Counting the Costs

Funding Feminism in the Digital Humanities

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lthough digital humanities is often described as a boon to humanities scholarship, particularly for its ability to attract funding from internal and external grant agencies, few have studied the "canon" of funded projects. As with the literary canon, existing digital humanities scholarship speaks to the underlying values operating within both the field of digital humanities and its funding agencies. Prominent funding agencies in the field include the American Council of Learned Societies, the Council on Library and Information Resources, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Mellon Foundation. All of these groups purport to share a central mission: to "strengthen, promote, and, where necessary, defend the contributions of the humanities and the arts to human flourishing and to the well-being of diverse and democratic societies" (my emphasis)—and fund projects according to their adherence to this mission. Digital humanities organizations share a similar mission: to create and support digital work that communicates the value of humanities work to the general public. One mission statement that has received particular attention from scholars is that of 4Humanities, which states, "The digital humanities are increasingly integrated in the humanities at large. They catch the eye of administrators and funding agencies who otherwise dismiss the humanities as yesterday's news. They connect across disciplines with science and engineering fields. They have the potential to use new technologies to help the humanities communicate with, and adapt to, contemporary society."2

An examination of existing scholarship, however, suggests that digital humanities research has not yet fulfilled these missions. Alan Liu, the author of the 4Humanities mission statement, notes that he overemphasized the relationship between the digital humanities and the public.³ As a field concerned with technical innovation, "digital humanities has historically deemphasized theoretical examination of the digital utilizing cultural studies frameworks," an act that has

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constrained the field to projects focused on digital tool production and/or a reassertion of canonical works.⁴

Martha Nell Smith argues that the divide between digital humanities and cultural studies is intentional: she suggests that the field was developed by scholars seeking to escape from the onslaught of culture and gender theory in the 1970s, observing, "It was as if these matters of objective and hard science provided an oasis for folks who did not want to clutter sharp, disciplined, methodical philosophy with considerations of the gender-, race-, and class-determined facts of life. . . . Humanities computing seemed to offer a space free from all this messiness and a return to objective questions of representation." 5 While the advent of new technologies in the 1990s and 2000s offered opportunities for experimentation grounded in cultural and gender-based criticism, the digital humanities largely maintained its distance from these forms of scholarship. Jamie "Skye" Bianco notes that "we've seen a winnowing of what was an experimental and heterogeneous emergence of computational and digital practices, teaching and theorization from within and across disciplines to an increasingly narrow, highly technical, and powerful set of conservative and constrained areas and modes of digital research." Although the cause of this narrowing has yet to be determined, one likely factor is the increasing need for humanities scholarship to garner external funding from agencies more drawn to technological innovation than cultural criticism.

Nevertheless, articles offering up theories and strategies calling for critical digital humanities scholarship have proliferated in recent years. Pieces such as Liu's "Where Is the Cultural Criticism in Digital Humanities?," Tara McPherson's "Why Are the Digital Humanities so White?," and Moya Bailey's "All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave" all point out the androcentric nature of digital humanities scholarship and posit the need for engagement with critical theory, including feminism, intersectionality, ethnic studies, and postcolonialism. The goal of their work is twofold: to increase critical digital humanities research and to invite a larger segment of scholars to participate in the field, particularly those previously marginalized due to their research in gender, ethnicity, or sexuality. In response, a cadre of feminist and cultural critiques have begun to establish methodologies for examining critical digital humanities work. Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips ask,

What would digital scholarship and the humanities disciplines be like if they centered around processes and possibilities of social and cultural transformation as well as institutional preservation? If they centered around questions of labor, race, gender, and justice at personal, local, and global scales? If their practitioners considered not only how the academy might reach out to underserved communities, but also how the kinds of knowledge production nurtured elsewhere could transform the academy itself?8

Providing a list of projects fitting these aims, Lothian and Phillips attempt to expand the canon of existing digital projects grounded in activism and social justice. A close examination of these projects, however, reveals that many of them are no longer active or available online. Although there is no clear articulation as to why some of these projects have disappeared, a cursory examination suggests that these projects did not receive either the institutional or external support needed to keep the projects alive, particularly as they were all the work of individual scholars. In contrast, the projects that are still active are collective projects, and each lists a series of funding organizations, businesses, and contributors that have made the project sustainable. Issues of sustainability are not relegated solely to the projects in Lothian and Phillips's article; in fact, Amy Earhart points to a similar trend in digital recovery projects emphasizing the work of writers of color; she states,

