

Encoding Feminist Poetry with *Processing*

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Artifact type: Assignment

Developed for: Undergraduate class in “Introduction to Feminist Digital Humanities”

Audience: English majors and non-majors in humanities course

Time required: Two 75-minute class sessions + outside work

Method and tool: Critical coding with *Processing*

Description: This assignment asks students to encode feminist poetry and then reflect on how they would write code for a certain piece of feminist poetry. The unit on “Poetry and *Processing*” starts off with digital humanities theory. We raise and discuss questions like: Can code be feminist? If writing (like that of Hemingway, for example) is considered “masculine” writing and writing (like that of Jane Austen, for example) is considered “feminine” writing, can code too be considered “masculine” and/or “feminine”? We followed up on these discussions in two ways: we learned the basics of *Processing* (a coding language used by digital humanists, with great tutorials on their site <https://processing.org/>) so that students are exposed to some basic coding exercises. We also read landmark feminist poems from the late twentieth century. The last section of this unit asked the students to bring together the three components of the unit (the theory of feminist digital humanities, the practice of coding, and the raw humanities materials of feminist poetry). Students reflect on code that they would write that might encourage feminist reading practices, i.e. practices that would draw readers’ attention to the ways in which race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. operate within our society. This assignment asks students to *imagine* and *construct* their own reading and writing processes in digital forms, not only to incorporate the visual, electronic, and written aspects of communication into their work but to *invent* new models of these aspects. By inventing new models of the ways feminist poetry is read visually and written electronically, the students, by default, incorporate the nonverbal aspect of communication in that they are devising code intended to prompt particular (nonverbal) reading behaviors from their users. It is also meant to highlight the ways that they students themselves “treat” the data and drive home the point that data is never neutral.

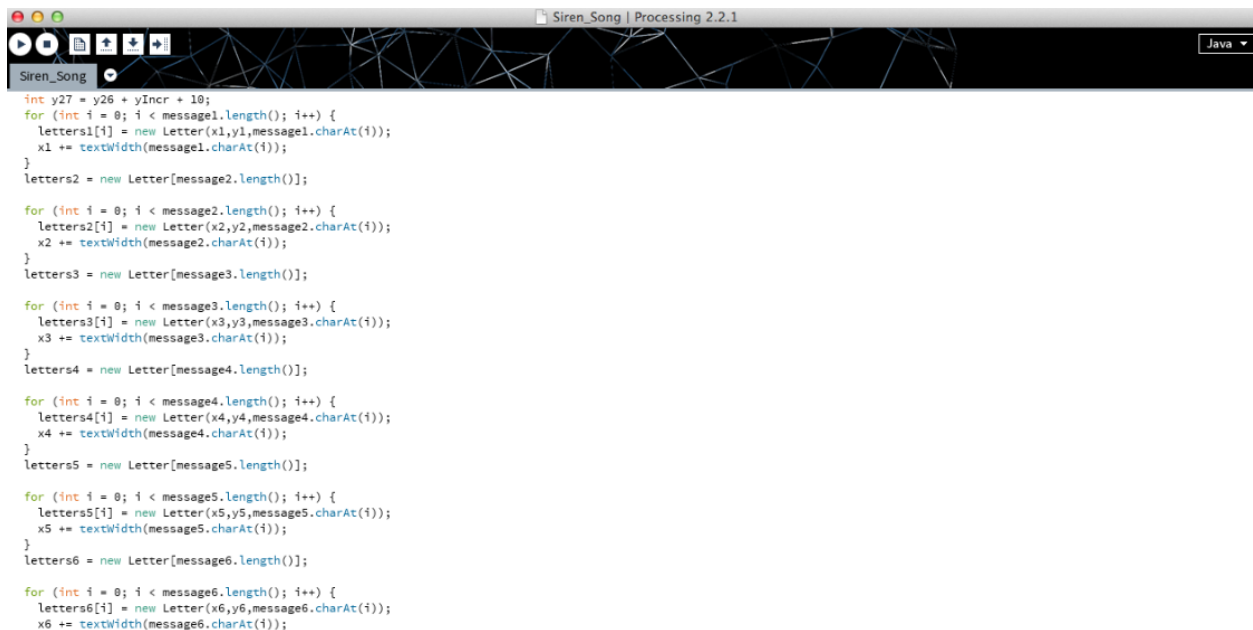
Supporting materials:

Assignment and sample student work

Reflection Paper - Encoding Feminist Poetry

In the first week of this unit, we performed close readings of some landmarks in late twentieth-century feminist poetry and talked about how political, personal, and popular poetry can evoke a range of emotions and reactions.

In the second week of this unit, we learned some basic coding commands in *Processing* and practiced writing code in an in-class writing workshop. We also looked at different codes written by feminist digital poets¹ and studied one in particular: a code that is meant to remind readers that poetry must be read with patience.

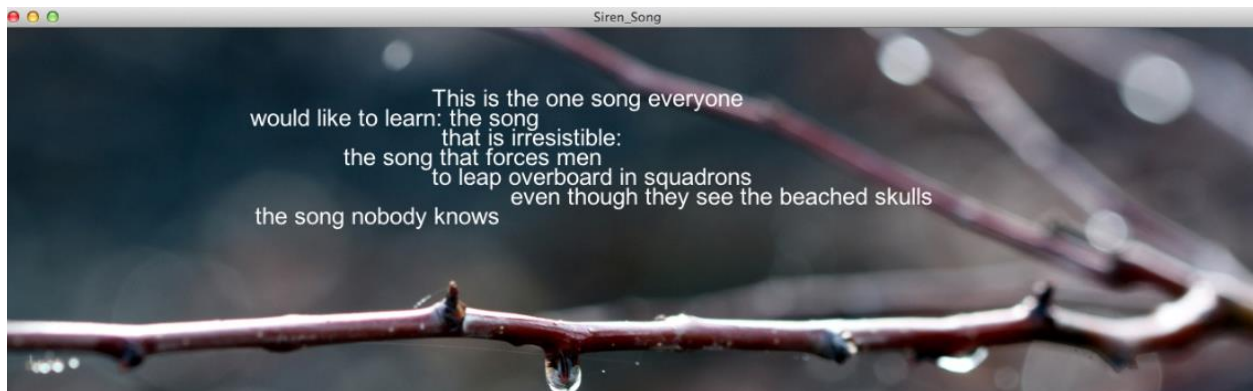


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int y27 = y26 + yIncr + 10;
for (int i = 0; i < message1.length(); i++) {
  letters1[i] = new Letter(x1,y1,message1.charAt(i));
  x1 += textWidth(message1.charAt(i));
}
letters2 = new Letter[message2.length()];
for (int i = 0; i < message2.length(); i++) {
  letters2[i] = new Letter(x2,y2,message2.charAt(i));
  x2 += textWidth(message2.charAt(i));
}
letters3 = new Letter[message3.length()];
for (int i = 0; i < message3.length(); i++) {
  letters3[i] = new Letter(x3,y3,message3.charAt(i));
  x3 += textWidth(message3.charAt(i));
}
letters4 = new Letter[message4.length()];
for (int i = 0; i < message4.length(); i++) {
  letters4[i] = new Letter(x4,y4,message4.charAt(i));
  x4 += textWidth(message4.charAt(i));
}
letters5 = new Letter[message5.length()];
for (int i = 0; i < message5.length(); i++) {
  letters5[i] = new Letter(x5,y5,message5.charAt(i));
  x5 += textWidth(message5.charAt(i));
}
letters6 = new Letter[message6.length()];
for (int i = 0; i < message6.length(); i++) {
  letters6[i] = new Letter(x6,y6,message6.charAt(i));
  x6 += textWidth(message6.charAt(i));
}

