



Queer Reading, Writing and
Performing Text with the Young
Girl Reading Group

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Looking at an artistic workshop by the Young Girl Reading Group (YGRG), this text conceptualizes collective practices of reading, writing and performing .txt (text) with smartphones as queering practices and as doing .txt. Focusing on the entanglements between media, technology, non/human actors and queer/feminist practices, situates .txt as media format, artistic material and practice, form and method, as standardizing and ordering but also potentially disordering and transforming.

“We read together pronouncing the words out loud, emphasizing the relationship of the body of text and the collective body. [...] [W]e are trying to depict a situation where the text can be experienced through a reading that is a shared experience.” (Serkova/Bezpalov 2021)

With these words, the artist duo Dorota Gawęda and Eglè Kulbokaitė, founders of the YGRG, describe their artistic practice, which “started from a collective reading of texts which explore broadly the intersections between gender and technology” (YGRG Archiv n.d.). Organizing close to 170 reading groups and performances, collectively reading, writing and performing digitally mediated text in various contexts and media formats is defined by the artists as a “queer reading experience” (ibid.) and as “a way to approach reading from a non-academic, non-hierarchical, horizontal point of view” (Heublein 2019). Thus, the texts from queer/feminist theory and speculative fiction selected by the artists for the YGRG’s *queer readings* can be conceptualized with Sara Ahmed (2017: 16) as “companion texts” and “feminist materials”, following Donna Haraway’s concept of “companion species” (Haraway 2008), acting as companions to feminists. In what follows, I am describing a workshop by the YGRG in which I participated by reading, writing and performing text together with other feminist companions.

Becoming With Text

Weird Read Intensive is the title of a reading, writing and performance workshop¹ led by Gawęda and Kulbokaitė. It focuses on experiencing reading and writing *otherwise*: collectively, bodily and mediated via smartphones. It is taking place at an exhibition space at NRW-Forum Düsseldorf in an installation created by the artist duo. Using polystyrene blocks covering the floor, digital mobile devices, screens, semi-transparent banners, colorful lights and an artificial waterfall with the artists’ self-designed fragrance, the workshop is situated in a material, bodily, sensually perceptible and digitally mediated surrounding.

Artistic projects with a queer/feminist² stance that involve digital mobile media, like that of the YGRG, bring actors together to form collectives in material and digital infrastructures and aim at deconstructing powerful dichotomies in support of entangled³ relations. While artistic practices materialize in physical space, they simultaneously become present on screen and with smartphones, as well as within social media platforms. As such, they create distributed practices, spatialities and temporalities as well as affective relations of participating, of being and *becoming with* and in non/human agencies (Haraway 2008: 244; Giffney/Hird 2008: 2f.). Combining diverse intersecting practices, this text entangles describing of and *writing on* artistic practices with practices of *writing up* and theorizing about these practices, adding layers of visual practices of documenting the artistic doings in my research practices. As these layers become interrelated, researching and participating in queer/feminist artistic practices constitutes *circular thinking* and *becoming with* text, the very practices I am researching. Positioning practice-theoretical stances as *always already* entangled with theoretical and methodological approaches in gender, feminist and queer studies, I advocate the need for drawing together practice theory with media artistic practices, aesthetics and queer/feminist studies. In thinking practice together with knowledge, I want to follow Silvia Gherardi (2019: 1) who proposes practice as entangled and as “collective and knowledgeable doing”. While she positions practices as “situated modes of ordering and ‘agencing’” (ibid.: 8), I intend to focus on modes of disordering and disorienting. This text focuses on research on/with/about media (art) and conceptualizes artistic uses of smartphones to read, write and perform texts and as potential *queering practices*: as practices of queering and queering of practices. To interweave practices with queering, I draw on queer theoretical concepts as suggested by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed: “queer objects” or “queer devices” (Ahmed 2006) as well as “queer use” (Ahmed 2019). By analyzing media artistic practices that enable smartphones to become *queer(ing) devices*, I argue for a specific *queer use* that is disordering and disruptive and potentially queers spaces, objects, texts, and practices that are not inherently queer. Conceptualizing practice(s) as revelatory and generative and by analyzing the retooling of technologies and their disorienting effects on bodies, spaces, and things, I intend to frame *queering practices* using and *doing texts* as potentially collectivizing, performative and disturbing.

