See Sue-Ellen Case, *The Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1997); Donald Morton, “Birth of Cyberqueer,” *PMLA* 10.3 (1995): 369–81; Nina Wakeford, “New Technologies and ‘Cyber-queer’ Research,” in *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, ed. Diane Richardson and Steven Seidman (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 115–44.
3. We thank the Center for Digital Liberal Arts at Occidental College for funding this course through the grant it received from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.
4. H. N. Lukes and David J. Kim, *The Grit and Glamour of Queer LA Subculture*, accessed February 1, 2018, [gritandglamourla.com](http://gritandglamourla.com).
5. José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8.2 (1996): 5–16; and Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
6. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen, 1979).
7. Ryan Cordell, “How Not to Teach the Digital Humanities,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 459–74.
8. See Stuart Timmons, *The Trouble with Harry Hay* (White Crane Books, 2012); and Timmons, *Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
9. Rachel Sagner Buurma and Anna Tione Levine, “The Sympathetic Research Imagination: Digital Humanities and the Liberal Arts,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 274–80.
10. Muñoz, “Ephemera,” 11; Adrienne Adams, “A Reflection on Reach LA,” in *The Grit and Glamour of Queer LA Subculture*, accessed February 1, 2018, [gritandglamourla.com](http://gritandglamourla.com); and Daniel Calzadillas-Rodriguez, “On Melancholia and Nostalgia,” in *The Grit and Glamour of Queer LA Subculture*, accessed February 1, 2018, [gritandglamourla.com](http://gritandglamourla.com).