

Stacks and Intersections: Feminist Thinking in Digital Humanities, a view from “these islands”

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Abstract

Intersectional feminist work around digital archiving can productively develop stack models to address questions concerning the location, site, and materiality of possible and effective feminist intervention. Developing this proposition, we draw on two DH research projects undertaken between the UK and Ireland (2020 and on-going) focussing on work around community archives at a moment of their radical transformation.

Asking what feminist DH can be in relation to these archives, we engage with the hollowing out of intersectional feminism – noting that it at times becomes a reached for category rather than a useful signifier, while also recognizing that theorizing forms of intersection between categories and groups experiencing discrimination is essential to grappling with issues including new forms of institutionalization, context dependency, and privacy.

An exploration of various forms of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and of more historically materialist thinking around intersectionality enables us to develop a feminist-informed stack approach able to grapple with the complicated stakes of archiving histories of trauma – including those undertaken by those in different situated positions.

We use this to inform a discussion of “where feminism should act” and develop an argument that stack models – echoing in theory what is found in material infrastructure – can be useful as guides to think about appropriate and expanded sites for feminist intervention in DH.

This discussion is about feminisms, Digital Humanities (DH), stacks, and archives.^[1] It is fuelled by a recognition that much has come into feminism to shake it out of its comfort zone in recent years, including specifically – but not only – Critical Race Theory (CRT). We argue that this process is on-going. Further consideration of intersectional feminism(s) is necessary to reconsider the operations of feminist DH, including asking *where* it operates, *how* it operates, and for *whom*. In this context, we explore how a stack model, referring to the layers that constitute a specific technical architecture nested within connected systems and also to their relations, can be used to map the geo-political, social, cultural, and *technical locations* of possible and effective feminist interventions within and across DH. The argument made is for Full Stack Feminism, as a methodological approach, informed by the successes of previous feminist interventions in DH, and seeks to build on them.

We work through these questions, and test our approach, by exploring issues that arise as archives are transformed through digital processes, while also recognizing the intersecting networks that constitute today’s digital systems – the internet, libraries, platforms – of which archives are only one part. The focus on archives appears to us apt in that it recognizes that we are in a pivotal archival moment – and because working with archives in a digital era demands addressing questions that relate to multiple operational layers – in relation to infrastructure, metadata, and presentation,

for instance. Intersectionality, often conceived of as a horizontal model, thus joins with stack approaches sensitive to depths and vertical layers.

What are the archival changes to which we refer? On the one hand “The Archive”, as a concept, an institution, and in its various iterations, is being “queered”, transformed, lauded, criticized, decolonized, and demystified. On the other, digitization programmes – coupled with born digital ephemera, and new standards formally enabling openness and transferability – have created an opportunity to rethink the boundaries of archives, to ask what gets archived and where. As (Arondekar 2005) puts it, “the archive is no longer the sacrosanct domain of the discipline of history”; and nor, we might add, of archival or information studies, both of which may also have felt that the archive was their own. Today’s archival systems link to other networks and are integral to our daily lives, shaping our interactions and preserving our memories. It is within this context that we specifically investigate how archives and feminist archival practices can be comprehended within a stack model or framework.

The discussion is informed by a research network^[2] co-funded by the UK and Irish research councils, exploring feminisms and DH; *Intersections: Feminism, Technology and Digital Humanities (IFTe)*, a transnational networking project between researchers in the UK and Ireland – these islands of ours, IFTe (2020-21). Its aims were to explore a proposition, generate new connections, and produce new forms of working, including working collaboratively, across the Irish Sea – “these islands” being a term referencing the history of racism, gender oppression, heteronormativity, and colonialism that pertain to the UK and Irish contexts and that condition their relationship with each other.^[3] It also located our situated position as joint authors as this paper is intended to be globally responsive but doesn’t make a global statement or claim.

Issues of the archive, and the generation, storage, and circulation of archival material, were key in the work of the IFTe network. The IFTe network drew on archival history and memory studies, and was centrally informed by discussions and interactions with communities and individuals with experiences of lack, silencing, or othering in memory – institutionally and/or socially – for whom archives at times constituted an uneasy restitution, and at others threatened to be a further expropriation.

This paper explores three key questions. First, we seek to elucidate how an approach to generating a feminist analysis structured around the concept of stacking can be informed by an engagement with diverse perspectives on feminism and intersectionality. Second, we ask how various kinds of intersectional feminist interventions into DH can respond to stack models, stacked architectures, and other theoretical or analytic models that have drawn on stacks. Third, it questions at what levels at what levels (what depths), across which materials, and by refusing or conforming to which real and imaginary architectures, with their boundaries and openings, do feminisms need to work? Here, community archiving and questions of archival justice constitute a case study, but they are also more than that, being also a provocation for the work done.

The paper begins by considering intersectional feminisms’ current entanglements with DH before turning to consider debates around intersectionality itself – this being undertaken through a focus on Critical Race Theory and historical materialism (each of which are, in different ways, interested in how relations are articulated in various forms). These discussions, and in particular asking how various explorations of structural (even base and superstructural) forms of discrimination and/in their tensioned relationship, can play out in the context of issues emerging in DH, particularly around digital justice, returns us to the stack, considered as an explanatory model *and* as an operating and multi-layered infra-structure that conditions digital politics. Finally, the possibilities for Full Stack Feminisms are evidenced through examples drawn from the IFTe’s activities and engagements, specifically through archives and archival work.

The stack

What is a stack? It is first of all a technical model (for instance the OSI model), which sets out how systems like the internet operate. It consists of hierarchical layers, with each layer abstracting upwards, handling functions independently, and defining principles for interaction. Potentially fostering platform agnosticism (or interoperability) and promoting ideas of layered emergence, it can also promote compartmentalized thinking. The stack has variously been

taken up as a way of modelling extant systems, as a technical diagram, as a global cybernetic order, as a metaphor, as a means through which to articulate a demand, as a manifesto, and as one of the ways the relationship between digital transformation and social justice has been explored in recent times (see e.g. (Bratton 2016) (Flanders 2018) (Liu 2020) (Terranova 2014) (Berry 2017) (Bassett et al. 2019)). Stack approaches to exploring technological systems are thus contested and operate in different registers.

