Unfolding Community in Electronic Literature

Desdobramento da Comunidade em Literatura Electrónica

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Abstract

Although the creative practice comprises a wide variety of narratives emerging in digital environments, we consider 'electronic literature' to be a scholarly and artistic field. Its sense of community is built on a transmedial narration of the field itself. I explore the development of the field in relation to the sense of community to identify a collection of trends that have emerged in electronic literature as an academic field. My findings center around three themes: 1) belonging and demarcation, 2) infrastructure and resources, and 3) transnationality and inclusivity. I combine theory about communities with sources that reference community in electronic literature, drawing from sources across media. I further argue for the urgency of considering 'community' as a formative element in electronic literature, a vital concept in understanding digital narrative in the globalized network society in which they emerge.

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Keywords

electronic literature | community | taxonomy | infrastructure | inclusivity

— Resumo

Embora a prática criativa compreenda uma grande variedade de narrativas emergentes em ambientes digitais, consideramos a 'literatura electrónica' um campo académico e artístico. O seu sentido de comunidade é construído sobre uma narração transmédia do próprio campo. Neste artigo, exploro o desenvolvimento desse campo em relação ao sentido de comunidade para identificar uma coleção de tendências que surgiram na literatura eletrónica como um campo académico. As minhas descobertas giram em torno de três temas: 1) pertencimento e demarcação, 2) infraestrutura e recursos e 3) transnacionalidade e inclusão. Para tal, combino a teoria sobre comunidades com fontes que fazem referência à comunidade na literatura eletrónica, extraindo fontes em todos os média. Ao mesmo tempo, defendo a urgência de considerar a 'comunidade' como um elemento formativo na literatura electrónica, um conceito vital para a compreensão da narrativa digital na sociedade em rede globalizada em que emergem.

— Palavras–chave

literatura eletrónica | comunidade | taxonomia | infra-estrutura | inclusividade

The field of electronic literature is built on a curious paradox: it requires the open-endedness of digital environments to experiment with modes of storytelling as well as the institutional structures inherent to academia to build a sustained collective memory. As Davin Heckman states: "a watershed moment in the history of the field, then, might very well be the decision to form an institution around such an unfixed practice" (2021, 60). As creative output, electronic literature involves "new forms and genres of writing that explore the specific capabilities of the computer and network—literature that would not be possible without the contemporary digital context" (S. Rettberg 2019, 2). Yet any media-textual definition is insufficient to understand electronic literature: as a tradition of practice, electronic literature relies on community. Both the "unfixed practice" of electronic literature and the "institutions" within and around the community are consolidated in digital interfaces as a mode of communication and publication. In this article, I analyze how the material, discursive history of electronic literature is entangled with 'community'.

I feel a sense of community in the field of electronic literature, but this is such a nebulous concept that it is difficult to pinpoint where the community begins and ends. This fluidity is not only a trait of electronic literature, but of the simultaneously common and contested use of the concept of 'community'. Anthropologist Anthony P. Cohen calls the concept of bigger communities "a rhetorical figment" (1985, 13) because they tend to be more aspirational than descriptive, whereas small communities do have an actual reality. In the pivotal book *Imagined Communities,* political scientist Benedict Anderson argues that on a national level, communities are imagined: "it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (2016, 6). Although not even close to the scale of most nations, academic fields, too, are now too big to know everyone in the field, but does this necessarily mean we need to look for an alternative for 'community'? Gerard Delanty pragmatically notes in his book *Community:* "virtually every term in social science is contested, and if we reject the word *community* we will have to replace it with another term" (2003, 2, original emphasis). In his foreword to Cohen, Peter Hamilton points out that while the end of 'community' was announced in western sociology, "people throughout the Western world in modern industrialized societies were aggressively asserting their locality and ethnicity, their membership of communities which were real enough for them if not for those who ought to be studying them" (1985, 7). He concludes that "people manifestly believe in the notion of community, either as ideal or reality, and sometimes as both simultaneously. [...] if people believe a thing to be real, then it is real in its consequences for them" (1985, 8). How, then, can we understand electronic literature's contested emphasis on community as a formative value?

