Tara McPherson
Feminist in a Software Lab: Difference + Design
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Reviewed by Amanda K. Greene, 2020

Amanda K. Greene is an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Research Scholar at Lehigh University, where she promotes interdisciplinary research and teaching efforts across campus. Her scholarship operates at the nexus of media theory, feminist technoscience, visual culture, and the health humanities, placing a wide range of fields in dialogue to interrogate the evolving feedback loops between human bodies and new media technologies. Her writing has been published in academic journals such as *Twentieth Century Literature* and *Information, Communication, and Society,* as well as in popular venues such as *Real Life Magazine.*

Feminist in a Software Lab: Difference + Design offers a revised origin story of the digital humanities that foregrounds the field's inclusive, feminist potential. Although this is no small task, Tara McPherson approaches this challenge in nuanced, creative, and frequently surprising ways. Furthermore, she effectively channels this central question about what the digital humanities is/can be into substantive social and scholarly concerns as opposed to engaging in a disciplinary turf war. Drawing from her own experience (starting in the late 1990s) developing the Vectors Lab, McPherson's narrative turns "away from a focus on massive data sets, on text mining, and on the connection of the digital humanities to the sciences in order to mine the relations between the digital, the arts, and more theoretically inflected humanities traditions" (13). Her alternative approach to the digital humanities undermines divisions between disciplines and blurs lines between theory and practice, software and screen, form and content. These generative entanglements reveal the integral role feminism might play in sustaining socially engaged digital humanities scholarship and, perhaps, even shaping new kinds of digital futures.

Feminist in a Software Lab joins previous conversations about the place of the humanities in the twenty-first century's quickly evolving technological landscape and about the role of feminism in the digital humanities. However, diverging from influential writing in this area--such as N. Katherine

Hayles's *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* or Lisa Marie Rhody's "Why I Dig: Feminist Approaches to Text Analysis"--McPherson pivots away from text as the privileged unit of analysis. She concentrates instead on multimodal visual culture and how "computation has long been deeply intertwined with visuality, aesthetics, and the sensory" (17). Reflecting this move away from text, McPherson's print book self-consciously grapples with its own form's un/suitability for the content in its basic organizational structure. For example, "A Visual Introduction," a short prelude, and two pages on "How to Read this Book" all guide a reader into the main body of the text. This body is not a conventional progression of chapters but an assemblage of two long essays and various multimodal "windows" that showcase Vectors and Scalar projects. Additionally, images and other artifacts such as emails or transcribed excerpts of planning sessions are interwoven through the entire text.

The first essay, "Designing for Difference," draws on intersectional feminism to address key questions that have been posed about the digital humanities' relationship to cultural studies and identity politics such as "Why is DH so white?" and "Is DH a refuge from race/class/gender/sexuality?" McPherson describes a critical ecosystem in which cultural theorists of digital media often relegate their analyses to the surface of screens, and hardware and software studies scholars frequently bracket identity as irrelevant. She claims that both of these tendencies are symptoms of a dominant stratigraphic model in which categories like platform, code, interface, and audience reception are viewed as discrete, enclosed layers that rest on top of one another. Culture and identity are seen to exist in these upper levels but not to penetrate into deeper, "purely" technological realms. McPherson critiques this schema by arguing that these layers cannot be so easily demarcated and separated from one another: "Code does not become cultural after the fact. Rather, code emerges from culture in all its complexity even as it exerts its own agential force on the

social realm" (76). Culture is entangled in all aspects of technology's infrastructure and development instead of being a cosmetic surface.

McPherson goes on to claim that this difficulty entangling code and culture itself emerged out of a particular sociotechnical context. She places the development of UNIX in explicit dialogue with US racial politics in the same mid-century moment, focusing especially on how relational databases and the era's racialized urban planning and color-blind identity politics relied on modular, encapsulating logics. Arguing that these dominant "operating systems" were mutually reinforcing, she synthesizes, "we can see at work here the basic contours of an approach to the work that separates object from subject, cause from effect, context from code" (82). Such contours persist in the very structure of digital platforms and lie behind conceptual challenges re-entwining code and context. Building from this foundation, the end of the chapter suggests that critical theory can help combat disciplinary modularity in the digital humanities. New materialisms informed by feminist and critical race theory--which focus on moving, relational assemblages as opposed to the static intersections of different discrete spheres/identities--are one way to address how gender and race cannot be dissociated from technological systems because they are "in there already." More speculative than expository, this section offers a rich tangle of theorists that generates new sites of future inquiry.