In this paper, we use a stack model to point to the material affordances of extant digital architectures – specifically including those found in archives and doing so with an understanding of the degree to which technological imaginaries operate powerfully at multiple levels and in many materialities. We also do so with cognisance of the ways the stack has also been adopted as a powerful metaphor, both analytic and political (and at times how this has been done by productively confounding the division between the metaphorical and material). We return to this below. The move now is to ask what is lacking in intersectional feminisms' *current entanglements with DH*.

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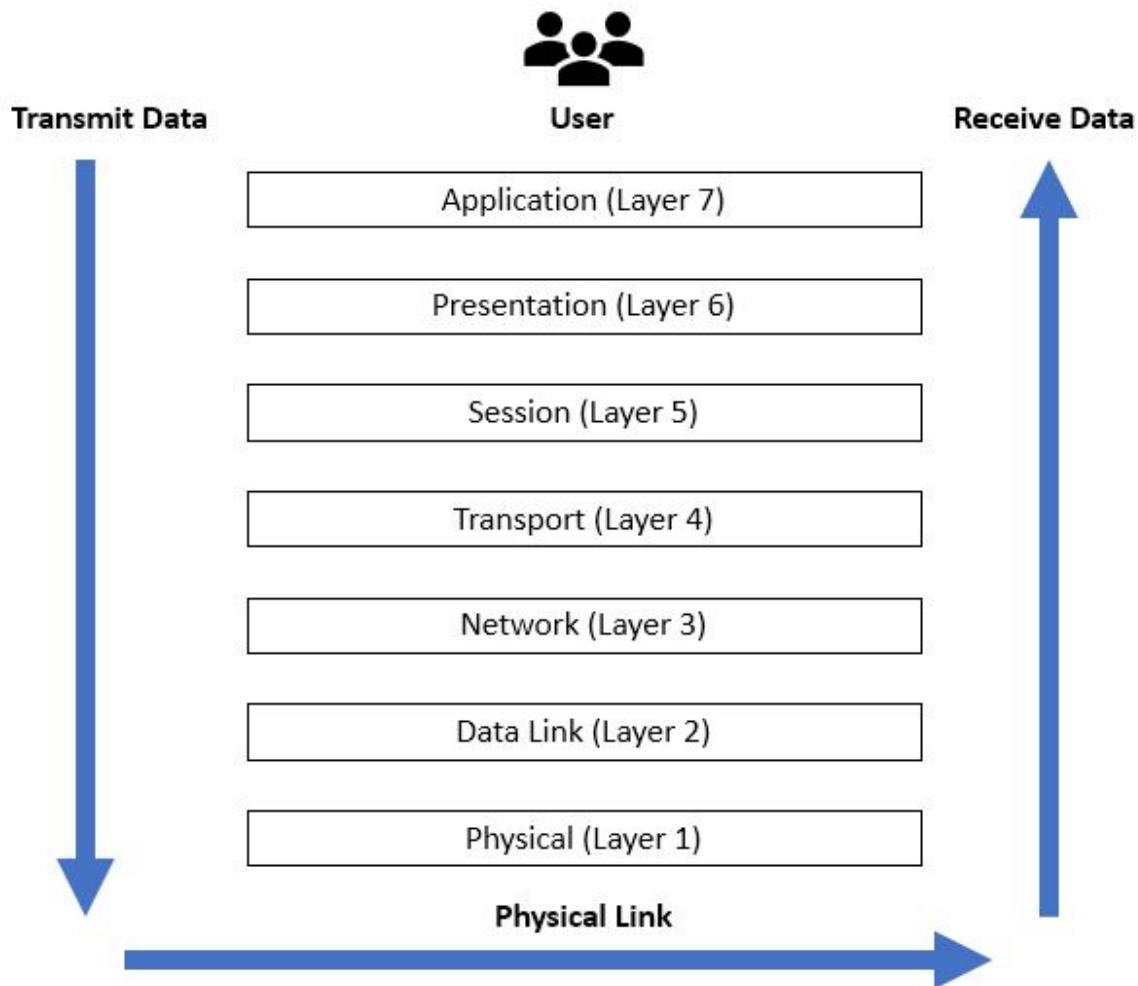


Figure 1. A typical OSI reference module which helps demonstrate stack models and metaphors. Ardika6879, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Intersectional Orthodoxy?

Digital Humanities communities claim to wish to be inclusive and equal, particularly in relation to gender, and recently the official aspiration towards gender equality in DH has been pretty uniformly defined in terms of the intersectional. A DH feminism that explicitly claimed it was *not* intersectional would likely be looked at askance. How could it be otherwise now? The “now” we are referring to here relates to the time after the killing of George Floyd, to the second wave of BLM, and to a time where CRT and new forms of thinking around race are defining a lack, articulating a claim, making urgent demands, and breaking into multiple fields, including those that might not wish to entertain them.

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These same developments point to *why* intersectionality, and intersectional feminism, both as it is formally “adopted” by DH^[4] and as it is variously practised by those who are actively pursuing feminist agendas within it, must not be taken for granted. Insofar as DH has adopted intersectional feminism as its new common sense, this has been productive. Writers “in” DH, particularly feminists, have deployed it to forcefully critique various institutional forms of exclusion, and to question DH certainties around knowledge production, ethical accountability, and the politics of care. This paper therefore seeks to supplement – not displace – feminist thinking in DH. However, it also seeks to unsettle some virtuous certainties about what kind of feminism is needed. These *need* to be unsettled partly because intersectional feminism itself is fraught, contested, perhaps in some ways in crisis, and is certainly not an entity reducible to a tick box about “inclusion”.

