Introduction to Feminisms and DH special issue

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Abstract

Introduction to the special issue of *Digital Humanities Quarterly* on Feminisms and DH, which offers both background on the origins of the special issue and an overview of the pieces therein.

Special issues often capture a moment in time, an efflorescence of critical engagement, or an urgent and timely shift in a field. If most special issues are snapshots, "Feminisms and DH" is something more like a long-exposure photograph, a surreal composite that is simultaneously fiction and fact. [1]

Let me indulge in a bit of scene-setting to help elucidate what I mean about the surrealism of this issue and as way of practicing the kind of self-disclosure that Chris Bourg and Bess Sadler argue is an important design and accessibility feature in feminist work [Bourg and Sadler 2015]. Katherine D. Harris and I first proposed this special issue to the editorial board of *DHQ* in January of 2012. We had been part of ongoing discussions about "silences" in archives and were relatively fresh off of a challenging roundtable titled "Editing Digital Feminisms" at the 2011 meeting of the Society of Textual Scholarship (STS), which also included Marilee Lindeman and Martha Nell Smith. The roundtable was great; what was challenging from my perspective was the clear gender profile of those in attendance – ours was a room full of women. While it was (is) disheartening to imagine that our male colleagues weren't interested in feminist DH work, it struck us as particularly strange given the history of the field. As Harris and I noted in our call for this special issue, "several of the major DH projects that are now at the forefront of the field had feminist imperatives at the outset (for example: Women Writers Project, the Orlando Project, and the Dickenson Archive), but it does not seem to us that there has been a sustained inquiry into the evolving relationships between feminist theory and DH work." [2]

In calling for a more sustained consideration of relationships between feminist theories and digital humanities, we were calling for engagements that helped enrich our sense of why feminisms mattered to DH, beyond simply getting more women in the rooms. In addition to issues of equity and access, at stake in the conception of this special issue were the ethics and commitments in digital humanities scholarship and teaching. Within a 12-month span leading up to the proposal, there were discussions at the Modern Language Association meeting about who was in and who was out of DH,[1] Jamie Skye Bianco's "This Digital Humanities Which is Not One" and Tara McPherson's "Why is the Digital Humanities So White?" came out in print, and the seeds of the three-site THATCamp Feminisms were sown by debates about coding, gender, and the politics of DH. In response, the creative and critical pieces in this special issue work to think not just about gender parity and recovery, modes central to second wave feminisms, but also about intersectional identities, labor, affect, and materiality in ways aligned with third-wave and decolonizing feminisms. Several of the pieces also reach outside of the admittedly porous boundaries of DH to include Library and Information Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Ethnography, and Game Studies as explicitly feminist interventions in a field that can feel dominated by literary and textual studies. [3]

By invoking the surreality of long-exposure photography I mean to point to the ways the interventions here are as necessary and fresh as they might have been in 2012 or 2013. Given the production time, this should be a blurry photograph, but the lack of sustained engagement with feminist theory within DH makes it still rather clear. Rather than being superseded, the interventions of each piece, and of the collection as a whole, have only become more urgent and [4]

it is striking that the field has not yet seen another special issue on feminisms and digital humanities. As I write this introduction the annual ADHO Digital Humanities conference is taking place in Sydney, Australia. In some ways it seems as if nothing has changed. As Scott Weingart has observed is his series of blog posts on the ADHO conference, while 46% of DH2015 attendees are women, they make up only 35% of authors with accepted papers.[2] What's more, his analysis suggests that part of what makes DH so white (to paraphrase McPherson) is that "there's a very clear bias against submissions by people with names non-standard to the US."[3] Now, it is worth noting that a single year does not a trend make (although he sees stable numbers over three years with respect to gender) and that the ADHO conference is not necessarily representative of the entirety of digital humanities scholarship. Nevertheless, the questions we posed in the call for this issue about the presence of a masculinized research/tools track and a feminized pedagogy track, the elided histories of feminist intervention, and exclusionary cultures within DH are as urgent today as they were in 2012

"Feminisms and DH" confronts a number of methodological and topical biases that continue to haunt the field according to Weingart's analysis. Jamie Skye Bianco's "Man and His Tool, Again?: Queer and Feminist Notes on Practices in the Digital Humanities and Object Orientations Everywhere" uses a performative mode, previously theorized in her 2012 "This Digital Humanities Which is Not One," to critique heteropatriarchal biases in a textual studies dominated digital humanities. Her piece exemplifies the "socially engaged critical creativity" advocated by feminist scholars like Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylenska; a thinking with and through the tools that we critique [Kember and Zylinska 2013]. Her piece and the companion teaching reflection by Nicole Starosielski push the boundaries of traditional academic argument by insisting that "creative critique" is central to how we communicate amongst ourselves as scholars and with and to our students.