Alan Liu's *Voice of the Shuttle* provides a good measure of the huge number of early recovery projects focused on literature and history written by and about people of color. A quick perusal of "The Minority Studies" section, however, reveals that a tremendous number of the projects have become lost. For example, of the six sites listed in "General Resources in Minority Literature," half cannot be located, suggesting that they have been removed or lost. The same trend is found with other projects listed on the site. While only 50 percent of the projects in the "General Resources in Chicano/Latino Literature" section are still online, other areas, such as Asian American literature, have a higher percentage of active projects. Digital humanists are fond of talking about sustainability as a problem for current and future works, but it is clear that we already have sustained a good deal of loss within the broadly defined digital canon.9

To prevent such losses, Martha Nell Smith asserts that digital humanities scholarship needs to "take into account the 'messy' facts of authorship, production, and reception: race, class, gender, and sexuality." Doing so will force us "to examine the canon that we, as digital humanists, are constructing, a canon that skews toward traditional texts and excludes crucial work by women, people of color, and the GLBTQ community." In other words, she, along with many others, argues that digital humanists have the responsibility to be self-critical and to acknowledge and address the lack of critical scholarship within the field.

While scholars have certainly engaged in such criticism in their writing, the field has yet to formulate a model for the equal support of large-scale research projects emphasizing critical digital humanities. However, a number of recent initiatives integrate critical scholarship into their work, particularly Global Outlook::Digital Humanities (GO::DH) and TransformDH. TransformDH is "an academic guerrilla movement seeking to (re)define capital-letter Digital Humanities as a force for transformative scholarship by collecting, sharing, and highlighting projects that

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push at its boundaries and work for social justice, accessibility, and inclusion." ¹² Launched at the American Studies Association conference in 2011, it asks its members to advocate for critical digital humanities by both theorizing new methodologies and promoting critical digital scholarship. As an organization focused on information sharing, this group draws attention to pertinent work in critical digital humanities, but does not seek to produce it. Similarly, GO::DH seeks to "break down barriers that hinder communication and collaboration among researchers and students of the Digital Arts, Humanities, and Cultural Heritage sectors in high, mid, and low income economies" by drawing attention to the scholarship being produced by digital humanists internationally. ¹³ In doing so, GO::DH expands the definition of digital humanities to include projects and initiatives serving a variety of peoples and cultures. While both organizations have made great strides in both advocating for and expanding upon the field of critical digital humanities, they do not have the means to provide financial support for the projects they promote.

So, how do critical digital humanities projects acquire funding? While culturally engaged scholarship fits with the mission of most external funding agencies, Jacqueline Wernimont observes that she has "repeatedly heard scholars suggest the NEH's policy that it will not fund projects 'that seek to promote a particular political, religious, or ideological point of view . . . or projects that advocate a particular program of social action.' "14 Even feminist projects that have acquired grant funding, like Women Writers Online (WWO), have not received money from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to "primarily fund the expansion of the WWO collection, but rather [for] the development of new encoding practices, interfaces, or tools." These observations suggest that critical digital humanities research may not only distance scholars from the conventional tenets of digital humanities but also hinder their ability to receive large-scale grant funding.

Existing studies on grant funding for digital humanities projects bear this out. Amy Earhart observes that the NEH's "shift toward innovation has focused on technological innovation, not on innovative restructuring of the canon through recovery. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) awarded 141 Digital Humanities Start-Up Grants from 2007 through 2010. Of those grants, only twenty-nine were focused on diverse communities and sixteen on the preservation or recovery of diverse community texts."16 More recent examinations of the NEH funding trends further highlight the absence of critically engaged digital humanities projects. John D. Martin III and Carolyn Runyon note that "the NEH provided a total of \$225,462,386.29 for digital cultural heritage projects through 656 individual grants over the course of the period between 1 January 2007 and 30 September 2016. . . . Of the total 656 projects, 110 could be identified as having a gendered focus and 288 as having . . . race/ethnic identifying characteristics." 17 Upon closer examination, these statistics become even more appalling. Martin and Runyon go on to state, "The number of grants with a gendered focus differed considerably for men (82) and women (20)."18 In other words, of the 110 projects utilizing gendered