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If a commitment to intersectional forms of gender equality is today a common sense in DH, operating in name if not in fact, this itself was fought for. Tara McPherson (2012) examined and critiqued the whiteness of DH as a field of inquiry back in 2012, while the powerful contribution by Deb Verhoeven through her furious talk at the 2015 DH conference, “Has Anyone Seen a Woman”, forced a long-overdue debate to which this project and paper owe much. More recently, work key to thinking how DH can engage with intersectional feminism includes in *Intersectionality in Digital Humanities* (2019), edited by Barbara Bordalejo and Roopika Risam. Also relevant is Risam’s *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis and Pedagogy*, advocating for a DH built by “sustained communities of practice that foreground critiques of colonialism in scholarship” [Risam 2019, 16].

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The 2018 *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and Digital Humanities* anthology edited by Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont also constitutes a foundational engagement; current drives to more fully develop an approach to intersectional feminism in DH owe much to it. This publication often frames discussions of DH around a specific DH community – those that attend or do not attend the AHDO’s international conference – although the authors recognise this is not DH at large. For this reason, it might also constitute a mapping, not only of particular positions and developments in, for instance, work around gender, race or sexuality-based equality, but also of their relations and intersections. All these areas, of course, are covered. However, they are not necessarily explored together. A chapter explicitly considering issues of representation at DH conferences (eponymously titled: “Representations of DH conferences”) and does so in order to consider percentages of women versus men presenters. The authors rightly denigrate the fact that data is not made available to explore ethnicity. On the other hand, there is no acknowledgment of the lack of data exploring how to think “beyond the binary”. Other chapters include discussions on queering DH, on lesbian feminist methods in DH and decolonising DH. What is striking is thus not that central issues are set aside (on the contrary). It is rather that the question of *how* the various issues explored *come together* is left relatively unelaborated, or remains implicit.

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We suggest that running throughout the collection is a tension between two perspectives. The first, a liberal perspective, advocates for more inclusivity, arguing for more diversity in actors, corpus, languages, and methodology. Among the various appeals to action within the volume responding through this perspective are interlocking calls to: recognise and value the varied forms of labour of all those working in the building of DH projects and supporting social justice or diversity work (e.g. Brown; Brundage et al.; Chatelain); examine and correct the dispersal of funding and institutional infrastructures which skews against diversity and justice (e.g. Boyles; Cole et al.; Aiyegbusi); recover, record, and respond in a reflexive manner to artefacts and histories that belong to more diverse groups – including the histories of DH itself (e.g. Earhart; Leon; Eichmann et al.); and (re-) politicise the theoretical and material tools of the field (e.g. Murray; Risam). In many (not all) of these contributions, *defining* intersectionality or intersectional feminism is not the priority. Rather, it is taken as something of a *given* (to be developed, found, cultivated further), posited as an *inherent good*.

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The second perspective within the book aligns with a more complicated demand for systemic, structural re-calibration of practices, processes, technologies, texts, theories, and research infrastructures, through an intersectional feminist lens. Taking on board queer, post-colonial, critical race, materialist, disability, and feminist interventions, informed by decades of critical research into these questions in cognate and linked fields, this might add up to a demand for root and branch renewal of the objects and processes of DH through a reconceptualization of its politics.

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The problem is that this is a *muffled* demand, since the two perspectives entertained in the collection are entwined together in ways that, by virtue of the whole, greater inclusivity – of topic, method, tool, or personnel – is proposed as the answer. In the absence of clear definitions, or specific discussion, intersectional feminism thus defaults to a kind of “additive” [Bassett 2022] inclusive diversity; each submission adding a missing element that warrants incorporation. Rather than wrestling with the underlying socio-technical stacks into which the discipline folds, or indeed exploring where – at what level, through what material(s), let’s say at what stack level, with what expectation of a stacked relation – intervention might be most effective, the implication is that the structures will inevitably change under the summary weight of the difference added by enough good projects.

If there is a lack of clarity in how and where DH feminisms might need to operate then, this relates to an imprecision – or perhaps a big tent version – of intersectionality, made to bear more than it should even while it threatens to become increasingly empty. It is for this reason that we believe a consideration of the stakes of intersectionality is required in order to recalibrate or adapt a stack politics for feminisms. Since DH’s somewhat fuzzy adherence to (multiple forms of) intersectional feminism reflects the situation in the broader field, we now turn to this in a move which considers CRT in relation to historical materialist approaches.

Ashley Bohrer comments that intersectionality has been called “hegemonic” [Bohrer 2019]. Bridget Byrne says it has become a central “buzz word” in feminist studies and a “signifier for good research” in US and European gender studies [Byrne 2015]. Jennifer Nash suggests the framework is both hyper-valued and devalued [Nash 2019], while Sara Ahmed has cautioned that too often calls for diversity and increased inclusivity are used to absolve institutions, or research fields, of the necessity to actively generate structural change [Ahmed 2017]. Historical-materialist orientated feminists, who would not have used the term in previous times, comment that its *thereness* makes it necessary to do so now as it crosses between public culture and academic thinking. [Bilge 2020] thus says its success means it has become an “empty shell”. Perhaps then, it has become “empty signifier” or tokenistic of a form of inclusion that is paid lip service to; I *heart* intersectionality...

It is partly because of its success, and its importance, that intersectionality has also become a contested term, and a term whose terms of use are contested. Three positions exploring this development rapidly set out here inform the return to stack feminism, as a form of intersectional feminism useful in DH, which we make in the later stages of the paper.