Although the creative practice comprises a wide variety of narratives emerging in digital environments, we consider 'electronic literature' to be a scholarly and artistic field. Its sense of community is built on a transmedial narration of the field itself. I trace the field's self-narration across media, from academic articles, conferences, exhibits, databases, Zoom meetings, and some artistic work and personal communications. I initiated the process of finding sources by searching the ELMCIP Knowledge Base for records tagged with 'community', which led among other reflections to a special issue in which authors described the electronic literature communities. I combined this with a snowball sampling method of going through sources of my original findings and sharing my research with others who then recommended further sources and memories. I do not offer a systemic, complete overview of the literature which would put stricter constraints on the types of content that could be included in my sample; the more scattered cross-format sources including both sources with community as their main argument and sources with incidental mentions of community do, I believe, give a more realistic representation of the community as it is experienced by its members. My aim is not to provide the reader with a timeline of the field

that fact-checks if the community is 'real enough', but rather a collection of trends that have emerged throughout internally identified sense of community in electronic literature as an academic field—as such, I do not include a comparative scope to other ways in which computer-mediation has led to communities online. My findings center around three themes: 1) belonging and demarcation, 2) infrastructure and resources, and 3) transnationality and inclusivity. I take a step back from individual discussions in the field, while arguing for the urgency of considering 'community' as a formative element in electronic literature, a vital concept in understanding digital narrative in the globalized network society in which they emerge.

1. Belonging and Demarcation

I attended my first Electronic Literature Organization conference in 2015 in Bergen (Norway), the summer before I was to study a semester abroad at the University of Bergen. I had never met anyone in the field and my experience of reading electronic literature was limited at the time, yet everyone at the conference was welcoming and answered all my basic questions without looking down on me. During the annual 'Town Hall' meeting, someone stood up to say that they had always felt connected to the electronic literature community since their first ELO conference, where they realized that "these are my people". I recognized this feeling that touches the heart of what community is. Despite the indefinable nature of community, Delanty states that "if anything unites these very diverse conceptions of community it is the idea that community concerns belonging" (2003, 4). This sentiment resonates in Norwegian artist Ottar Ormstad who notes, "I was invited by Scott Rettberg to do a reading and screening of my web poetry at the E-Lit in Europe conference in Bergen, Norway (2008). This was an essential event that made me feel more part of the community since I had productive conversations with several participants" (2012, n.p.). Belonging to the community, then, is tied to the dialogues about electronic literature with others. In electronic literature, a field with a strong entanglement between scholars and artists, the arenas for dialogues include both publications and events such as conferences, festivals, and exhibitions. Belonging to a community cannot be understood without meshing this social aspect with common demarcations of the field.

The ontology of a field, even when formulated rigorously, always runs a risk of being too narrow or too broad. When I introduce my students to electronic literature, I tend to take an agnostic stance as to what 'counts' as electronic literature; when students ask me if a creative work they encountered (often online) is electronic literature, I ask them what they would gain from analyzing it *as* electronic literature, rather than within another discipline. At the same time, the process of collectively contemplating definitions and narrations of a field can further a sense of belonging. Jill Walker Rettberg comments on the broad definition of electronic literature by the Electronic Literature Organization as a way to bring "together genres that in many ways were seen

as separate in the early years" (2012, 13). She cites Lori Emerson's blog post "On e-literature as a field": "what did not exist until the founding of the Electronic Literature Organization in 1999 [...] is a name, a concept, even a brand with which a remarkably diverse range of digital writing practices could identify: electronic literature" (Emerson in JW. Rettberg 2012, 13). A definition, then, is not only an ontological issue, but also a force for community and identity.

Different histories of classifying various types of electronic literature have been developed—which both shapes and is shaped by the community. The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) used to define electronic literature on their website as "works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer" (n.p.). Remarkably, the ELO has removed even this broad definition from their website as it was considered too limiting. Yet the ontology and history of electronic literature remain essential parts of the field. The start and development of electronic literature have been narrated repeatedly in various media and channels to grasp the origins of the field.

In 2002, N. Katherine Hayles gave a keynote address at the Electronic Literature Organization at UCLA, where she made the distinction between "first-generation" electronic literature, referring to early works of electronic literature, and "second-generation" electronic literature, referring to works produced after around 1995[1]. In *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008), Hayles places electronic literature in a literary tradition. In 2019, Leonardo Flores followed Hayles's first- and second-generation demarcation and updated it with a third generation. The third generation in Flores' conception started around 2005, which "uses established platforms with massive user bases, such as social media networks, apps, mobile and touchscreen devices, and Web API services" (2019, n.p.). This does not mean that it replaces the second generation: "this third generation coexists with the previous one and accounts for a massive scale of born-digital work produced by and for contemporary audiences for whom digital media has become naturalized" (Flores 2019, n.p.). However, it has a relevant chronological aspect concerning the first two generations: "each generation builds upon previous and contemporary technologies, access, and audiences to develop works and poetics that are characteristic of their generational moment" (2019, n.p.). Including third-generation works as electronic literature is a site of debate within the community, with Eugenio Tisselli and Rui Torres as its most vocal opponents: "why should e-literature seek to go mainstream, when the mainstream is, *par excellance* [sic], the medium where the disruptive cosmology of Technic reproduces itself?" (2020, n.p., original emphasis) They argue that social media-based works lack the self-reflexivity of the first and second generation. Even so, third-generation

