A Feminist Framework for Research

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Introduction

It is perhaps inevitable that a project working on feminist methods should reflect upon and embed the values we hope others will incorporate into their research and practice. From the beginning of this project (Oct. 2021) we wanted to ensure that our work practices were informed and lead by our stated commitment to intersectional feminist values. In many respects, we see this articulation as a reflection and a response to the positive, as well as the negative, ways in which we, as individuals, have experienced the world (whether the world of academia, industry or otherwise). From experiences that have left an indelible mark upon us and inspire us to emulate the caring practices and support of specific mentors, to experiences that force us to reject certain ways of being and doing. A feminist framework for research, therefore, can be very personal - a one size fits all, especially for diverse research teams, does not necessarily exist but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try to articulate one!

In our project proposal we state a commitment to intersectional feminist methods, praxis and values. This means we are cognisant of the way in which we experience the world differently because of overlapping, or interconnecting, identities related to gender, sexuality, gender identity, race and ethnicity, class and neurodiversity (see Combahee Rivers Collective, Kimberly Crenshaw, bell hooks, Audre Lorde and Patricia Hill Collins). For us intersectional feminism is a means of articulating a certain feminist stance which is inclusive of trans-men, trans-women and non-binary individuals. This is the team’s positionality, and it is from this position and understanding that we have documented the following feminist methods for research.

This document outlines our intersectional feminist framework for research and will become part of our ‘Full Stack Feminism Framework’ and Toolkit. It details the way in which we work as a team, as well as the methods we employ and practices we use to inform and carry out our research. It is a commitment to working in a particular way, and acknowledges that this approach is not always easy – it requires persistence and patience. It is not intended as a comprehensive guide but rather a starting point for others who would like to embed feminist praxis and feminist research ethics in their work.

We acknowledge the work that has already taken place within the field of digital humanities to embed feminist values and ideals. We, therefore, see our contributions as an intervention in the growing field of feminist and Queer DH.

Decentring Expertise

As a starting point, we are committed to working with community groups and organisations as well as with researchers, academics, artists, coders, activists, and software developers. This approach ensures we are actively listening to multiple voices, acknowledging that voices outside of academia make an important and essential contribution to our work. In this sense our definition of digital humanities (the main domain for this project) is one that is inclusive and representative of voices traditionally excluded from, or marginalised within,
DH practice. As Losh and Wernimont (2018) point out, intersectional feminist “coalition building…[and]…communal care and repair are increasingly important to the humanities”, making community-led archives, organisations and digital art practice core to any intersectional feminist thinking and praxis. For us, working in this way is not an add on, it is core to how many of us have worked prior to this project and is a value which is reflected in and drives the project.

We are interested in exploring and deconstructing the parameters of DH, calling for a consideration of a more public and open DH, to include those groups that contribute to what we might call Public Digital Humanities. In particular, we are interested in ways that disrupt normative knowledge production and which decentre homogenous expertise and traditions. This decentring is also about shifting power dynamics - moving from what might have been deemed powerless to, instead, empowered. The idea of ‘decentring’ was a prominent value expressed by our research team at a team meet up (see word cloud below) - this is perhaps unsurprising given the context in which we work and the methodologies we embrace (for example, Critical Participatory Action Research and Feminist Ethics of Care, as discussed below).

Roopika Risam (2015), a member of the Full Stack Feminism Advisory Board, states

…it is incumbent on those at the center of the digital humanities

to understand the position of those whose work dwells in the peripheries,

to understand the historical legacies that link knowledge production with the
derignation – even the destruction – of that which is other….

Our work is concerned with materialising the voices of those ‘whose work dwells in the peripheries’ and recognises that not all digital arts and humanities projects are built equally or with equity in mind. The intersectional feminist praxis and methods we embrace help us to understand the problem, ‘the historical
legacies’, but also help us to create solutions which are informed by those most affected by traditionally hegemonic, and heteronormative DH spaces, projects, tools, archives, and infrastructures.

A critical component of our feminist framework, therefore, is embedding **Critical Participatory Action Research** (CPAR) methodologies across our workflows. When viewed through an intersectional feminist lens, CPAR centres the voices and experiences of those who have traditionally been marginalised within conventional DH environments. It is an intersectional, decolonising, anti-racist strategy, that disrupts power relations and nourishes community and collective growth and action. We take seriously the activist mantra, “No research on us, without us”. Our research is outward facing and celebrates different approaches - it is research with, not on.