There are a number of origin stories for intersectional feminism, but most agree that a form of intersectional feminism was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw to understand and articulate the ways multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion were experienced by Black women, and other early developers of the term were also women of colour [Crenshaw 1989]. There are also different reasons given for its emergence. The direct experience of African American women in the US carceral system to which Crenshaw responded is one of them. It is also useful to understand the emergence of intersectional feminism in a different register; as a response to post-feminism which celebrated difference while ignoring differential positioning and multiple discriminations. Post-feminism resonated with Web 2.0 optimism, which for most people was of the cruel kind [Berlant 2011], and corresponds to the rise of “capitalist realism” or that situation in which the possibilities for any form of collective future appear constrained to market options – and the project of self-improvement overtakes collective identifications and solidarity [Fisher 2009]. By contrast, intersectional politics *begins* by recognizing a system. Crenshaw’s point, after all, was the foregrounding of structural, systemic discrimination.

Intersectionality has expanded and evolved since its beginnings. Key here is Critical Race Theory (CRT), beginning in the US but claiming global purchase, and certainly having international reach. Aswani Sharma’s discussion of the eclipse, at CRT’s hands, of an older form of multiculturalism, informed by British cultural studies, and specifically by Paul Gilroy’s work, explores this from a UK perspective and is useful in that it de-naturalizes intersectionality by historicizing it, exploring it in relation to a particular set of global flows [Sharma 2009]. Sharma, reading intersectionality as a theorization and a critical/political position currently entangled with CRT, underscores the degree to which it also has travelled, being the outcome of a series of exchanges, the terms of which are complex and interesting to explore.

Three contemporary positions that we find useful in further thinking through these issues, and in relating them to specifically technological feminisms and to our own situated positions as feminist scholars working between the UK and Ireland – historically colonising and colonised nations – are briefly set out below.

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The first argument comes via Sirma Bilge, who demands to know: “What makes intersectionality an empty shell onto which scholars of all stripes can conveniently project their own concerns and feel completely legitimate to do so? What authorizes the easy removal of Black feminists from their theoretical innovation, intersectionality?” [Bilge 2020, 2298]

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Bringing afro-pessimism into dialogue with intersectional thinking, Bilge adheres to a theory of permanent extraction, i.e. the persistence of the exploitation of Black people in the slavery era of the US which made of them fungible goods, robbed of their personhood. Rendered object not subject, and therefore outside of “history” and the agency it may afford, slavery is a state of “social death” [Patterson 1982] that persists today. The crux of Bilge’s argument is that intersectionality, which belonged to Black women, has been expropriated and has become part of a *post-racial* formation, aka white liberal feminism. Many critical race theorists, acknowledging some white appropriation, would nonetheless argue that theory can’t be owned in this way – or even territorialized.

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In the UK, Bridget Byrne’s friendly critique of intersectionality-as-given takes two main routes. She (too) acknowledges that mainstreaming has hollowed out intersectionality’s critical edge. She argues that it is becoming a consensus builder not a critical analytic and sees this as an appropriation. On the other hand, she also argues that CRT moves to entirely frame intersectionality around women of colour, reducing its capacity to explore “the construction and maintenance of *structures* of power” (including whiteness, discrimination, exploitation, exclusion, and how illegitimacy is made and remade) [Byrne 2015]. It is this, she argues, that produces a flattened form of intersectionality. Byrne melds a CRT-aware account of power with an engagement with a form of cultural materialism, inflected by Hall, whose work was always attuned to Britain’s colonial histories and its legacies – although less attuned to its specific relations with Ireland [Beatty 2022].

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Finally, Ashley Bohrer has explored the possibilities of perming out a form of intersectionality with a form of socialist or Marxist feminism. As she points out, it is not only CRT that hosts divisions within itself [Bohrer 2019]. The 20th century history of Marxist feminism can be viewed as an argument around how to theorize the relationship between oppression, discrimination, and inequality based on anything *other* than or, *in the determinate analysis only* class. The orthodox Marxist framework, at least as instantiated in political organizations, did recognize multiple oppressions but did not see them as intersecting *vectors* – as bearing a capacity for making real change. Revolutionary *feminisms*, however, were (are), arguably, always more intersectional in spirit than the traditions (organizations) within which they found a home. The goal of Marxist feminism, a feminism that some of us recognise from our own activism and experience, has been to bring into view the workings of the social whole and the relations of power within it – including those pertaining around gender, sex, and race – seeing these as vectors for change, as well as conditions to be surpassed primarily through class struggle. We would add too, that Marxist traditions have always included questions about how to understand “layers” and their interaction; base and superstructure, ideological layers and material determinants, medium and media, and how one could apparently slip into the other and back, or offer itself as having the characteristics of one of these whilst being the other. Capitalist realism, after all, sells an idea of a material future as inevitable.

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How do we now read this situation back into our discussion of DH? The intersectional as variously defined by CRT-influenced work, offers one model of a social relation; Marxism offers another. Each approach is capacious, demanding notice be taken of structures as well as signs, and of materials alongside representations. We’ve argued that the kind of feminism-that-intersects that is useful for DH needs to be both systematic and systemic. For us, historical materialism *and* many latter-day intersectional feminisms manifest this kind of approach and we aim to entangle them into a “theoretical coalition”, as suggested by [Bohrer 2019, 23], *and* articulate them in relation to DH as it is invested in both theory *and in practice*; that is, and specifically, in thinking and engaging with questions concerning technology. The need to engage with material operations as well as (materialized and symbolic) ideologies is key to what makes DH distinctive within the broad range of humanities work around the digital. Further, the desire to explore the relationship between these operations, rather than siloing them constitutes one of the defining features of critically engaged digital humanities work.

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The question we now move on to ask is *how* these kinds of approaches to DH feminism can be articulated. It is with this in mind that we turn, in the final sections of the paper, first back to a more general consideration of stacks and stack politics, and then on to a consideration of archives.