Challenging Practices of Reading Text

With our smartphones in our hands, we gather on the soft blocks spread in the art space. We share digital text files in .pdf and .epub format. We open the e-book of science fiction author Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*, a novel about a young, black-skinned vampire living in mutualistic symbiosis with humans, portraying queer sexualities, challenging normalized power relations on the level of race, class, and gender. We read the .txt together off our phones. We listen to each other voicing words. We search our way into text, narration and space, into reading collectively, our relations to each other and our smartphones, emotions and bodies. While reading, we look for new postures, lie down on, over, next to the blocks, someone reads upside down. In open search movements, we bodily, cognitively and affectively engage with unfamiliar reading practices. A collective reading group is forming out of individuals and smartphones.

Understanding "media as practice" (Couldry 2004: 129), media practices can be described as practical doing(s) with media that are situative, bodily, processual, cross-media, infrastructural, historical and socio-cultural (Dang-Anh/Pfeifer/Reisner/Villioth 2017: 7f.). Framing praxis as specific, singular and situated, but at the same time circulating independently of singular subjects positions praxis as eluding common dualisms (Völker 2019: 509). Researching artistic praxis and practices using smartphones and .txt, therefore, requires an entangled approach expanding the question of "what people do with media" (Couldry 2004: 118) to what media do with people (Dang-Anh/Pfeifer/Reisner/Villioth 2017: 15), with non-human actors and practices as Nick Couldry (2004: 129) indicates in asking: "what is the role of media-oriented practices in ordering other practices?" Against this backdrop, I want to argue that media practices like reading text collectively using smartphones are not only *ordering* but also *disturbing* other practices, such as normalized practices of reading, of bodily (be)coming together and solitary smartphone use. While our gazes are focused on phone screens, we are constantly being made aware of the presence of bodies in physical space, by finding new postures, by giving our voices to the texts we read. Using smartphones this way disturbs how bodies interact, devices are used and texts are read, they become disoriented. In this regard, Ahmed's "queer phenomenology" (Ahmed 2006) positions the concept of (dis)orientation as central and, thus, the situating of bodies in space and time, towards or away from objects that (dis)orient them. Following

Ahmed's concepts of "disorientation device" (ibid.: 172) and "queer devices" (ibid.: 179), I focus on the potentiality for objects, spaces, practices and texts to become queer, thereby, challenging orientations like heteronormativity, norms and power structures. In this context, the practice of *queer reading*⁴, of reading text against the grain and in search of its subversive potential, enables reading .txt as disorienting practice, as counter to norms of institutions, regulated (online and offline) spaces, historiography, western progress narratives, against text as an all too traditional medium.

Doing .txt and Queer(ing) Writing

Inspired by what we read the day before, we set out to compile a performance text. To write collaboratively, we use our smartphones and the web-based text editor Etherpad. With different colors assigned to each of us, we compose together, write with, across and over each other, weaving a colorful text. Associating, referring to one another, as well as to vampires, social media and pop culture, we collectively produce a 94-line text we title *sand witch craft – scent which crafts*.

Drawing together collaborative digital media use and artistic practices, I inquire which practices become relevant in artistic projects, "how they are established and through which organizational, technological, institutional, and aesthetic interconnections they are formed" (Schüttelpelz/Gießmann 2015: 9). Following artistic practices using smartphones to read, write and perform together, I suggest that media and artistic practices are mutually, cooperatively and continuously produced and distributed among various actors and agencies. In the workshop, these cooperative .txt practices constitute spatial and temporal relations, while relying on technical devices and software as part of the infrastructure for cooperation. Using Etherpad, an "open source online editor providing collaborative editing in really real-time" (Etherpad 2021), allows its users to write a text together, share its .url and download it afterwards as .txt, .pdf, .rtf, .doc, .od or .html. Here, the file extension .txt refers to an electronic, human-readable text file, structured as sequences of characters forming words and lines, stored as encodable and thus computer-readable data. Contrary to so-called binary files, text files can easily be accessible and editable with text editors. Our collectively written text emerges through relations between non/human participants, their joint reading, writing and performing, or if you will, through *doing text*. As such, Etherpad can be interpreted as a device

for queer writing and **.txt** as an interface or node between human and non-human actors.

