

Introduction to Digital Feminisms

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Welcome to *Atlantis'* latest foray into making the "digital" explicit in feminist scholarship and practice. Guest editors Sheila Petty and Barbara Crow have extensive academic experience ranging from developing hands-on workshops on how to code web pages to curating exhibitions of digital art. From our perspective, the "digital," in other words, the conversion of texts, sounds and images to zeroes and ones moving around the globe in nano-seconds and their ephemeral and ubiquitous qualities, are both wondrous and daunting. Digital practices have made significant changes to not only how we disseminate, transfer and send content, but also how we manage, negotiate and move in our day-to-day lives.

This issue focuses on "digital feminisms" and how new technologies have informed women's self expression, cultures, labour and histories, influenced the representation of women, and changed the way in which women's issues are viewed or pursued. As feminists working in the areas of new technologies and new media practices, we were interested in how the complexity of new technologies has altered the way women think about time, space and ourselves in the digital age. Whether it is business, media, entertainment, advocacy, art, education, social action, politics or a myriad of other sites of contention, the ability of new technologies to converge with and transform past, present and future ways of interacting with the world in which we live has immense and wide-ranging implications for feminists.

In the original call for papers, we looked for contributions from a broad range of areas, including Women's Studies, New Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Film and Communications Studies, History, Visual Arts, Computer Science and any other area relevant to the discussion. Given the complexities of new technologies, we encouraged submissions that think across geographical divides, histories and media,

including (but not limited to) the Internet, digital arts, aesthetic and narrative analysis, film, video, television, educational software/delivery, and visual and digital art.

We were encouraged by all the exciting feminist work going on out there. For example, gender issues in art and technology have been taken up by Canadian new media artists Nell Tenhaaf, Catherine Richards, Julie Andreyev, Char Davies, Caitlin Fisher, Judith Doyle, Sara Diamond, Joey Berzowska, Kay Burns, and Nancy Paterson, among others. Institutions such as the Banff New Media Institute have been important sites for nurturing and taking risks with artists working in new media contexts. And given that we both work in the areas of Fine Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, we were especially keen to see papers dealing with artistic and cultural inflections of new technologies. Inspired by women artist researchers working at the crossroads of art, science and technology, we were keen to demonstrate that women's voices are pivotal and central to these practices.

One of our goals with this issue was to further a project that saw fruition in 2003 when The MIT Press published *Women, Art, and Technology*, edited by Judy Malloy. One of Malloy's major goals was "to compile a volume that both documents the work of women who have been working innovatively with art and technology for many decades....and includes projects and voices now integral in the field" (Malloy 2003, xx). Diversity, inclusivity and difference became key issues and as more women artists/theorists grappled with and challenged them, it became clear that "gender matters" (xvi), but it matters differently to different women.

Interestingly, our project forced us to ponder our intellectual and political relationship to digital technologies and feminism. While we are both cognizant of and have been engaged with "third wave" feminism, we found ourselves asking ultimately if feminism is relevant to considerations of digital technologies. We were glad to see that the submissions we did

receive, and thus included in this issue, share in common, but not always explicitly, the ways in which digital technologies mediate women's bodies: their labouring bodies, their reproductive bodies; and their disabled bodies.

The cover art of this issue of *Atlantis* is a photo of students interacting with a work by feminist collaborators Nell Tenhaaf and Melanie Baljko and this collection begins with an interview/conversation conducted by Kim Sawchuk entitled, "Artificial Life and Lo-Fi Embodiment: A Conversation with Nell Tenhaaf and Melanie Baljko." This piece sets the context of collaboration for, and interdisciplinarity of, feminist work in digital technologies. Sawchuk's interview weaves questions of how, why and when these kinds of collaborations can come together and what these collaborations can reveal. They address the significant challenge of "making...different languages and skills speak to one another." In particular, Sawchuk, Tenhaaf and Baljko explore "feminism and embodied communication" and "[how] the presence of feminism inform[s] their scientific research and the art practice." They provide us with ways to not only think about how to effect these kinds of collaborations, but what they can also enhance and ultimately, make more complex and nuanced.

While Sawchuk interviews two feminists working and creating in the fields of computer science and Fine Arts, Krista Scott-Dixon's "Long (Standing) Digital Divisions: Women's IT Work in Canada" puts this labour into a context and probes the notion of the "digital divide" and its relevance to women's work within the IT contexts in Canada. The labour involving the creation, production and administration of digital technologies takes up, and is shaped by, gender practices. Scott-Dixon provides us with evidence of how the intersections of race, masculinity and femininity have material consequences.

But, what is most significant about Scott-Dixon's contribution is her dismantling and interrogation of the concept, "digital divide," that continues to reproduce and reify relations of gender and digital technologies.

She argues, through an examination of five juxtaposed relations, "technology/work," "paid/unpaid," "good jobs/bad jobs," "work/time," and "divide/equity," that the concept of divide is embedded in corporate discourses of "haves" and "have-nots" and that solutions lie almost exclusively in the realm of skills and access to technologies. Hence, the "digital divide" discourse relies and reproduces liberal notions all the while purporting that individual women must be responsible for learning these skills and leaving it to the market to provide these technologies. She concludes by arguing: "If feminists are to address the persistent disparities in women's IT labour force participation and experiences, they will not only need to reclaim the conceptualization of the 'digital divide,' but also to speak more broadly of a project of technological equity."