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Back to the stack

Stacks have already been introduced, but here demand some elaboration. Amongst other things, stacks have been employed as a way of understanding how the internet works as a layered system. The OSI (Open Systems Interconnection) reference model, which deals with the internet and associated networks, and what enables interconnection between them, is one example of this, and has become somewhat canonical. It consists of layers rising from the physical base towards the lighter super-structures, an ordering often understood in terms of etherealization (from the physical depths, up to the application layers enabling human computer interaction). What are also modelled are the principles controlling the intersections between various layers. The system abstracts upwards and is modular, each layer handing off functions to the layer above. In theory at least, the principles of heritance and autonomy between layers means that what happens on one layer is not the business of the next.

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We are interested in how intersectional feminist digital politics may be configured within extant material conditions and possibilities, those that the stack model and its layers might help us understand. The stack models the real and stack politics reflect that. We are also interested in the ideological heft of the model; in particular, in the way it might, in so far as it has become a naturalized way of understanding the affordances of the different technical layers of network systems, imply that there is a “proper” place for particular kinds of engagement (for instance, those that are viewed as political rather than technical). Finally, we believe there is potential for the stack to be used metaphorically within a feminist digital politics. In all these ways, we believe stacks can be useful for DH as it seeks to think through the specifically technical elements of a form of (feminist) (intersectional) (historically materialist) politics, whilst also understanding those technical elements as techno-cultural.

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Specifically, we wish to explore the prospects for a depth model of intersectional feminism; one that foregrounds the material possibilities and constraints of operations at particular and multiple levels of the stack and recognizes technical heritance, but that also (i) seeks to refuse conventional assignations that arise when stack layers are mistaken for social structures and conventions (and vice versa), and (ii) that stresses the connective tissues that link operations undertaken at different levels in stacked systems *in operation* or *in location*, which may exceed the technical and abstraction principles apparently constraining the possible or ordering “the system”.^[5] Stack violations may constitute a (non-metaphorical) political intervention; feminism has often got things done by refusing to stay in its allotted place.

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We are not the first to get stacked. And not the first to do so with critical intent either. Of note here is Alan Liu’s beautiful DH-focussed demand for a diversity stack [Liu 2020]. Tiziana Terranova’s digital media studies’ *Red Stack Attack* meanwhile is both analytic (mapping out forces and structures), and constitutes a demand for change (Terranova, 2014). A markedly different approach is that of Benjamin Bratton, who understands the stack to have environmentalised to form an “accidental megasphere” [Bratton 2016]; as Terranova notes, this essentially amounts to cybernetics, or a reading of the earth as a cybernetic system. Others working with stacks include: David Berry who use the stack as a tool to re-model forms of net culture [Berry 2017]; Julie Flanders who prompts us to “read the entire stack as a cultural text” [Flanders 2018]; and one of us, via *Furious: Technological Feminism and Digital Futures* where the cloud is preferred to the stack as a figure for generating specifically utopian possibilities [Bassett et al. 2019]. Recently, Nancy Mauro-Flude and Yoko Akama have argued for a feminist stack that is attentive to the materiality of the sites “where the ethical, political and intersectional agonisms manifest 5” [Mauro-Flude and Yoko 2022, 49], advocating for continuous co-design in the physical substrate of the stack and in its imaginaries.

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So, should we have a feminist stack for DH? And would it be part of Bratton’s totalized cybernetic reading, fuel a mode of utopian antagonism as it does for Terranova, become a tool to model culture as Berry suggests, or work in relation to design as for Mauro-Flude and Akama? Or would it work in tandem with Alan Liu’s more specifically DH thinking? How does (can) intersectional feminist thinking, as we have reconceptualized it, relate to the stack? How can it be operationalised?

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Our “stack attack” takes inspiration both from Terranova’s political commitment and from Liu’s refusal to countenance the DH status quo, as well as his questioning of where, or on what layer, change needs to come. His work exposes a disjuncture between a laudable DH rhetoric (democratise the global internet) and the possible engine(s) of its effecting. His call is to change the net’s working language at the infra-structural level rather than, or as well as, addressing proximate issues of “content” or translation^[6] which might obtrude more conspicuously. However, where Liu considers specific language layers within the diagram of the whole, we look at archives and archival practices as layered systems, drawing on work around community archiving, and/in relation to structural/infrastructural developments in institutional collections, and in direct relation to issues of memory and politics.

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An archive stack can be understood as a static technical *diagram* expressing the various materialities and affordances of what a digital archive is constituted by (e.g. location, hardware, physical networks, protocols, software, content), with these layers being relatively autonomous from the next layer up or down and verticality being defined by trajectory (layers hand off upwards). Intersectional feminisms can work with digital archiving by working *with* the kind of layering and handing off the stack foregrounds. But it is also possible to trouble some of the assumptions that this kind of modelling produces about suitable sites for intervention and also about the reality of the system in operation; handing off between layers implies a *clean* process, but, in practice, of course, what is handed over – or handled – are people, documents, images, histories, stories, institutions. There are moments when the stakes of the relationship between various layered operations, and their real and assumed relative autonomy from each other, are more visible. Finding these moments, or making them, and addressing the issues they raise begins to constitute a feminist response to archival institutions, institutional archiving, and archiving’s norms as a practice. In the sense that the archival stack enables this kind of exploration, it might also become a pointer to a more generalisable DH politics of feminist intervention based on an ethics of care – across the stacks of the archive and its socio-cultural contexts. Below, this is worked through in relation to various archival projects including those with which IFTe engaged.

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Community archives

Large archives and institutional repositories are facing radical digital disruption, and also changing in response to cultural shifts as well as demands for archival justice coming from multiple directions, including those engaging with intersectional feminisms. Archives and archival practices are in many other cases beginning to become post-custodial, decentralized and, in some cases, democratized. But archivalization still entails the gathering together and linking in of myriad previously, relatively autonomous collections, and contributions from individuals. This is a process that subjects them to archival discipline, often including the archival discipline of large institutions – and includes not only issues of capture, but also relates to the terms of storage, and the politics of re-circulation. In this sense, we are interested in the material realities of the archive as well as its technical and social structures.