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These studies, however, focus solely on the NEH, a government funding agency whose leadership is appointed by the president with the approval of the U.S. Senate. The leadership council is composed of a chairman, who serves a term of four years, as well as a council of twenty-six private citizens, who serve terms of six years. While there has been a dramatic increase in the diversity of council members since the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, the position of chairman has consistently gone to Caucasian males. Barring the work of Lynne V. Cheney from May 1986 to January of 1993, the chairmanship has been held by a white man since the NEH's inception in 1965. Although the race and gender of the chairman do not preclude the organization from funding projects emphasizing diversity, they do suggest that the NEH, whether advertently or otherwise, reinforces structures of power that marginalize individuals based on their race, gender, and sexuality. Subject to mainstream pressures, governmental oversight, and political bias, the NEH's funding trends raise the question, "Do private grant funding agencies provide support for critical digital humanities projects?"

One of the largest private financiers of digital humanities work is the Mellon Foundation. Founded in 1969, the Mellon Foundation seeks to support outstanding work in the field of higher education, especially in the humanities and fine arts. At its inception the Mellon Foundation was invested heavily in feminist issues, donating \$800,000 per year to Planned Parenthood and the Population Council in order to produce better research on reproductive issues, to develop more effective forms of contraception, and to become more educated about reproductive practices globally.²⁰ Such initiatives demonstrate the funding trends during the Mellon Foundation's first few decades of operation; however, changes to the Foundation's leadership and central mission in the late 1990s have made its relationship to the feminist digital humanities less clear. To provide a comprehensive look at funding trends pertaining to the digital humanities, this analysis will examine Mellon's annual reports from 1988 to 2015. This period marks the launch of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI; 1987) as well as the establishment of many key feminist projects including the Women Writers Project (1986) and the Orlando Project (1990s). Although the Mellon Foundation does not make its grant narratives publicly available, it does post annual reports to its website. The annual reports include three components: a brief overview from the Mellon Foundation's president, a statement on how the organization is meeting its core programs (which vary according to leadership), and a comprehensive list of grants for the year, each of which includes a brief description. Uploading these annual reports to Voyant, a text analysis tool that displays word frequencies, word co-occurrences, and frequency distributions, makes it possible to determine trends

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in the Mellon Foundation's funding behaviors. On its website, annual reports are available from 1969 to 2016. As the terms "digital humanities" and "humanities computing" do not appear in reports prior to 1988, those reports are excluded from this analysis. The remaining reports are broken down into three groups to reflect the funding behaviors of Mellon's last three presidents: William G. Bowen (1988–2005), Don Michael Randel (2006–2013), and Earl Lewis (2013–2018).²¹

The late 1980s and early 1990s marked a unique time for the Mellon Foundation. At this time, technological projects were not on the leadership committee's radar; instead, the foundation spent its efforts addressing prominent feminist and cultural issues in both education and public health. Notably, significant funding was given to the Population Council to continue its work promoting healthy contraceptive and reproductive practices. Additionally, research into migration practices was developed in order to understand the economic and social implications of immigration. Like the work with the Population Council, this work had a particularly feminist bent. According to Mellon's annual report in 1994, "The Foundation expects to center more of its activities on female immigrants who currently comprise one-half of all immigrants to the United States each year but whose economic plight has been neglected."22 At the same time, the foundation launched the Mellon Minority Undergraduate Fellowship program, which funded undergraduate students planning to pursue graduate education. The goal of this program was to increase diversity among faculty by limiting marginalized individuals' barriers to entry into the profession. While these programs continued to be funded for a number of years, those focusing on feminist issues were dramatically downsized in 2003. According to foundation president William G. Bowen, "the Foundation has decided that it is time to phase out grantmaking in its population and forced migration program," as these areas of focus no longer fit the organization's principal areas of application.²³ Figure 7.1 shows the decline of the foundation's work on feminist issues by mapping the prevalence of the terms "migration" and "contraceptive" from 1988 to 2005.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the phasing out of feminist projects clearly coincides with the foundation's growing interest in technological projects. In 1997 Mellon's annual report focused almost entirely on technology—lauding the development of JSTOR, emphasizing electronic publishing with university presses, and boasting the College and Beyond Database, an attempt to collect data about outcomes for college graduates around the United States. Then, in 2000, the foundation released a formal statement stating that its intention in years ahead is to provide support for rigorous studies of applications of instructional technology that will include online education and distance learning. From then on, the annual reports almost entirely focus on digital projects launched by the organization including ARTStor, Ithaka, Aluka, and the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE). Figure 7.2 shows the shift in the Mellon Foundation's priorities by depicting how its devaluation of feminist concerns coincide with its affinity for digital projects.