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1 She later kept her division but updated her terminology in her 2008 book to "classical" and "contemporary" to "avoid the implication that first-generation works are somehow superseded by later aesthetics" (7). With the continued development of new phases in electronic literature, the numerical distinction stuck better than "classical" and "contemporary".

works are becoming more common case studies in written publications and conference presentations and the term has entered the shared vocabulary of the field. Discussions around the taxonomy of electronic literature, then, furthers the community even (or especially) when there is disagreement about it.

Yet not every history of the field uses a demarcation based on chronological cohorts. Chris Funkhouser's *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959–1995* (2007) traces digital poetry back to early computer experiments (rather than a literary tradition stipulated by Hayles) and defines electronic literature types by providing case study analyses. Scott Rettberg's 2018 book *Electronic Literature* considers electronic literature in line with experimental art traditions prior to electronic literature, stating: "they are not exclusively of digital lineage. They have particularly deep connections to experimental writing and avant-garde art movements of the twentieth century" (2018, 6). As such, his book chapters each cover a specific genre of electronic literature that traces the analog origins and digital evolution of each genre. This approach reflects a general focus in the field on experimental literature within the context of electronic literature, exemplified most clearly in the PO.EX Digital Archive of Portuguese Experimental Poetry.

Exhibitions also play a role in putting forward alternative material histories of the field. The 2013 exhibition *The Emergence of Electronic Literature* (S. Rettberg et al., 2013) in Bergen included various key documents and objects that hold significance in the history of electronic literature and placed special attention on the role of the University of Bergen in the development of electronic literature as a field. The exhibition *No Legacy|| Literatura electrónica* (Saum-Pascual and Ortega 2016) criticizes the history of electronic literature by removing the linear history and instead proposes that "all literature is contemporary." More recently, the Indian digital art movement dra.ft curated an exhibition of Indian electronic literature in the context of *ELO 2021: Platform [Post?] Pandemic*. This exhibition included *Excavating E-lit,* which explores Indian electronic literature between 2000 and 2021, highlighting that this meant "looking at places which might not have been tagged as E-lit but if thought upon can be considered one" (dra.ft 2021, n.p.). Renegotiating electronic literature's history and definition, then, epitomizes the narration of the field, which functions as a tool to discursively imagine the community.

Demarcations within electronic literature—questioning what genre and/or generation a work belongs to—have a powerful effect on the development of the community. At the same time, social factors affect the evaluation of the material: the community around creative works affects whether a work is regarded as electronic literature. Flourish Klink pointed out in their presentation at *ELO 2015 The End(s) of Electronic Literature* that the definition as set by ELO was broad enough to include all sorts of genres, "but to do this is to ignore the differences in the communities that supported these texts' creation. Similarly, it is tempting to declare the 'end of e-lit,' since so much e-lit can also be framed as fan fiction, video art, games, etc., but to do this is to ignore the impact

of the e-lit community and its structure" (2015, n.p.). This productive aspect of community creation is brought forth by Mia Zamora at ELO 2015, where she highlighted that "community develops around a collaborative fictional enterprise" (2015, n.p.). This aligns with the findings of anthropologist James Leach who foregrounds that creation is a critical element of binding social groups.