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Equally critical, argues Roopika Risam, is intersectionality as "a lens for scholarship in the digital humanities [that] resists binary logic, encourages complex analysis, and foregrounds difference." This is an important corrective that we have seen recently emerge in projects like the Digital Diversity Timeline, Amy Earhart's Diverse Histories of DH, and Global Outlook DH to tell more diverse histories of digital humanities work and thereby imagine alternative futures. Risam draws on Sandra Harding's work in feminist and postcolonial Science and Technology Studies (STS), to foreground the relationships between difference and technology. In addition to suggesting the value of alternative histories, Risam does the difficult work of charting theoretical foundations for alternative digital humanities "methods that advocate inclusion and critical analysis but are situated in the materiality of technologies." In ways that blend the kind of theoretical and historiographic work of both Risam and Bianco, Gabrielle Dean's "The Shock of the Familiar: Three Timelines about Gender and Technology in the Library" offers a set of provocations about not only the history of librarianship and information technology, but also about its possible futures. Like Bianco, Dean plays with argumentative form, drawing on the timeline as both a critical and speculative genre. Both Dean and Tanya Clement draw on Library and Information Science disciplines to push digital humanists to grapple with both the physical and epistemological sites of DH work, which is very often housed in libraries and archives either literary, metaphorically, or both.

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Clement's "The Information Science Question in DH Feminism" brings the question of infrastructure and its situated relations to the fore specifically through Information Science and architectures and systems of knowledge. Like Bianco, Risam, and Losh, Clement is interested the ways that a feminist insistence on situated knowledge and "technologies of self-consciousness" draws attention to technocultures and their underlying epistemic commitments. Drawing on her own work on the Baroness von Freytag, Clement deftly demonstrates how tools and subject become entangled as she pursues the social text/body/network. The social body/network is central as well to Moya Bailey's "#transform(ing)DH Writing and Research: An Autoethnography of Digital Humanities and Feminist Ethics." Bailey further expands the question of how we communicate amongst ourselves when undertaking research by blurring the boundaries between the researcher and her "subjects." Prioritizing "collaborative connections" in order to enact a praxis of care that she sees at work in Black trans women's use of Twitter, Bailey's autoethnography charts a different mode of scholarly engagement than that envisioned by standard protocols in the social sciences.

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Elizabeth Losh looks to feminist Media and Game Studies and STS to suggest that it is critical to move networks and power formations from ground to figure in feminist digital humanities. Citing the example of the Ludica collective (Celia

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Pearce, Jacki Morie, Tracy Fullerton and Janine Fron), she also imagines new ways for collaborative, communal feminist work to unfold within DH. Collaboration and social networks might be keywords for this special issue. Bailey and Losh both point us to scholarly practitioners who act as and within communities. Similar modalities have histories within scholarly and activist communities of women of color, trans, and queer folks. Work like that of the Crunk Feminist Collective (http://crunkfeministcollective.tumblr.com/), Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0/b.a.n.g lab (http://bang.transreal.org/about/), the LatiNegrxs Project (http://lati-negros.tumblr.com/) and GO::DH (http://www.globaloutlookdh.org/ demonstrate that interdisciplinary and inclusive collaborative communities have long been present if not centered in digital humanities work. They also illuminate how powerful community-driven mixed-media scholarship can be — both as models of scholarly practice and as arguments that illuminate technologies and practices of oppression.

Constance Crompton, Ray Siemens, Alyssa Arbuckle, and the DMSEG team use "Enlisting 'Vertues Noble & Excelent' Across Scholarly Cultures: Digital Collaboration and the Social Edition" to reflect on the affordances and limitations of social editing for the Devonshire Manuscript, a text that is itself deeply social and networked. The team sought to create an inclusive, visible editorial process as a way of prioritizing the processes of editing and social networking over a traditional model of consumption. In this they are perhaps the most conventional of all of the projects discussed here, in so far as they are producing a digital edition of an early modern text. But their efforts to expand beyond traditional scholarly platforms and communities place their work firmly in line with the other feminist interventions in this special issue. These efforts were repaid with insights on the ways that wiki platforms might enact social support functions akin to early modern marginalia and, as if responding to Losh and Clement, they foreground their own feminist epistemological commitments through both their processes and their platform. But they also had to grapple with the presence of trolls in their open edition, making it clear that digital platforms are always "contact zones" of the kind discussed by Mary Louis Pratt [Pratt 1991]. Spaces where difference, dissensus, and even abuse can mingle in the social text.