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Community archives or community heritage groups and projects, multi-voiced and often co-curated, grapple with issues around ethics, access, and datafication, often challenging, explicitly or through practices, what are taken as self-evident axioms of the Open Access movement and Open Research alike.^[7] Community archives indeed, outrage the kind of precision that giant institutional archives rely on, historically at least. The latter are models of hierarchical order whose ordering both articulates a cultural logic (that of empire, for instance) whilst also obfuscating it (via an appeal to the neutrality of the general or universal), thus employing, well before the computer, the fantasy of automated and impartial systems.^[8]

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The Cork LGBT Archive, founded by Orla Egan, a queer archival activist, and Haringey Vanguard (HV), founded by Veronica McKenzie, film director, curator and archivist, both contributed to debates taken up in the IFTe network project. Both archives, engaging with intersectional gender and sexuality issues, stem from grassroots activism. Both became digital archives following the collection and digitization of context-specific ephemera. A third archive invoked in this discussion is the Archiving Reproductive Health project run by the Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI) which includes work to archive #inHerIrishShoes Facebook posts, and as such is born digital.^[9]

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In all three cases though, what is produced through the archiving process is a change of state; with the HV and the Cork LGBTQ Archive, objects in a basement are moved or a photo album is transposed, but this is also the case for the posts

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taken “out” of Facebook, as per the Archiving Reproductive Health project. Through archiving processes, all become different (digital) objects: contextually accessible, useable, and situationally meaningful, significant, and affective, as they are tagged, recategorized, and move within and between various technological systems. In this process, they both carry and lose their original affective intensity, and their original significance formed by the practices of production and collaboration that made them, and are now re-formed by the operations and contexts of the work done – the institutionalization – that makes them executable in multiple digital contexts.^[10] Ethical considerations arise anew in relation to each new instance of an object which, while stripped of its original context, remains fiercely context dependent, albeit now *also* being placed in relation to more fluid and complex contexts (see [Webb et al. 2013])^[11]. The vulnerabilities and possibilities of digital LGBTQ+ archives, like those of the Haringay Vanguard project, which concurrently reveal, empower, and riskily expose already marginalized people recorded there [Chenier 2015] [Cowan and Rault 2018] are a case in point. This is complicated more by legislation like the EU’s “right to be forgotten” which assumes, in fact, that you were remembered in the first place.

All of these repositories emerged through geo-political community concerns and community outreach efforts, but within the context of the digital space now transcend their original geographical boundaries. The Cork LGBT Archive is now an Omeka archive, which has been ingested into the DRI and from there, content has been aggregated into Europeana, the EU digital cultural heritage content aggregator. Cork LGBT Archive, or more accurately its data, has crossed multiple infrastructural stacks. It has been transcoded, cross-walked and migrated, enabled by interoperability, across different systems and platforms. Haringey Vanguard now has a digital archive, launched in 2021 alongside a physical exhibition, *We have always been here*, at Bruce Castle, Haringey, London.^[12] This process is never one of static ingestion; these archival objects are modified through ongoing computational transactions as these archival objects variously manifest over time and every time the elements of the archival database are assembled into a new interface.

Each passing through the archive layer, (re)framing at the code layer and decoding at the symbolic layer alters, impacts and reshapes what the archive gives us. The archon was never (only) the archivist – the work of the stack upon/with the objects that it is partly co-constituted through, and partly makes, is never done. Issues of *circulation and re-circulation* therefore are central to thinking about archival architectures and emerging digital archival infrastructures and practices; not least, as those that emerge as community (located, of interest, via commitment) archives are ingested into public archives, and also linked in to the larger archival economy (the multiple stacks that are joined via e.g. data harvesting or aggregation, linked open data, as well as IIIF etc.).

The Ontology of Objects

Thinking through stacks invites thinking about these processes in terms of layers. And here Temi Odumoso’s (2020) intervention into thinking about archival justice in relation to images from the former Danish Virgin Islands, held at the Royal Danish Library, is informing. Odumoso’s study articulates the tensions involved in digitizing and making available particular kinds of “cultural heritage” as acts of (re)representation and repatriation. Their argument centres on the image of a Black child, once a photograph, then a postcard, now digital code, and therefore reproducible, and shareable in new ways. The image may be explored for what it represents; a child crying turned into a curiosity for others, and it may justly be argued that the representation itself outrages an ethics of looking. But at the heart of Odumoso’s argument, there is also a critique of the failure to register, or take account of, the power of circulation itself with relation to archival ethics.^[13] Odumoso’s critique, and their search for a response to the question, “What is the best way to attend to violated bodies and biographies without replicating historical patterns of abuse?” [Odumoso 2020, 295] is essentially a demand to think about how the infrastructure layers of the archive (and/as it connects into the larger stack being constituted through technologies like IIIF), are shaping the terms on which an image is ethically engaged with, and also how the image needs to be understood as an image in relation to its capacity to circulate (its digital ontology).

It is often assumed that “politics”, including feminist politics, should confine itself to particular layers of the stack, or to particular kinds of DH activity. Odumoso’s investigation points to the need for stack violation, for a refusal to be contained by – or to contain – an ethical or political practice, which might be a practice of general refusal, or take-down, or restriction, or opening, or a call for an intersectional feminist politics to the “appropriate” place. This is not essentially

an argument about distinctions between what is legal and what is ethical, but is rather about at what intersections intersectional feminism *needs* to operate at to operate an ethics and politics of care. Thus, while it is clear that in a technical sense the operations determining and conditioning circulation of the images are handed off between layers, the image itself (properly understood) and the grounds for intervention – by feminists for instance – cross those layers, and refuse those divisions. Ethics is all the way up and all the way down.

Archival Refusal?