The ontology of the field, then, is not a detached theoretical academic discussion, but rather a dynamic imperative to build the field further. Delanty states that "as a discourse of loss and recovery, community can be utopian and at the same time nostalgic" (2003, 11). The nostalgia in the narration of electronic literature often relates to the community's small size in its starting days which inspires the sense of belonging. Electronic literature author Bill Bly hosted an ELO Virtual Salon session in 2020 to discuss the history of his work *We Descend*, which brought forth many reflections on the history and development of the community. About the Cybermountain conference in 1999, he says "the whole gang was there" (2020, n.p.), explaining that "it occurred to me at the time that this was likely the last time that you'd be able to get everybody who was involved in this movement into one place" (2020, n.p.). By 'this movement' he seems to refer to the North-American writing community, which at the time was not as cross-continental as current efforts in the field. He explains: "every name of everybody that I knew was writing this kind of literature seems to be sitting there [...] or else was hooked up to us via dial-up modem on various communication venues on the web" (2020, n.p.). This nostalgia towards the early days might relate to Cohen's assessment that a community's size influences the extent to which perceived relations are based in reality. At the same time, both past and current utopian expressions embrace the professionalization of the field. Infrastructure and resources, then, are required for the community to function—which begs the question of how these logistics affect the community's development.

2. Infrastructure and Resources

Although I have always been an avid reader, I did not encounter electronic literature until some works were assigned in one of my BA classes in literary studies. This experience corresponds to developments in electronic literature years before I started university. In her 2007 keynote address "Is the Future of Electronic Literature the Future of the Literary?", Hayles argues that the future of electronic literature is in academia. And Scott Rettberg notes two years later that "electronic literature is slowly but surely working its way into academic contexts as literature programs, digital culture programs, and other academic departments hire new faculty with specializations in digital textuality" (2009, n.p.). The development of the electronic literature community cannot be separated from the infrastructure, and accompanying resources, in which it developed, both inside and outside academia. For example, in her reflection on the electronic literature community, Yra van Dijk argues that "literary festivals, conferences and workshops form temporary communities in which planned collaboration takes

place" (2012, n.p.). Community is not simply as social practice but also facilitated by infrastructure. As such, I turn to the prevalence of discussions of infrastructure in the electronic literature to elaborate on the role of resources and the gift economy in further developing the field.

Although romanticized as a small-scale community, electronic literature has developed within institutional support in various contexts throughout its existence. In her recent book *Pre-web Digital Publishing and the Lore of Electronic Literature,* Astrid Ensslin examines the case study of *Eastgate Quarterly Review of Hypertext*, a hypertext journal from the mid-1990s, noting that "the mutual generosity between Eastgate writers was and still is an important part and trademark of the electronic literature community" (2022, 32). Hypertext conferences organized by Eastgate facilitated this network:

> To Eastgate founder and "serious hypertext" pioneer Mark Bernstein, the Hypertext conferences likely meant "some kind of currency" (Douglas, interview) with the emergent hypertext writing community. These events proved to be a key incubation platform for soliciting new ideas and publications as they brought together existing and new talent. (8)

The community, then, was part of an infrastructure. Ormstad also notes, about the E-Poetry festival series, that the ability to organize events has a crucial influence on community formation: "I realized that the openness and freedom I felt were part of the basis of the community, and that the interdisciplinary cooperation I had been missing from the sixties also was another important element" (2012, n.p.). He reflects that "I understood how these dimensions in combination with resources and new technology made it possible to present such a remarkable and massive festival program" (2012, n.p.). These anecdotes function as examples of Cohen's note that "community continues to be of both a practical and an ideological significance to most people" (2012, 8). Talking about the electronic literature community, then, helps with the practical organization for the community itself and the ideological association of the values associated with this community. These values often build on a sense of belonging and inclusion. This egalitarianism contributes to the imaginary of the development of electronic literature, but must, according to Cohen, also be handled with caution:

> The complaint we should make against this claim of egalitarianism is not that it is incorrect or empirically unwarranted, but that it is inadequate. It rarely distinguishes among equality as an ideology ('We should all be equal here'), as a rhetoric ('We are all equal here'), and as pragmatism ('We behave as if we were all equal here'). None of these should be confused with a description of actual social relations. (1985, 33)

It might seem like this discussion about equality would be a better fit for the next section, in which I discuss inclusivity in electronic literature. Yet I consider a discussion

of resources and dependence on infrastructure a prerequisite to fully understanding the inclusivity of the community.