To be consistent with both CPAR and intersectional feminism, a **feminist ethics of care**, an ethical practice that foregrounds welfare and well-being of participants and researchers, is a central practice and methodological approach to our research process and activities. It advocates for research teams, project leaders, etc., to consider the impact of their actions and research on others and encourages active listening practices, compassion and understanding, distinguishing between legal rights on one side, and ethical rights and responsibilities on the other. This perspective ensures that individuals (partners, participants, researchers, etc) are considered, as Caswell & Cifor (2016) state, ‘empathetically and in relation to each other and to dominant power structures’. It also encourages decision making processes that consider the effect or consequences of that decision on others and articulates a need to reflect upon power dynamics, both in relation to the research team but also how we work with partners, community organisations and groups. Caswell & Cifor (2016) also demonstrate the ways in which ‘an ethics of care…[stresses] the way people are linked to each other and larger communities through webs of responsibilities’. In this regard, we value, as adrienne maree brown (2017) states, interdependence and decentralisation:

> The idea of interdependence is that we can meet each other’s needs in a variety of ways, that we can truly lean on others and they can lean of us. It means we have to decentralize our idea of where solutions and decisions happen, where ideas come from.

Interdependence and decentralising nurtures a working environment of understanding and compassion. brown also cautions that, ‘we have to embrace our complexities’. We acknowledge and accept that working in this way is not always “easy”. Each of us carry the weight of our experiences and identities as well as our privileges, opportunities, biases, and oppressions. In this sense, we also recognise the importance of our individual and collective **positionality**. As a method this recognises our intersectional values but also articulates when and where we cannot claim expertise, knowledge or lived experiences – we, as a team, are not, nor do we claim to be, universal. Our knowledge is, as Donna Haraway states, situational and shaped by who we are and the contexts in which we work and live, currently and historically. Following *Feminist Data*
*Manifest-No*, our project also recognises the multiplicity of feminisms ‘that may differ in their positive visions, methodologies, collective ends, and situated concern’.\(^{11}\)

This feminist ethics of care extends to our qualitative research methodologies which follow strict informed consent and GDPR guidelines, and give respondents control over how their data is used, reused and attributed. In general, the project aims to be consistent with both the FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable) and CARE (collective benefit, authority to control, responsibility and ethics) principles of managing and producing data and artefacts.\(^{12}\) We acknowledge the CARE principles are specifically related to data management and stewardship of Indigenous data, but we value the principles outlined and advocate for their consideration in other contexts, such as feminist, queer or trans data, data sets and archives. Our data practice and data management processes for the project’s research data pay particular attention to these principles. This consideration reflects our duty of care to our interviewees, respondents and participants, and to the information they share. We acknowledge the sensitive nature of aspects of our research questions and are cognisant of the ways in which some discussions may be retraumatising or triggering. In this regard, principles such as feminist listening and radical empathy, as listed below, are important and crucial.

Centring CPAR alongside a feminist ethics of care articulates a resistance to working in patriarchal hierarchies and informs how we work and how we support each other’s professional and personal development. They inform our inter-personal relationships, how we engage with others and the resources we create and from which we draw.\(^{13}\)

**Key Praxis**

Our research principles are influenced by a number of existing frameworks, such as *Feminist Principles of the Internet, Manifest-No* and *Data Feminism*, among others. As noted, we are influenced by Black feminist thought and writing, including Audre Lorde, Octavia Butler, Patricia Hill-Collins and bell hooks, among others. Our principles stem from a deep commitment to intersectional feminist values and praxis – this means we are inherently concerned with ways in which our digital tools and systems can be decolonised and queered, and how they may also foreground and support neurodiversity. These elements inform the development of our Full Stack Feminism Framework and toolkit and will be explored in future publications. With these in mind, our key feminist research praxis include: feminist listening; radical empathy; proximity; and decentring.

1. **Feminist Listening:** We understand listening to be active rather than passive, and as being linked to both radical empathy and proximity, as outlined below. This is consistent with the notion of challenging traditional understandings of ‘expertise’ and ‘knowledge’ and linked to earlier discussions on decentring.\(^{14}\) We embrace this method as a key aspect of our research methodology and also prioritise ‘listening in’.\(^{15}\) That is, ‘shifting the focus from well-known protagonists, and following feminist traditions that acknowledge process and community rather than single individuals’.\(^{16}\) Feminist listening as a practice, can, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2020) describes,
…open a space to uplift the practice of listening even more than the practices of showing up and proving and speaking up. Listening is not only about the normative ability to hear, it is a transformative and revolutionary resource that requires quieting down and tuning in.17

2. **Radical empathy**: According to Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor (2016), radical empathy is ‘a willingness to be affected, to be shaped by another’s experience, without blurring the lines between the self and others’.18 It is, as they state, ‘the ability to understand and appreciate another person’s feelings, [and] experiences’.19 It cautions against individualism but instead centres mutual obligations to highlight structural inequalities, and systematic oppressions. There are a number of contexts in which radical empathy emerges; a particular focus for this project is radical empathy within the context of archives, our community outreach and engagement, as well as our qualitative interviews and team working ethos. The goal of radical empathy, while it involves the ‘substitution of one body for another’ should not, however, create ‘paternalism of “rescuer and victim mentalities”’,20 and should acknowledge differences but does not erase them. Consequently, our project endeavours to navigate away from the hierarchy of rescuer/victim, by challenging binaries such as expert/subject, researcher/participant, data/artefact, and digital/material. With respect to data/artefact and digital/material, Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klien (2020) highlight the ‘importance of the visceral impact of affective, embodied knowledge production providing novel entry points to data and broadening the audience’.21 As this project endeavours to centre embodiment, affect, minoritised voices and multi-modal digital artefacts, including digital art, it underscores D'Ignazio and Klein’s argument that activating emotion, leveraging embodiment, and creating novel presentation forms help people grasp and learn more from data-driven arguments, as well as remember them more fully.22

This further elucidates the interconnected nature of theory and praxis evident in this project as the principles espoused here are both consistent with CPAR research methodology as well as the intersectional feminist framework adopted.