Writing and reading collectively from screens, pronouncing words out loud engendering their vocalization and embodiment, queers these traditionally solitary practices, making collaboration a queer practice in itself. Instead of idealizing the notion of cooperation, however, I want to stress the volatility that is shaping the practices, which are in themselves fragile and transitory, thereby refusing to align all too neatly onto a narrative of positivistic, *straightforward* cooperation. For instance, seeing each other type text on screen in real time *orients* but also continuously *disorients* our thoughts and words, that form and get reshaped as others write, add, delete and propose other threads to weave with.

Performing Text Collectively

We then stage the text for our performance in the art space. Sitting down in a circle, we read the text from our smartphones in distributed roles. Our words spread out through the room. We are filming ourselves with a CCTV camera, transmitting an eerie black and white image to a big screen in the center of the room. Simultaneously, a 360-degree camera is documenting the performance, distorting images, space, human and machine bodies. One performer acts as a visual jockey: using a search engine on her laptop, she associatively looks for images matching the text, which appear in the middle of one of three wall screens. On the left screen, we broadcast our collective writing process via Etherpad's automatic timeslider feature, on the right we share the process of reading together by transmitting one performer's smartphone display.

Collectively reading out loud from screens seems as if they have cast a spell on us, putting focus on the smartphones, the text and our (be)coming together. Transferring our writing process with the timeslider function creates a cinematic component in the art space, depicting an uncanny appearance of letters and words as if guided by a ghostly hand; just like the visual jockey's live broadcast mimics a flow of thoughts and images in one's associative brain. The cameras create partial, distorted images of our bodies and devices in the space, contributing to a rather *weird, intensive, queer(ed)* impression. Allowing to share, read, write and perform texts together, enables a retooling of smartphones to support queering their solitary use. Digital mobile devices can, thereby, allow for collectivizing, performative and disturbing practices, that can be described as

practices *queer* to their intended use, or as *queering practices*. As such, smartphones can potentially become queer and queer practices surrounding them. In this, I propose that not only objects but also practices potentially become queer, as "queer objects" (Ahmed 2006: 157ff.) are deeply entangled with the practices that make them. "Becoming queer", then, centrally focuses on the practices of queering and of "disturb[ing] the order of things" (ibid.: 163, 161). Queering is, thus, understood as a specific appearance, gathering, performing of things, as a disturbance of their order (Ahmed 2006: 167). In this sense, *queering* constitutes deviating from *straightening* practices of institutions, bodies and things within a dominantly hetero-normative society, while establishing orientations towards other kinds of (dominant) practices. In positioning smartphones as potentially queer(ing) devices, I translate Ahmed's line of argumentation onto technological objects.⁵ Following the example of the table, she describes how it is transformed from a straightening, hetero-normalizing dining table into a "reorientation device" "when the kitchen table supports feminist writing" and into a "supporting device for queer gatherings" (Ahmed 2006: 179). Similarly, smartphones in the workshop reorient us by supporting reading, writing and performing text together, thus, making the mobile devices *queer(ing) devices* enabling *queering practices* and doing **.txt**.

Queering Spaces, Things and Texts

While we read, write and perform texts, the artists take photographs and videos using smartphones, capturing non/human actors, texts and screens. Then, they share them as a story on their Instagram account, adding text by writing captions and tagging people. The image-text-assemblages have an eerie, uncanny visual quality, disturbing the all too perfectly staged and colorful fluffy flows of Instagram feeds.⁶

Using digital mobile devices to collectively read texts, write a performance script, to perform, document, and share contents on social media, smartphones are put at the center of the workshop practices. Connecting human and non-human actors and defining use as a "way of being in touch with things" (Ahmed 2019: 21), hints at how we relate to things is generated in active use, that is, *in practice*. Using things as practicing, can thereby be understood as their epistemological quality: things *in practice* can become revelatory about their specific being and *becoming with*. Or to use Ahmed's words who considers "how usefulness can be evocative: use as how we handle things; use as how we mingle

with things” (ibid.: 22) – and, as I want to add – how we mingle and practice with technological things. In the context of artistic and media practices with smartphones, I want to argue with Ahmed for a potential *queer use* – a use that is not intended, but rather extended and transversed, a use *queer* to the use expected or how *something* is used “by those other than for whom they were intended” (ibid.: 199). This queerness, however, has to be activated:

“Queer uses would be about releasing a potentiality that already resides in things *given* how they have taken shape. Queer use could be what we are doing when we release that potential.” (ibid.: 200)

Here, I want to stress the doing necessary to release the potentialities of how things can be queered, by queering their use. As such, the potential *becoming queer* of spaces can depend on

“how those who identify as queer make use of spaces. [...] The implication here is that uses are queer because spaces are not: queerness as what is injected into spaces by queer users.” (ibid.)