Some of the issues Odomuso explores arose in different contexts, for some of us closer to home, in relation to campaigns in Ireland around abortion rights^[14]. *Archiving the 8th* sets out to “provide long-term preservation and access to the many at-risk archives generated by grassroots women’s reproductive health movements during the [Repeal the 8th] campaign” [Archiving Reproductive Health n.d.]. However, the #InHerIrishShoes Facebook posts, already referenced and central to the campaign to repeal the 8th Amendment that the archiving project responds to, should be viewed in relation to the *on-going* history of occlusion and denial around the systemic and systematic oppressions of the Magdalene Laundries. Specifically, the histories of women’s experience in so-called “Mother and Baby” homes in Ireland have been swept under the proverbial archival carpet as the Irish state has sealed the records and findings of the investigating commission.^[15]

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Within the context of Irish reproductive rights and women’s health, archival refusal may appeal counter to contemporary political and societal sentiment, particularly amongst feminists who demand openness. However, it does respond to women’s own activities to inscribe – and at times conceal – a history when formal histories excise it;

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When our history isn’t important enough for men to write it down in ink, we take to needle and thread, sewing ourselves into the quilts for our daughters and sons, telling stories in embroidery. When our histories are not safe to voice aloud, we ensure they are folded in the hems of skirts, sharp daggers tucked in hats. We will not go silently. We write our own history into legislation, into the Dáil, in poems and books, in music and art. Our stories keep us alive. [Erin Darcy. (11 November 2021). *In Her Shoes – Women Of The Eighth*. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/InHerIrishShoes>. Accessed 13 October 2025]

Archival ingestion is not simply a matter of making a history visible, but of rendering into a form amenable to *computational* operations – circulation, recombination, distant reading, meta-dating, exploration via new tools, comparison at large scales. Among the questions arising: The stories contained in the data set are stories of trauma, relived for a national campaign now preserved for historical futures. But what happens when we create a dataset of trauma that can be read computationally? When we make computational assumptions and analysis? What happens when we distance read instead of close read? What connections do we lose when we connect data sets? What do we join which had not been thought joinable? In the future, could the anonymous participants (speaking and concealing) be identified through more sophisticated computational author recognition analysis or techniques? Datafication of the self and data fusion are creating unique data profiles linked through systems without our knowledge. The production of these archives, in other words, involves various and multiple forms of *handing off* between the original object and its archiving, and between the layers of the archival stack. *With each transition, they change ontology*. They are no longer objects in a basement, a photo in an album, a post on a social media page.

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Many of these issues are also pertinent in relation to the Cork LGBT archive, and also to the Haringey Vanguard collection; where various forms of Black queer socialist activism, based around 70s–90s organized left political milieus are documented, and where materials designed for circulation in specific communities, contextualized by local and temporally specific struggles, are exposed to a broader view and to audiences never intended to be addressed. There is a need to re-frame these issues not only in relation to the politics of the visible (making visible, the terms of the visible, the gaze, objectification, for instance), but also in terms of access, and circulation, where this is explored in more infra-structural or multi-layered ways.

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Across the digital archiving landscape, the Open Access movement and FAIR principles for data management have

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created findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable data sets and collections. The kinds of (intersectional feminist) ethics of care we are beginning to point to, drawing on what these archivists have found and on work by scholars including [Odumosu 2020], is in tension with this; not against it, but demanding more nuanced thinking, rather than a technical or absolute solution. Adopting and considering the (FAIR) CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility and Ethics) to data management, data access, and dissemination is one response to this tension. Archival refusal as a political tool is bound up with what haunts the stacks as well as with the data that might be collected there; one way to think this through is to explore the resonances between data bodies and real selves, another is to think about the collective inheritance of trauma.

Stack politics?

To think about an intersectional feminist stack politics, as this relates to archival activities and more generally, is thus to refuse the temptation to enfold feminist activities around archival issues into sets of demands that can be simply and comfortably resolved, but that do not address the complexity of the technical inheritances of the systems we work within, nor the ways in which they are also non-neutral. It is also to insist on defining the object in relation to the circulation that its digital form allows. At the interface layers, the social structures that condition meaning are more clearly discernible as legacies carried into code than those further down the stack. These might appear to be evident only on that layer. Nevertheless, they are connected through the stack, via the technical process(es) of handing off, whereby infrastructure conditions layers above it. And, they are connected as well as in more indirect and lateral ways, through network architectures on a global scale having been forged, in their incompleteness, their unevenness, in their gateways and closures, in relation to cultural and social histories and conflicts, and struggles around justice around gender, race, class and sexuality and its structural withholding.

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An intersectional feminist approach to archiving, based on the demand for care, allows for both critique, intervention and mobilisation, but all of these require a holistic view of the materials and processes entailed in making and using archives, their practical and symbolic affordances. It must understand the impact of the inheritances up and down the stack in order to fully appreciate the complexity of any holding or object – understood as an archival object. It must also understand these dynamics as producing a particular, situated material reality but one that can be analysed as discrete moments; it retains the specificity of discriminations manifesting in a particular layer while insisting that these layers are imbricated together. Finally, it must understand the power and force of arguments that claim large parts of the social reality that is computational culture have become inevitable, unchangeable, and are not amenable to feminist demands.

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Conclusion

Thinking about intersectional feminism and DH through stacks isn't a panacea. There are issues with the formalism of the model; the temptation is real to simply take the stack (model) for the reality of complex and layered techno-social systems that make up the digital archive archipelago emerging as digitalisation processes intensify; and this is not a matter of mixing metaphor with material, but rather assuming that the model of a system becomes its reality. However, we find it helpful to use it to think through or hold together a set of considerations of the necessarily intersectional modes of feminism at play in contemporary global society with all its multiple forms of discrimination.