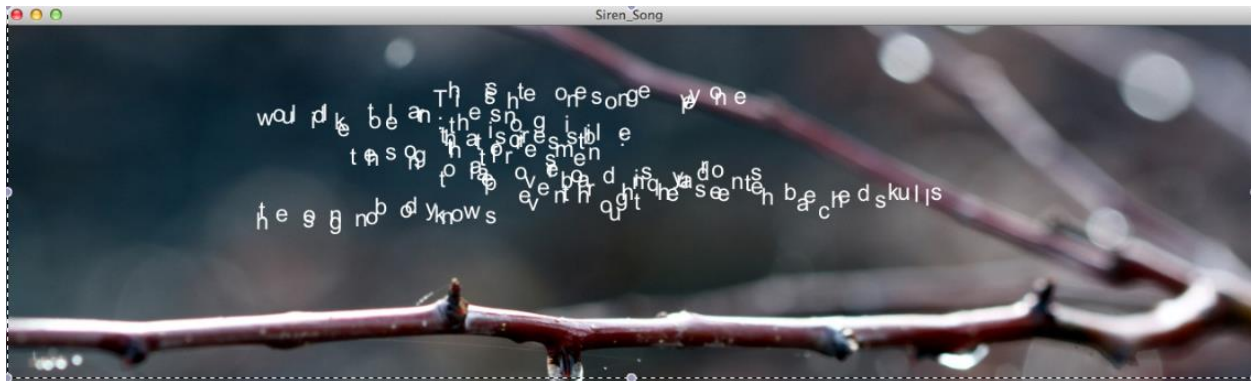
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After practicing writing code with *Processing*, students re-code a poem of their own choosing using a provided template. The template used in this assignment includes a command that tells the computer's camera to follow the reader's movements. If the reader is still, the poem will appear still:



¹ Code templates from DHSI "Feminist Digital Humanities" Course 2014

If the reader is fidgety, the camera will capture the reader's motion and the poem will shake, reminding the reader to be patient with the poem:



We used this templated code to encode a feminist poem of our own choosing and we discussed how code can prompt behaviors that encourage certain reading practices.

In this assignment, imagine you are writing code to prompt a behavior that encourages a particular feminist reading practice that *you* have come up with. In no more than 300 words, explain the reading practice your code would encourage and how you envision this practice to align with feminist principles (to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression).

The main focus of your writing must be your code, reading practice, and purpose. However, because this is a reflection paper, some of the questions you may want to consider as you draft your reflection include:

- How did you take your reader into consideration?
- What obstacles did you encounter?
- How did you overcome these issues?

The assignment will be graded based on how well you speak to these questions in the context of the issues raised by the poetry as well as articles we've read on feminist theory and digital humanities, and coding. You may want to revisit some of the key issues in each of these texts.

Requirements

1. Because this is such a short assignment, your reflection must begin with a thesis statement. The thesis statement can, but doesn't have to, take the form of something like: "I would write a code that would encourage ABC reading practice which aligns with feminist principles because XYZ."
2. The rest of the assignment should explain your ideas more fully.

3. You may offer your reflections on your thought processes as you worked through the assignment. However, this should make up no more than 25% of your writing.

Please submit your writing to Canvas as inline text.

Representative Student Work: Reflection Paper on Coding Feminist Poetry

Student A:

I would write a code that would encourage close reading practices which aligns with feminist principles because it would allow readers to think critically and carefully about feminist ideas in poems that are often times overlooked or undervalued. My code would look through a poem and highlight sections of text and lines that are related with feminist topics of race, sex, and sexuality. Highlighting would bring attention to readers of these feminist ideas in texts that might otherwise be misinterpreted as unimportant.

Principles of Feminist Theory, such as patriarchal societies, male dominance, inequality and oppression, exist even today. These ideas are too common and are unfortunately accepted by many people, causing people ignore feminist ideas. Highlighting text in poems would allow readers to notice, critically think, and question these ideas. This would advance feminism and redefine "feminism" for many people

My code would function as an unbiased program, outputting the same highlights for any reader, independent of their race, sex, sexual orientation, background, or ideas. This would allow for any reader to get an equal opportunity to understand the feminist aspects of the poem as the poet had intended the reader to. It would also serve a larger purpose: interpret multiple poems or texts and group them based on keywords and phrases. This would provide the means to create a database for anyone interested in comparing feminist ideas in poems and could also possibly depict a change in feminist ideas with time.