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I began this introduction by invoking the analogy of long-exposure photography, which produces surreal images in part because it obscures differences across time. Streaky starry night images preserve the traces of celestial bodies that appear at the beginning of an evening, but are no longer visible by morning. We don't have a good equivalent of this in academic publishing. The contributors to this volume are doing the hard work of bringing feminist theories and practice together, each in her/their own way and their important work is preserved here in this issue. Process — the additions, deletions, revisions evoked by the social edition of the Devonshire Manuscript project — is far less visible. Perhaps this is a way in which the special issue is more surreal that the long-exposure photograph; in advancing itself as a snapshot it erases the long arc, privileging just the final product. Without this introduction, "Feminisms and DH" could well appear to be the labor of a single issue editor when it was inaugurated by two and significantly supported by *DHQ* staff. It could look like a collection of eleven authors across eight pieces, instead of an issue that contains within it the traces and published work of seventeen authors across fourteen pieces.

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As feminist theory has long known, our work is embodied and this embodiment manifests in this issue as institutional and professional limits, geographic moves, pregnancies, illnesses, and self-determining redirections. In some instances this has left gaps in the final product – spaces where voices were to be heard, but aren't for a variety of reasons. These absent voices register for me as faded streaks in the long exposure image. Harris and I invited more experimental pieces for an "assemblage" section in our original call, which is realized in Bailey, Bianco, and Dean's pieces but was envisioned to be larger and more experimental still. A vibrant discussion of the distance between the representation of women in the profession and feminist agendas is absent and much needed. Engagement with queer theories and praxis are similarly limited despite the great work being done in venues like *ada: the journal of gender, new media, and technology* (see for example issue #5 on Queer Feminist Media Praxis).

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The pieces herein are working to redefine DH and they all point to larger, often marginalized fields of creative and critical work. Bailey and Rissam's articles function as entrée points to the work being done by women and feminists of color both in the U.S. and internationally that has too often had to find home outside of DH as such but is nevertheless transforming both how scholarship is done and on what terms. Crompton et al.'s chapter similarly points to the rich vein of work being done and still to be done on the various affordances and risks of social media and open platforms for

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feminist digital production and scholarship. As suggested by Bianco, Dean, and Clement, a more robust theorization of feminist digital humanities requires understanding the ways in which academic structures subsume feminist innovation and critique, appropriating both the insights and power of subversive work. Finally, as nearly every piece herein demonstrates, if we are to have a more just feminist digital humanities, we must attend to the ways that academic practices and digital spaces and tools are being leveraged by those with power — very often to limit marginalized people and at the most extreme in order to consume or promote violence against women, people of color, and trans people.

Gaps and silences aren't unique to this special issue – there are always declined invitations, rejected articles, pieces withdrawn or delayed or never written – but having had the privilege of watching the process, they strike me as important traces. Affect, another feminist keyword, was everywhere present in struggles over and in reviews, anxieties about timelines, celebrations of new directions, and the mourning of losses. Anger, frustration, sorrow, and joy are co-present on these pages and in the margins of this issue, and yet are nearly absent from the reader's perspective. From the privileged position of editor, I am acutely aware of how disciplinary, technical, and personal constraints have shaped this volume. `13`

I draw attention to this as a way of testifying obliquely to the challenges that continue to shape feminist engagements within digital humanities (probably within academia more generally as well). I want to observe openly that this volume is shaped in ways that may well be inarticulable but are at the heart of feminist commitments to seeing knowledge production as material, embodied, affective, situated, and labor. bell hooks writes about citing gaps in archives and histories as a way to "let the reader know that something has been missed" and I want to mark that the pressures that come to bear on women's bodies, lives, and work mean that there are known gaps here [hooks 2004]. One of the great insights, I think, of the contributions to this volume is that there are also many unknown gaps and that intersectional, interdisciplinary, and multimodal work is essential to that process of seeing what we do not yet know is missing. Ellen Rooney argues that "feminist address" is a performative, critical act that creates constituencies and brings feminist positions into being – it is a generative, poetic process through which alternative futures are created [Rooney 2006]. Herein are eight different modes of feminist address and they are powerful but partial beginnings. `14`

- Jacqueline Wernimont `15`

Notes

[1] see Stephen Ramsay's write up of the MLA Roundtable http://stephenramsay.us/text/2011/01/08/whos-in-and-whos-out/

[2] http://www.scottbot.net/HIAL/

[3] ibid.

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