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Our exploration of the stack concept has led us to explore a series of questions about *where* DH feminism should operate – at which levels, and in what ways. Informed by the IFTe Network, we have expanded upon our stack orientation in our subsequent project, *Full Stack Feminism in Digital Humanities*.^[16] This project maintains a commitment to an engagement with the stacked reality of the networked systems we engage with, but it also uses the stack as a conceptual metaphor, delineating three distinct stacks: data and archives; infrastructure, tools, and code; access, experience, and integration. This new engagement with stacks, isn't undertaken with the aim of finding a technological solution, or an infra-structural "answer" to algorithmic discriminations. Our suggestion is that attending to the kinds of relations stack models model – and also asking about the status of the stack – model or metaphor, closed or open, for instance – can be productive. Using the stack as a framework for structuring feminist thinking and practices, we can challenge assumptions that certain questions are irrelevant, or of marginal importance, when they are posed in relation to particular material layers or operations of digital systems. For example, the stacks outlined in Full Stack

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Feminism provide a structured framework for contemplating the connections between different layers, which are often iterative, accumulative, and cumulative.

By employing the stack analogy, whether through the FSF framework or earlier iterations, we provoke critical reflection on where, within the stack or layer, a sense of intersectional politics in DH truly belongs. In this context, questions about the place of intersectional feminisms arise, and various perspectives have offered diverse suggestions on how to address this issue. Exploring these propositions, in the context of archives and on issues arising around archival practice, we wanted to both illuminate the material conditions we found and also use the example to challenge some assumptions about stack hierarchy. Feminisms need to operate to grapple with the questions DH raises both for itself and as – or in so far as – it wishes to engage with digital cultures in a critical and questioning way that seeks justice. *All that seems solid may melt...*

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Notes

[1] Authorship is listed in alphabetical order – authors contributed equally to developing, writing, and editing.

[2] The IFTe Network (Intersections; Feminism, Technology and Digital Humanities) sought to address a critical challenge in contemporary society and culture (the gender imbalance in computational practices and systems), to address issues of feminism in DH, and also to think specifically about (other) forms of post-colonial history; notably those traversing the UK and Ireland. Funded by UKRI-AHRC and the Irish Research Council under the “UK-Ireland Collaboration in the Digital Humanities Networking Call” (AH/V00199X/1 and IRC/V00199X/1). Followed up by Full Stack Feminism (on-going).

[3] The toponym “British Isles” refers to a European archipelago consisting of Great Britain, Ireland, and adjacent islands. In documents drawn up jointly between the British and Irish governments, the archipelago is referred to simply as “these islands.” We frame our experiences of feminism within the context of our experiences of intersectional feminism in the UK and Ireland. By its very nature, a feminist perspective from the UK and Ireland (Republic of) must be considered within a colonial and decolonial lens – both as coloniser (UK) and colonised (Ireland). While there is much debate about how Ireland has historically fit the “colonised” model, we know Ireland was used as a sandpit or playground for English imperial training and methodologies/atrocities.

[4] (as an aspiration even if one that is not fully or generously accepted).

[5] The question of the inheritances between material and symbolic layers has particular resonance in the context of these islands. The continued dominance of the English language in the Republic, the flow of culture back and forth across the Irish sea, and the material, cultural, and economic infrastructures of the geographic border (made more complex by Brexit), indicate how handing off between nation-states is never simple and certainly not clean. This also applies to the digital infrastructure. What, for instance, does it mean to label one part of Ireland .uk and the other .ie? Is this simply a naming issue at one level of the stack? How does the political context these domains inherit shape relations between the people and things that traverse their logics?

[6] We explored the example of English as the *lingua franca* of DH in our workshops.

[7] IFTe’s 2021 series “Transforming Archives: Intersectional Feminist Approaches to the Practice and Reading of Archives” problematized archives and archiving as having “... a troubling history. At their worst, they have involved the reification of their objects, turning living cultural practices into decontextualised objects stripped of their richer purpose. Curation and collection involve decisions of value which have too often imposed dominant meanings and created exclusions from the historical narrative. Archives have been associated with othering and colonisation practices and the abstractions of masculinised thinking. With the dominance of archiving projects within Digital Humanities it is vital to understand how we may build more inclusive archives but also how we may break the models so that they can express different ideals.” [https://web.archive.org/web/20220215160604/http%3A%2F%2Fifte.network%2Fifte-programme-21%2F]

[8] Niamh Moore (2020) invokes Star’s thinking on boundary objects to describe the way in which feminist archives, and community archives more broadly, sit between “between professional and amateur practices...[and] official institutions and grassroots organisations” (Moore, 2020).

[9] These Facebook posts, part of the campaign to repeal the 8th amendment in the Irish constitution which prohibited access to abortion services, were/are public facing but were part of an active political campaign.

[10] The emotive experience felt by those digitising the physical objects, and creating the digital archive as an act of archival activism, may not be felt or coherent to users of Europeana in this iteration or in any other configuration any other user might encounter them. What is lost and/or gained in these processes is the necessary focus for an intersectional feminist interrogation of the kind we advocate.

[11] “Bounded and unbounded to their original conceptualisation, their functionality and meaning dependent upon user and system interactions” [Webb et al. 2013].

[12] See <https://www.hqbh.co.uk/> See also https://www.hqbh.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Haringey_Vanguard_Report_FINAL.pdf

[13] See also Tonia Sutherland's research presentation, "Digital Remains: Reflections on Race and the Digital Afterlife" (2021), at IFTe's public lecture in collaboration with the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

[14] Here we are drawing in part on Aileen O'Carroll's discussion with IFTe (April 2021)

[15] See Justice for Magdalene Research <http://jfmresearch.com/>, see also <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2020/38/>

[16] *Full Stack Feminism in Digital Humanities* (2021-24) was funded by UK Research and Innovation-Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Irish Research Council under the "UK-Ireland Collaboration in the Digital Humanities Research Grants Call" (grant numbers AH/W001667/1 and IRC/W001667/1).

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