3. **Proximity**: As Virginia Eubanks (2012) recognises in *Digital Dead End*, the ‘people closest to the problems, probably have the best information about them…to build solutions that will last’.23 This is why our project aims to ‘prioritize voices with closer and more direct experience of issues of injustice over those that study a data injustice from a distance’.24 In practical terms, this project will engage with communities of activists, archivists, artists, scholars, coders and practitioners working on, or endeavouring to work on, digital humanities and/or community based digital projects. This approach is different to traditional software engineering models of analysing users and user behaviour through use case analysis and scenarios, and/or user forums. In developing our toolkit, for example, we want to investigate how “proximity”, as well we our other feminist values, will inform and direct a different type of user engagement because as, Ruha Benjamin states, ‘users [traditionally] get used’.25

Our project prioritises affective cultural heritage, artistic expression and traditionally marginalised groups in order to problematise notions of ‘authority’ and ‘expertise’. In this sense, the feminist methods and
principles espoused by this project redefine both what counts as knowledge production and who gets to produce it. Consequently, there will be a number of engagements with the various stakeholders to ensure that the research remains ‘participatory’ and ‘active’. This also aligns with elements of action research and ideals of widening participation across the digital arts and humanities.

4. **Decentring:** We know there is a connection between the data that is prioritised for collection, for archiving, for dissemination, and the histories, narratives, and heritage that is thereafter instilled upon our identities, and those of our communities. As such, much of our research methods, outputs and activities are designed to empower individuals and communities traditionally marginalised from the historical record and who are now, through biased digital systems and data, at risk of further discrimination and wrongful harm. As a feminist research practice, the Urbanization, Gender, and the Global South Network describes this commitment as

> fostering opportunities for individuals and groups who have historically been denied access to power, including women, as well as those marginalized along lines of class, race, sexuality or ability to represent their own realities and redress the harmful effects of patriarchal, imperialistic and other oppressive social structures.\(^{26}\)

There are a number of ways in which a commitment to decentring knowledge is articulated through the project, from our research data strategy which enables participants to make informed decisions on their data, to our community forums which are led by and for community groups.

We know, for example, that the canons that underpin much DH often replicate old systems of knowledge, and therefore reinforce existing patriarchal power structures. Referring again to Risam (2019), a notable advocate and activist in DH on the subject of feminist intersectionality in the field, states

> ...those of us who work with issues of difference often perceive the ways that many digital humanities projects fail to engage with race, gender, disability, class, sexuality, or a combination thereof...some of the most developed digital humanities work preserve the writing of dead white men.\(^{27}\)

Our project is a means to effect change. We recognise that many within DH face structural inequalities such as labour distribution and recognition, and that societal marginalisation based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and ability, among other identities, have created unequal opportunities. Our project seeks to identify and actualise intersectional feminist approaches from data creation and curation through to end user design and experience, but we acknowledge across the life-span of this project we cannot and will not resolve all these issues. The project therefore is, inspired by adrienne maree brown’s publication of the same name, an ‘emergent strategy’.\(^{28}\) It is a way to effect change and create new possibilities and imaginaries through step change actions. These actions will become elements in our Full Stack Feminism Toolkit, which includes concepts and considerations such as Abolition (how certain technologies contribute to racist surveillance.
methods), and the CARE principles of data stewardship and governance (how can we create and share data in an ethically responsible manner) will become part of our Full Stack Feminism Framework.

The key praxis we have described above represent only a fraction of the way in which we endeavour to work. They are linked, iterative and should not be viewed as static. Additional elements of our thinking is captured in the word cloud above (replicated below) and demonstrate other concepts and ways of being/doing that we, as a research team, embrace. This framework is a starting point and we look forward to your contributions on this topic.

Footnotes


6. Ibid., p. 34

7. Ibid., p. 28

8. brown, adrienne maree, Emergent Strategies, shaping change changing worlds (2017), p. 87

9. Ibid., p 88


12. https://www.gida-global.org/care

13. For more information on Feminist Research Ethics see Kirsch, Gesa (1999) *Ethical dilemmas in feminist research: the politics of location, interpretation, and publication*, https://genurb.apps01.yorku.ca/courses/feminist-research-ethics/lessons/objectives-of-the-module/


16. Ibid.


18. Caswell et al. (2016) p. 31

19. Ibid., p.25

20. See also Sevenhuijsen 2003; Nencel 2014 in Caswell & Cifor 2016


22. Ibid


28. brown (2017)