The dynamics within the electronic literature community are not self-contained but instead embedded in academic structures at large. Its development fits with the general tendency that: "the patterns of internationalization and globalization of academic networking are [...] increasingly conditioned by social structural factors and economic considerations" (Becher and Trowler 2001, 95). It is no surprise, then, that the double-edged sword of the 'gift economy' pops up again and again in both discussions of academic expectation and the electronic literature community. In its most general definition, the gift economy refers to a culture in which services or goods are not exchanged for monetary value but rather given without explicit one-to-one return. In some cases, the gift economy is profiled as a form of egalitarianism. Members of a community "may denigrate the disparities of wealth and power, or the competitiveness which they perceive elsewhere, to justify and give value to their espousal of equality" (Cohen 1985, 35-36). In this way, positioning academia as a gift economy can be posited as a way to place it, ideologically, outside monetary transaction and replace it with the 'transaction' of social and cultural capital. Actions to further the academic field, through peer review and conference organizing to name a few, consolidate and the often implicit shared standards of any academic community. For example, Erik Dean Rasmussen asked the question "what can we—i.e. the authors, artists, critics, coders, scholars, students, writers and readers thinking at the interface of these social systems—do to create environments in which e-lit can flourish?", proposing that the gift economy of making networked and open-access environments "bypasses conservative paternalism and neoliberal corporatization, which undermine higher education and literary culture by emphasizing training elites and making profits" (2009, n.p.). He combines, then, both literary and academic culture in this movement in which the gift economy is a (partial) resolution to favorable development of the field.

The sentiment around this gift economy as an ideological position was already present in the 1990s with "the birth of the copyleft movement, with Creative Commons becoming the new standard for digital publishing and sharing" (Ensslin 2022, 31), which challenged "the more copyright-leaning intellectual property model followed by Eastgate" (Ensslin 2022, 31). However, the gift economy does not operate outside of infrastructure and institutional resources. Ensslin, for example, describes the gap between free-market thinking and the need to preserve works: "since the free market economy cannot be reasonably expected to undertake this mammoth task, concerted government, institutionally and charity-funded scholarly undertakings are needed to preserve the enormous legacy left by pioneer enterprises like Eastgate" (2022, 38). In other words, the gift economy requires institutional support to function. ELO was planned at

the TP21CL[2] conference in 1999 by electronic literature authors and scholars. Even so, it wasn't until later that year that Scott Rettberg (ELO's co-founder and first executive director) announced: "ELO is a go" at the Cybermountain conference (Bly 2020, n.p.) when they received a donation of startup funding from publisher and internet investor, Robert Ziff, and their official nonprofit status would follow by the end of the same year (personal communication with S. Rettberg). ELO grew out of a grassroots community, but its success relies on its ability to raise funds. The history page on ELO's website also exemplifies this by emphasizing the different universities ELO has been affiliated with and the organization's received grants over the years. In 2009, Rettberg explained that authors and scholars can think of their work as separate from the free market because they are "ensconced within universities" (2009, n.p.) before hailing this gift economy as "a progressive evolution of the distribution of thought, enabled by the technology of the global network" (2009, n.p.). Steffen Hantke, on the other hand, critiques academia's functioning as a gift economy, as academics are expected to do various tasks such as writing articles, attending conferences, and sitting on editorial boards without monetary return besides their employment. This system then presumes that everyone has relatively stable employment and freedom to work on their 'gifts' inside the terms of their employment. This is, however, often not (or no longer) the case. As such, the gift economy parallels Miranda Joseph's description of nonprofits:

> Nonprofits are defined through their relation to capital. Nonprofits are supposed to be *not* for profit—the capital they accumulate cannot be distributed as profit—but they are also not non-capitalist and especially not anticapitalist. Nonprofits are often posited as the institutional form in which community complements capital. (2002, 70, original emphasis)

Although communities can be presented as egalitarian and criticized for not being egalitarian enough, as Cohen stipulates, Joseph's insight into community as a complement to capital raises questions about positions of power in nonprofits, ELO among them. The lack of monetary flow within nonprofit academic organizations requires willing exploitation of intellectual labor of the dedicated community to function. Although ELO directors seem to have institutional power, their proximity to capital necessitates a note that these positions tend to come from a place of free labor. This labor can be partially provided within the context of the academic gift economy, in which professors have the possibility to consider their nonprofit work as part of their employment, yet anecdotally we know that many of the people in these 'positions of power' work considerable overtime. This overtime is required to achieve top positions in a field, which increasingly relies on metrics and competitions. Additionally, we must acknowledge

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the paradox that someone in a position of power has more freedom to do this free labor, while it is also more difficult to refuse free labor when one has not (yet) reached the career stability to do so. What we think of as 'egalitarian', then, is more complex than an academic appointment. The institutionalization of electronic literature, in academia and beyond, entails a multifaceted understanding of infrastructure and resources. This includes a perspective on the transnational nature of electronic literature and the inclusivity of the community.