Consequently, queer spaces per se do not exist, neither do queer things – it is their *use* that makes them potentially queer spaces or things (ibid.). Smartphones, thus, can become *queering devices* when used queer to everyday use in artistic practices such as in the YGRG workshop; just as texts can potentially become queer when used, written or read in a queer context. Thereby, I suggest, queer use is always situative and temporary. Localizing the potential for queer use in the spaces “somewhere between our bodies and our worlds” (ibid.: 201), I argue for practices as the connecting (and potentially dividing)⁷ tissue in realizing queer uses.

Sticking with the Queerness of Practices

Analyzing the queering of reading and writing practices by reading queer/feminist texts, that counter normative narratives as well as by collectively reading, writing and performing text, which queers technologies and media practices of isolated, solitary use of smartphones, I suggest that queering provides an alternative concept to understanding (artistic) practices using or doing *.txt* (see ff. Leeker 2023). In that context, *.txt* serves as media format, as artistic material, as practice and method, as it constitutes a tool challenging all too normative practices of *doing text*. The queering of media, technological, artistic, cultural technique and

bodily practices as well as the potentially, situative, and temporarily disturbing of things, spaces, bodies and their practices as a deviating from orienting practices, I describe as *queering practices*. In this context, I conceptualize queering as a critical media practice, as it considers and enacts things, matters and relations otherwise. In making and using queer objects and devices, artists and participants of the YGRG workshop *queer* intended, everyday practices of smartphone use. As such, queer/feminist artistic practices are probing and countering the straightening, the aligning, the (hetero-)normative forming mechanisms of smartphone uses (Strick 2012). Conceptualizing practice in their queering potential as *queering practices* unfolds and reflects practice as potentially generative, revelatory, collectivizing, performative and disturbing. As such, queer practices can have a diverting effect in disorienting normalized straightening practices. Thereby, it is the practice of *using* things, media, spaces and texts in a queer manner that potentially queers them. Localizing the potential for queer use between bodies, spaces, objects and media, practices constitute the connecting tissue in actualizing queer uses and devices. Emphasizing the need for “a meta-language of describing practice”, Nick Couldry (2004) postulates that “we have to point to things as one practice as distinct from another practice, as distinct from something that’s just messy and confused and isn’t anything at all” (Genner 2020: 6). While I agree that describing practices calls for critical use of language, I argue that immersing oneself in and researching practices, such as (media) artistic practices, necessarily is *messy and confusing*, especially because practices entangled in media and the artistic are themselves not as distinct, nor as *straight* as one might hope for. Therefore, claiming to be able to clearly distinguish one practice from another, runs the risk of drawing boundaries where entanglements are, while smoothing over the messiness and disorder centrally inherent to practice(s). Thus, I want to propose being a “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed 2017) and sticking to and “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) of the messiness and queerness of practices, research practices, material and generating knowledge on and with media as smartphones and texts. If “feminist theory is world making” so is *doing research*; and “if our texts are worlds, they need to be made out of feminist materials” (Ahmed 2017: 14). As we are becoming with text, it greatly matters how we write, who we cite, which typographies we use, how and what we read, who we read (with) and which texts we make our companion texts.