The second essay, "Assembling Scholarship: From Vectors to Scalar," follows these questions into the intersection of theory and praxis, using the development of the Vectors Lab and its subsequent offshoot, Scalar, as an anchor. As McPherson was one of the founders of this USC-based lab, her writing oscillates between personal narrative and theoretical reflection. The essay is also repeatedly disrupted by the incursion of "windows" that place the reader in contact with particular Vectors and Scalar projects. Although this unsettling of narrative and formal expectations is deliberate, it also means that this second essay doesn't have the same argumentative elegance and

energy as the first. The book's conventional print modality begins to strain more in its efforts to communicate the innovative architecture of Vectors and Scalar design. Without the reader having firsthand access to all of the projects that McPherson mentions, her summaries sometimes seem insufficient even as the sheer number of examples verges on redundant. However, in spite of this minor glitchiness, the experience of reading is carefully crafted, and its dual narrative-archive function does embody the kind of experimental forms being described.

The theoretical strength of the second essay is its compelling reframing of the classic relationship between form and content for a digital context. If, as synthesized above, modular design and the relational database encourage siloed modes of approaching the world and doing scholarship, Vectors strove to develop design practices that could enable alternative, entangled approaches. At the center of McPherson's argument is the idea that by engaging with design, humanities scholars "might better help technology handle the complexity of our interpretive frameworks. We can participate in designing technological systems that better suit our needs and modes of analysis, joining critique and creative 'carpentry'" (131). To this end, the lab's interdisciplinary collaborations generated projects that pushed against the constraints of the relational database or the hierarchical structures built into WordPress, for example, forcing readers to create new kinds of navigational and reading practices. Here theory and practice are not at odds; by contrast, theory is an essential ingredient in innovative design practice. As the essay draws to a close, McPherson turns to Scalar, an initiative of the Alliance for Visual Networking Culture and a newer offshoot of Vectors's work. Scalar is a free, open-source publishing platform that enables scholars without advanced technical skills to create digital-born, long-form scholarship. Scalar emphasizes relationality and deconstructs artificial binaries, such as narrative versus database (seen as opposing models by influential digital scholars like Lev Manovich) or distant versus close reading.

One consideration that is missing from the book--in light of its initial framing as a digital humanities origin story, the first essay's meticulous linkage of mid-century technology and sociohistorical contexts, and the second essay's emphasis on archival practices--is a concerted engagement with theories of media history. When media history is touched on, particularly toward the end of the book, it deals primarily with the ephemeral or already lost nature of many of the projects McPherson mentions. This meditation on obsolescence is provocative, but could have been more theoretically rich if it were developed further or more cohesively considered in light of feminist design principles. Additionally, it would have been fruitful to consider how Vectors/Scalar projects and a feminist approach to scholarship interact with the broader evolving digital ecosystems within which the digital humanities necessarily must operate.

Still, this is a small gap in an overall elegantly written, strikingly original, and thought-provoking book, which has something to offer a wide range of readers inside and outside of the humanities and of academia. McPherson's deliberate demarcation, clarification, and reclarification of her claims address the diversity of her intended audience, offering an admirable model of intentional, accessible interdisciplinarity. And her text serves as an archive not just of Vectors projects but of contemporary feminist thinkers, embodying Sarah Ahmed's position that citation can be a mode of feminist praxis. For feminist philosophers, the book is also a call to action that affirms the power of feminist theory to intervene not only in the digital humanities but in wider understandings of a digitally networked world. In McPherson's words: "It is hard work to hold race and computation together in a systemic or relational manner, just as it is difficult to join theory to practice, but feminism offers rich models to engage and expand in this vital endeavor" (106).