One obstacle I faced was how my code would distinguish between feminist ideas and other unrelated ideas. I was able to overcome this problem by implementing a search for keywords and phrases; the program would look for words such as "woman", "man", "sexuality", "race", and "gender" and highlight these words, bringing attention of these ideas.

Student B:

I would write a code that would visually capture how the reader interprets feminist poetries by taking the user's voice as an input to the code. When the user reads the poetry out loud, the microphone in the computer would pick the user's voice, and analyze its volume and intonation of each word. Then, the code would not only print out the poem on the screen that the user read, but appoint different colors, fonts, and sizes for each word the user read. Each word would go through the algorithm that would convert voices into words, and the completed project would depict personal interpretations of feminist poetries. Since everyone has different thoughts and perspectives, the code would be posted on to a social-network bulletin, where other users could give feedbacks to the project, and the visualization of the poem would be recorded on web. This practice is important, for it provides the user's viewpoint on feminism, and presents an opportunity for the users to develop their personal viewpoints on feminism. The visualization itself created from the code would provide as a resource that assists the users to realize thoughts that have not been discovered when the user read the poem. Also, the feed back from other users

would be a chance to widen their aspect of feminism and be enlightened. Because the code would be user-friendly to all age groups, more people would have a lucid understanding of feminism. One of the obstacles that could occur is that the final visualization could be skewed, due to hardware problems such as the quality of the microphone, or a possible glitch on software would pick up the user's voice. These could be overcome by averaging out several trials to a single visualization, thus creating more accurate analysis of viewpoints on feminist poetry.

Student C:

I would write a code that would encourage observational and critical thinking reading practices which aligns with feministic principles. My code puts extra spaces around words or phrases that a feminist poet would want its audience to pay attention to. For example, the line from the feminist poem "Barbie Doll" using my code would look like the following:

She was advised to play coy

The code spacing allows the reader to observe that the word is spaced out and to think about why that might be. In this instance, the word "advised" is placed apart because it is referring to the patriarchal power that shapes the belief of certain "standards" of women. I chose spacing out words, instead of other methods such as bold or italics, because when using those methods, the words are still bunched together and are still easy for the eye to skim over. I think that by spacing out the words, it forces the eye to notice that something is different, even at first glance, and to analyze why. At least this reflects my personal reading experience.

I took my reader in to consideration because he or she will easily be able to see certain words standing out and will make his or her own interpretation from it. This code provides a way for the poem to be read that will spark interest or curiosity in words that may have been skimmed over otherwise.

Obstacles encountered consist of determining the method in choosing which words to space out and also removing any sort of bias. As I have learned, nothing is ever neutral. The key to this code would be picking out words that solely reflect feministic ideology, which is something that is kept in mind when overcoming these issues.

Student D:

If I were to create a feminist code, I would write a code where it would change the pronouns in poems to less encompassing ones to help the readers understand how important the use of pronouns is in feminist writing. Over the course of this semester as well as this unit in poetry, the use of pronouns really makes a difference on how the reader interprets works of writing, especially poetry. Due to the fact that on average, most poems are short, authors try to condense as much information as they can into a few words to try and get their points across to the readers. The meaning of a poem can be changed extensively if only a few words were changed. This is why readers should be attentive to every single word and the position of that word in each poem they are reading.

Essentially, what my code will do is to change feminist written poetry into "normal" poetry written without the thought of what types of pronouns should be used. Since feminist poetry generally has pronouns that are more encompassing such as "we" instead of "me" and "he/she" instead of "he", this code will do the favor of changing all the pronouns in this poem into more individualistic pronouns such as "me", "I", etc. The purpose of this code would be to

show the importance of what type of role pronouns play in creating a feminist poetry. When the user copies and pastes a feminist poem into the code, the program will run through it and change all of the pronouns into more masculine ones and afterwards the code will show a screen with the original poem and the “new” poem side by side to show the effects of what is created when only the pronouns of the poem are changed.