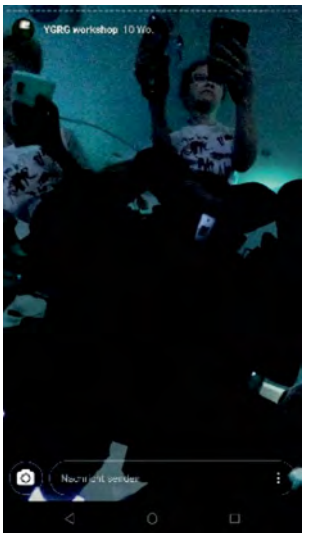
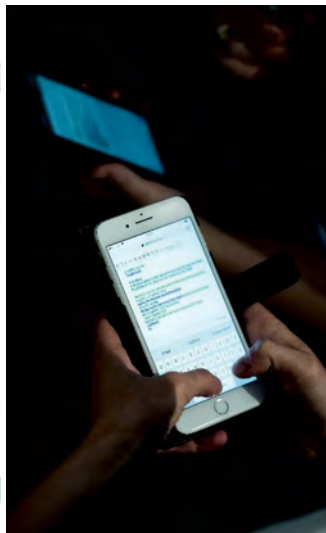
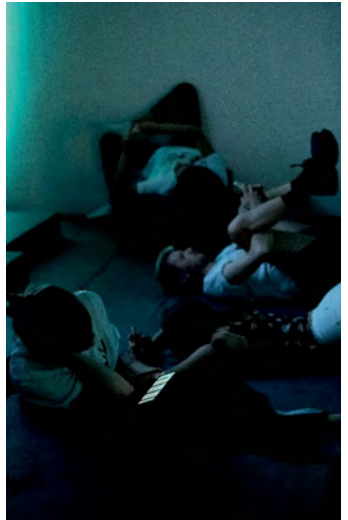
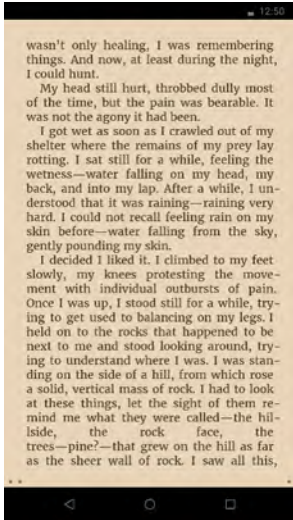


Photo credit

The images in this article consist of screenshots taken by the author from the Instagram account of the Young Girl Reading Group (@y_g_r_g) from the story highlight “YGRG workshop” (<https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17864136457432608/>) (1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10); screenshots taken from the author’s smartphone screen during the workshop from the e-book of Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling* (2) and the collective writing process using Etherpad (4); photos taken by Katja Ilner showing collective reading and writing via smartphones (3, 5); a screenshot of an Instagram post by Dorota Gawęda (@tuniatunia) (https://www.instagram.com/p/Bzf_bHziNu/) (7); a screenshot of the exported performance text in .txt format (11); and photos taken by the author of the collective reading and writing of text in the workshop and the t-shirt participants got from the artists (12, 13, 14). The numbers represent the images counting from top to bottom, from left to right.

Notes

- 1 The workshop *Weird Read Intensive* took place on the 5th and 6th of July 2019 at NRW-Forum Düsseldorf as part of the event *Digital Imaginaries* initiated by the Akademie der Avantgarde in cooperation with the Institute for Art and Art Theory at the University of Cologne.
- 2 Relating to *techno-ecofeminism*, Yvonne Volkart defines *queer/feminist* as queer and feminist deconstructions: as practices of “‘queering’ of powerful dichotomies. [...] Those who help to break through these dualistic hierarchies in the direction of complex relations and entanglements of agents always take action, one could say, in a queer/feminist or ecofeminist way” (Volkart 2019: 119).
- 3 For the notion of entanglement see Barad 2007.
- 4 For a summary of the practice of *queer readings*, its use in queer theory and as a feminist method challenging heteronormativity see Björklund 2018.
- 5 Thinking together Ahmed’s concepts of orientation with media, Nelanhi Hewa (2021) proposes a *media phenomenology*. Franziska Wagner (2019) brings disorientation together with virtual-reality films, arguing with Ahmed for their queer potentials and perspectives in bodily mediations.
- 6 Kristin Klein (2021) looks at YGRG’s work to exemplify how digitality is articulated in the artistic in terms of body, space, materiality and image circulation by critically reflecting on concepts of postdigitality and Post-Internet. I am thankful to her for our shared in-depth experiencing and analyzing YGRG’s practices.
- 7 For an in-depth analysis on media (theories) and their potential to connect and divide, also in relation to gender, see Bergermann/Schüttelpelz/Dommann/Stolow/Taha 2021.

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