3. Transnationality and Inclusivity

After I attended ELO 2015 and studied abroad at the University of Bergen, I returned to my home country but remained a research assistant in Bergen. Not only was I able to do all my work and communication online, my taken-for-granted ability to speak Dutch was suddenly a distinctive skill I could use to find and document Dutch electronic literature that was lacking in the ELMCIP Knowledge Base. This experience highlights the dependence on local institutional situatedness combined with digital connectivity. The general shift from local communities to Marshall McLuhan's 'global village' corresponds to the expansion of media technologies. There is, however, a limit to what just 'being connected' can do in terms of community development. The practical realization and outcomes of making a 'global village' are portrayed in the electronic literature community as a herald of the increasing awareness of internationalization in academia—it has been transnational from its conception as a field. When describing electronic literature authors, Thomas Swiss points out:

> the electronic literary community, which typically works and meets in cyberspace, diverges from the historical avant-garde in that geographical place has not been a defining feature as it had been, say, for earlier outsiders, including mid-twentieth century collectives such as the San Francisco Beat writers and the New York School of Poets. (2004, 15)

Jerome Fletcher and Lisa Somma take such an observation to the next level by contrasting it to the academic infrastructure, highlighting "the discrepancy between the geographical situatedness of the Academy on the one hand, and the dispersed nature of networked e-lit communities and of e-literature as a practice on the other" (2012, n.p.). Digital connectivity has affected academic institutions to become more internationalized, yet local institutional situatedness continues to influence the field and a transnational community does not escape societal biases. This begs the question what electronic literature, which depends so heavily on both dispersed networks and institutional infrastructure, gains and loses through its transnational status.

3.1. Language

Considering the transnational nature of electronic literature combined with its inherent focus on language (it is, after all, literature), it is perhaps not surprising that multilingualism has been a concern of the field for a long time. The ELO 2007 conference included an "International Electronic Literature" panel (Baldwin, Borràs Castanyer, Gervais, Gutiérrez, Marino, JW Rettberg 2007), "the goal of which was to turn ELO's attention to work being written in other languages and other cultures, specifically Spanish and Catalan" (personal communication with Marino 2022). At this panel, Mark Marino pointed out that almost everyone in the room was a white American (personal communication with Marino and S. Rettberg 2022). One year later, a conference called *Electronic Literature in Europe* built on previous conferences in Paris and The Netherlands. Apart from one Norwegian and one French work, however, all presentations and works were in English. The year after, in 2009, Rettberg profiles translation and inclusion of different language communities as a major goal. He outlines various actions "toward common goals and to work together across language communities" (S. Rettberg 2009, n.p.). Rettberg, who later spearheaded the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base, suggests that "one very important effort would be to develop shared bibliographic and metadata standards for electronic literature, and to create descriptive records that are both open and shared" (S. Rettberg 2009, n.p.). In the same article, he also envisions translation of both electronic literature works and introductory essays about electronic literature to foster cross-language communication about different types of electronic literature in communities around the world. Yet despite these early developments, the discussion around transnationality and language communities continues to this day. Since no one speaks every language, but we also want to avoid the balkanization of research, the field grapples with questions of how to escape its historically Anglo-American focus.

Both artistic and academic practices reveal engagement with multilingualism—often creating a mosaic understanding of language rather than a melting pot. Ormstad uses it as a creative drive by creating a multilingual work made up of different languages used by people in the electronic literature community. He explains that "people will experience the video differently dependent upon their language background. A person knowing just one language will probably get less out of it than a multi-lingual viewer. On the other hand, the sounds of the words are also important so the impression will be different based on the focus of the viewer" (2012, n.p.). The inability to speak every language, then, becomes a requirement that enables varied experiences and interpretations of the work, rather than a weakness. This acceptance that most people will partially understand the work also runs through other experiments with multilingualism in the electronic literature community. The 2015 exhibition *Decentering: Global Electronic Literature* (Seiça et al.) displayed works from Brazil, Peru, Poland, Portugal, and Russia to decenter English as the lingua franca of the field and demonstrate the value of encounters with artistic practices and traditions outside one's linguistic knowledge.