Student E:

I would write code that would encourage the reader to think about the use of gender-specific pronouns. This practice aligns with feminist principles because the reader will have their attention drawn to how the author conveys the persona they are adopting. Do the author’s and speaker’s genders agree or do they differ? More importantly, however, how does the adoption of masculine pronouns (he, him, his), feminine pronouns (she, her, hers), or neutral pronouns (they, them, theirs) affect the reader’s perception of the poem and the author’s intent. In order to encourage this reading practice, the reader would have to click the screen to pop up the next word of the poem and if that word is a pronoun, instead of showing it, the reader will have to type in what they think the pronoun will be. After going through the entire poem, the program would display the poem again with the author’s original pronouns filled in and prompt the user to think about the use of pronouns not only in poetry, but also in culture and society as a whole.

I really like this idea and think it would help change the perspective of an everyday reader. I recognize the importance of assuming gender-neutral pronouns before someone discloses their pronouns to you, however, many others do not. I think that by guessing at the pronoun, the reader has to think about the bias of the author and what their purpose is. When it is revealed to them later, they can reflect on what they thought the pronouns were and why they thought that. They can then think about why the author chose to use certain pronouns and if their usage of them is in anyway oppressive or reinforcing of sexist practices or standards.

Student F:

I would write a code that encourages the reader to read slowly as well as place emphasis on certain important words/main ideas which aligns with feminist principles because it would enable the reader to pick up on social aspects of poems that encompass feminist ideals like oppression, sex, stereotypes, and inequality that the reader might not have been able to distinguish on their own. I would create a platform that featured only the title and author at first. Then, as the user clicked their mouse groupings of words belonging to a single word would appear. I don’t like the idea of a whole line appearing at once because there might be pauses and or different amounts of emphasis to be placed in a single line. The user would then click their mouse again for new words to appear; however, if the user clicked to early then an error message would pop up telling the reader to be patient and read slower. The words with greater emphasis/importance would appear larger than other words to provide a cue to the user that that certain part of the poem has a certain significance. The only issue with creating a platform in this manner deals with the question of who decides which words are more significant and how one goes about doing so. One could possibly overcome this issue if the author of the poem had their own recording of a reading. In conclusion, my code would prompt a reader to be more conscious of gender differences, inequalities, social issues, oppression, and more through as well as be more patient when reading because my code would place greater emphasis on those parts via enlargement of words as well as timing cues.

Student G:

Given the time and Processing expertise necessary to do so, I would write a code that would change the color of words based on their genderization. Words would be colorized on a scale ranging from red to blue with male gendered words red and female gendered words blue with intensity of color directly correlating with the intensity of genderization. This colorization would assist in making readers more aware of the genderization of literature as they read. Though this code would fall short when it comes to identifying the many other subcurrents of writing such as race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, let alone the intersectionality of the subcurrents, this code would engage readers in a critical analysis of the literature, revealing genderization and thus heightening critical awareness. There would be a key difficulty in writing this code which cannot be ignored, and that is the reality that the genderization of words is heavily cultural and reliant upon interpretation. Not all cultures gender words in the same way. Though the contrast is generally not as stark as the contrast between the genderization of the word “woman” in *The Matter of Seggri* and the genderization of the word “woman” in general American culture, real differences do exist in interpretations between cultures even within a single geographical region. However, the true power of the code lies not in its accuracy of color-coding, but rather in the heightened awareness of genderization it creates and the critical thinking it stimulates. Readers will question the colorization of words, thus questioning both their personal perceptions as well as the textual ramifications of the language used. This critical analysis of the importance of language and its subcurrents is an innately feminist practice and could be greatly encouraged with the use of this code.