Scott-Dixon's interrogation of the problematics of the "digital divide" and more specifically, how this concept continues to maintain traditional gender relations in the material practice of digital technology and her call for "technological equity," lends a useful framework for two Canadian case studies that explicitly take up the labour of digital technologies. These case studies, examined in Katrina Peddle, Alison Powell and Leslie Regan Shade's article, "Bringing Feminist Perspectives into Community Informatics," reveal how Scott-Dixon's relations get played out in a community business organization and a not-for-profit technology group developing and implementing "free" Wi-Fi networks. It is Peddle, Powell and Shade's contention that gender played a significant role in shutting women out or keeping them in particularly subordinate roles. Their appeal to this emerging field is that this kind of work must "examine the exclusions inherent in the invisibility of the everyday when conceptualizing participation in CI initiatives and organizations" (Balka 2002) and why a feminist intervention is required in the newly emerging field of Community Informatics (CI).

In quite a different context, Janice Hladki explores "Social Justice, Artistic Practice, and New Technologies: Gender and

Disability Activisms and Identities in Film and Digital Video" through the work of South African feminist disability filmmaker Shelley Barry. Hladki approaches the filmmaker's works from a Foucauldian perspective and provides close critical readings of the film and video trilogy, *Whole: a Trinity of Being*. In this context, Hladki reveals the ways in which digital technologies can tell different stories for and about bodies with disabilities. Barry's rendering of her experience with digital text, sound and images not only provides her with ways to represent her disabled body, but also to consider the potential of bodies with disabilities.

In one of Barry's pieces in her trilogy, she skillfully changes the subject position of the medical profession's gaze of her body that Monique Benoit and Jean Dragon so carefully document in "Corps, genre et interprétations par imagerie médicale: les dessous de la scène clinique dans la relation patiente/médecin." Like Barry, Benoit and Dragon argue that medical imagery has had a significant impact on representations of the gendered body in medicine. In particular, the field of gynecology has involved, and evolved, visualization techniques that have served to "standardize" images of women's bodies that were, at one time, invisible to the human eye. The authors effectively argue, however, that this practice and process are inherently voyeuristic in nature and procedure. Furthermore, they go on to detail how, by pushing the limits of photographic technology in the drive to achieve the most "realistic image" of the woman's body, western medicine has, in essence, reduced the doctor/patient relationship to one of technological efficiency and innovation. As Hladki describes and analyzes the ways in which artist Shelley Barry turns the medical gaze back unto us using digital technologies, Benoit and Dragon illustrate how difficult it is to not be completely objectified by medical technology itself. Ultimately, women's bodies are reduced to the minutia of zeroes and ones - both a digital body and electromagnetic fields with no agency.

Our last two papers address the ways

in which one digital technology application, blogging, with its attendant culture of giving everyone a voice and making everyone an author, conveys the always critical insight of feminist scholarship that contexts matter. In "Blogging the Maternal: Self-Representations of The Pregnant and Postpartum Body," Lesley Husbands investigates current efforts to counter the narrowness of dominant representations of the pregnant and postpartum body. Like Benoit and Dragon, despite the potential of these technologies to provide women with more knowledge and agency about their bodies, the continued subordination and devaluation of women's bodies gets reproduced in blogs by, about and for women. In particular, Husbands' essay examines the Internet blog, "The Shape of a Mother," and argues that while its intent is to successfully challenge and engage with hegemonic mass media representations of the "perfect" pregnant and postpartum body, in her impressionistic methodology, she finds that despite the agency of digital tools women's post-partum bodies continue to be pathologized and desexualized.

In another blogging context, "Blogging in the Classroom: Technology, Feminist Pedagogy, and Participatory Learning," Jenny Roth advocates the use of blogs in the feminist classroom as a way to enrich students' participatory action. Roth claimed to be a neophyte in understanding and using these technologies yet she was keenly aware of the ways in which her undergraduate students have integrated digital communications in their day-to-day lives and wanted to work with these skills (social networking, text messaging and emailing). Indeed, from Roth's perspective the blogging component of her course met with tremendous success. What is critical to note in the Husbands and Roth papers is that context matters in order to facilitate the agentic dimensions of these technologies. While Husbands' premise that a site where women could discuss post-partum bodies might be a way to resist dominant discourses, the proprietor of the blog did not intervene, facilitate, and/or engage with participant

entries. In the blog Roth established for her class, the reasons for the blog, instructions of use and focus on particular content with specific readings - hence its explicitly pedagogical agenda - produced the more emancipatory results expounded by proponents of blogging. Consequently, what is most significant for feminist considerations of digital applications is how to facilitate and make room for all women's experiences in all contexts.

As Shade and Crow have argued elsewhere, English-Canadian research in this area "has made the material relations of technology and culture explicit and integral to social change" (2004, 170). These papers continue this research agenda and also allude to the possibility that these technologies can be part of our agenda for social change. It is our hope that feminist scholars can make more explicit the ways in which digital technologies permeate our everyday, are compelled to make more obvious and provocative relations with these technologies and to be mindful of the ways in which these technologies continue to mediate women's bodies.

References

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