At ELO 2018 in Montreal, Canada, the conference contained several French sessions among the majority of English sessions, and the introductions to plenary sessions were done in both English and French. Some translation work has been done in the context of electronic literature research. Monika Górska Olesińska and Mariusz Pisarski translated *Sea and Spar Between* (Montfort and Strickland 2012) into Polish (2013). They presented the translation process as an interrogation of the code and literary aspects of the work. Individual scholars also research electronic literature in different languages. Reham Hosny, for example, does essential work in researching and promoting Arabic electronic literature through the Arabic Electronic Literature (AEL) Network. She states: "to get a broader understanding of the field, we should reflect upon different perspectives on e-lit from different parts of the world. [Sandy Baldwin and I] felt that it's the time to shift the world e-lit community interest from the western e-lit to e-lit in other parts of the globe such as the Arabic e-lit as well as propose new concepts and ideas on e-lit derived from the Arabic culture specificities" (2017, n.p.). Several language-specific databases, such at PO.EX, NT2, and Ciberia (initiated in 2005, 2005, and 2012 respectively), were also created in part to function as a corrective to the field's focus on English-language works in the past (Goicoechea; Portela and Torres; Saemmer). More recently, in 2021, Yohanna Joseph Waliya built the MAELD & ADELD Database of African electronic literature in collaboration with Jason Boyd. They did this work as part of the ELO Research Fellowship, to bring African works to the attention of the majority of the electronic literature field unfamiliar with these works. These projects contribute to a more inclusive community and ensure that works are not overlooked as quickly because they are not in English. Due to the various artistic traditions in different cultures, electronic literature is indeed an international phenomenon but can also have distinct characteristics based on language and cultural tradition.

3.2. Communication Technologies

Communication technologies are inherent to the community of electronic literature, so much so that it is a common theme in the narrative around its development. Swiss states, for example: "Trace, started in 1996, is another well-known online community for writers, including hypertext and New Media writers. Based at Nottingham Trent University in England, the community conducts its business by email, sponsors live meetings and events via the Internet, and has a large site on the Web" (2004, 19). Ensslin, too, highlights the communication technologies between authors, following up her comment on the sense of community between Eastgate authors with:

> The mutual generosity between Eastgate writers was and still is an important part and trademark of the electronic literature community. Nevertheless, developing this community spirit, with multidirectional links and effective information and technological exchange, was no small feat when the fastest and most accessible way of communicating

was via landline telephone, especially if email addresses were unknown. Many hypertext writers never met each other in person. (2022, 32)

Similarly, Ormstad reminisces on the email threads used a decade later to discuss issues such as "nakedness on stage and also our relation to other parts of the world" (2012, n.p.), highlighting the convenience and importance of 'mail debates' between physical meetings. Despite their ease, he does express the desire to have these discussions embedded in the timetables of physical meetings. Communication technologies, then, provide a lot of opportunities but do not seem to fully replace face-to-face communication, especially when it comes to confrontation.

Communication technologies mentioned above are mainly text-based, and to a certain extent, 'private' or at least addressed to specific people. Communication in the electronic literature community now also involves social media such as Facebook groups and Twitter as well as video meetings. In January 2020—two months before COVID-19 made video conferences ubiquitous—a small group of researchers and writers led by electronic literature author Deena Larsen started the ELO Virtual Salons on Zoom, which continues on a monthly basis. Each month, a different host presents a topic or leads a workshop, followed by a discussion among the attendees. With this type of communication, the aim is to have more accessible and frequent meetings between the annual ELO conferences, although, unavoidably, time zones and unstable internet connections continue to be a problem.

3.3. EDI(A) discussions

Discussions about inclusivity—mainly regarding language and geography—have preoccupied ELO for over a decade and a half. During the spring of 2021, these debates soared. Various issues concerning equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA) were raised in the ELO Facebook group[3] that continue to affect ELO's actions and the relations between ELO members. The initial spark was the *Posthuman* exhibition in Bergen, Norway. Various community members took offense that four men had curated the exhibition and that there was a gender imbalance among the artists in the exhibition. The critique concentrated on what was only one of a collection of events and exhibitions, while the organizers had kept track of the inclusivity of the Arts programs as a whole. Although the curators upheld that the acceptance rate was equal for men and women when considering their unequal number of submissions, this led to a more extensive discussion around how the pandemic had disproportionately affected women in terms of care work. This has meant that female academics (especially mothers) submitted less work overall (Krukowski; Minello), and according to some people in the discussion, this

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3   I do not identify or directly cite any of the individuals in the discussion, but rather speak in general terms.

should have been considered by the curators. The discussions also expanded beyond the exhibition and the issue of gender balance to include EDIA in the ELO activities at large. In response, the ELO initiated monthly "EDI in the ELO" conversations every first Friday of the month on Discord, led by Leonardo Flores who was ELO president at the time. The ELO Virtual Salons hosted a non-recorded session called "Inclusion Solutions" in Zoom breakout rooms on April 12, 2021, which invited people to share solutions on various topics related to EDIA. Furthermore, Margaret Rhee, the ELO Amplify Anti-Racism Research Fellow of 2020-2021, hosted "Intersectional E-Lit: A Workshop" on Zoom on July 1, 2021. As I argued above, one person can be in a position of power in one sense (for example, by being on a board of directors) while underprivileged for another reason (for example, doing free labor at an underfunded university). Rather than an issue isolated to ELO, these developments echo similar discussions in academia and culture at large. The 2021 discussions have revealed not only that there is a lot of room for EDIA improvement but also that participants build on community practices and appeal to a sense of belonging when engaging with these issues.

The last few years have also seen more interest in accessibility, both in community and artistic practice, be it more erratic than the sustained consideration of gender and language. A key example is the creative work *Byderhand* (Greyling and team 2015-2020), a locative narrative made for a blind/low-vision target audience. Franci Greyling (the project leader) and Gustaf Tempelhoff (the web editor) have presented this work at several electronic literature conferences. Deena Larsen, electronic literature author and prominent member of the ELO, started envisioning a working document to provide electronic literature authors with the knowledge to create more accessible works. Parallel to the successful "Acid-Free Bits" (Montfort et al. 2004) and "Born-Again Bits" (Liu et al. 2005), this resource would be called "Accessible Bits". More time and focused labor are necessary to create this vital resource. Discussions around accessibility can be difficult within the community—after all, it requires not only inviting more disabled people to the table, but also potential behavior change from disabled and non-disabled authors alike to create more accessible works while understanding the impossibility of creating works that are accessible to *everyone*. In my article calling for more accessible electronic literature, I use 'we' and 'us' to address the field as a community to help people move towards a readiness to scrutinize the accessibility of their own works and events.

4. Concluding Remarks

Digital narratives do not appear out of thin air but are created by people in specific contexts. The Center for Digital Narrative advances the understanding of trends within genres and contexts of digital narratives without losing their specificity. This requires a consideration of how technological aspects intersect with social and cultural practices. Alongside the use of technologies for creative works of electronic literature, the narration of the field is also transmedial, including among other things email threads,

academic publications, teleconferencing platforms, and social media. The decades of deliberate intertwining between artistic and academic practice require scrutiny and accountability of academia's impact on 'the community'. Providing a discursive history of electronic literature gives access to the nebulous but material influence of community. The practice and positioning of community as a value relies on the entanglement of social and material factors, which reveals a three-fold dialectics. The verbal and textual negotiation of demarcation and classifications focuses on the objects that are being created and researched within the field. Rather than a foundation, ontology functions as a tool in the field. This ontology falls short without considering the negotiations taking place on the structural level, including the transactions between monetary, cultural, and social capital. This focus on institutions contextualizes electronic literature within academia. Finally, the negotiations of inclusion and transnationalism focuses on people while opening up discussions about the ontological and institutional frictions. These dialectics can in themselves be productive to keep the community going. As Yra van Dijk puts it: "the goals and the creative energies of the community are to an important extent concerned with the description, the establishment, and the rules of the community itself" (2012, n.p.). Without romanticizing 'the community', the discursive and material force of community development needs to be recognized in order to understand electronic literature as a practice and field within the wider digital narrative landscape. Electronic literature benefits from its openness, or "unfixed practice", as Heckman describes it. The experimental impulse inherent in electronic literature enables problem-solving as new technological, social, and institutional issues arise. Like other fields, electronic literature continues to unfold over time, allowing the community to cultivate it in the directions we want to see going forward.

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Hannah Ackermans completed their dissertation *The (Inter)Faces of Electronic Literature: Scholarly Experiments that Built a DH Field* in Digital Culture at the University of Bergen (Norway). Throughout their PhD, they have taught courses on electronic literature and digital humanities, co-organized the Digital Humanities Network at UiB, and served as co-convenor of the Digital Culture research group. Additionally, Ackermans was an editorial board member of the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base, co-organizer of the Electronic Literature Organization annual global conference in 2021, and editor of the *Platform [Post] Pandemic* special issue ('gathering') in Electronic Book Review.

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