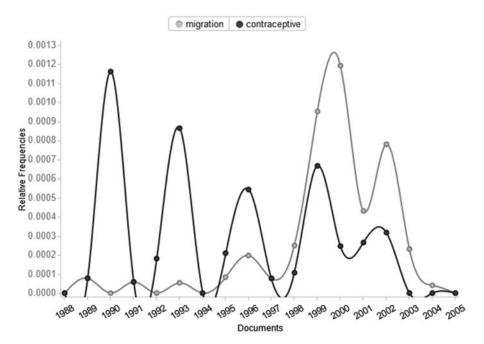


Figure 7.1. This figure depicts the frequency of the words "migration" and "contraceptive" in the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's annual reports (1988–2005) to demonstrate the foundation's early commitment to cultural and feminist concerns.

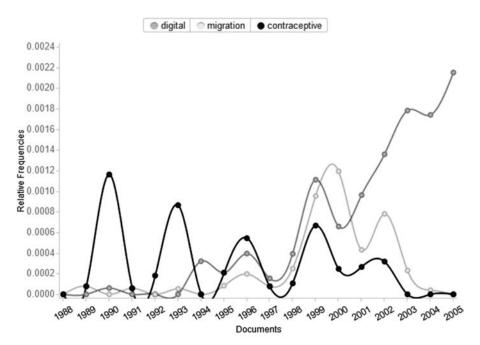


Figure 7.2. This figure compares the frequency of the word "digital" with the words "migration" and "contraceptive" to show the ways in which the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's priorities shifted from cultural and feminist concerns to technological ones. Data for this visualization come from the foundation's annual reports (1988–2005).

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Text analysis of the projects' funding during this time period (1988–2005) reveal that the foundation largely focused on "assist[ing] projects that might possibly have a broad and general impact on the fields as a whole," a mission that typically translated into support for projects on canonical authors, prevalent historical events, and technological developments. ²⁶ In other words, Mellon's movement away from feminism occurred concurrently with its movement toward digital humanities, which has been to the great detriment of feminist digital humanists. Although there are a handful of feminist projects developed during this time period, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s during the first boom of feminist digital humanities research, many of these projects focus on broad populations rather than specific individuals or their contributions to the humanities. As a result, findings from these projects have had little influence on either gender studies or digital humanities.

In 2006, leadership of the Mellon Foundation transferred to Don Michael Randel, who in his preliminary annual report noted, "The Mellon Foundation is unique among the major foundations in its commitment to the humanities and the arts in bringing new technologies to their support." Notably absent is the discussion of Mellon's previous philanthropic initiatives, particularly those engaged with feminist ideologies. Instead, Randel emphasizes the social and governmental pressures faced by nonprofit organizations, noting, "There is, without question, need for appropriate governmental rule-making and monitoring in the foundation world." His praise for Mellon's focus on educational technology and his desire to conform with the practices of governmental agencies result in a heavy-handed focus on digital technology separated from feminist or cultural critique.

Text analysis of Randel's time in office (2006–2012) reveals that the Mellon Foundation funded projects focused on technological advancements, as evidenced by the prevalence of words such as "research," "development," "database," and "information." Along with continued support for JSTOR, Ithaka, and NITLE, the foundation promoted the digitization of canonized literature, the development of open source educational software, and the expansion of the semantic web. Such projects were supported by new grants, such as the Mellon Award for Technology Collaboration, as well as the foundation's new guiding principles emphasizing tool development, digitization, and conservation.

Unsurprisingly, the emphasis on technological development vastly overwhelms the remaining text, highlighting the foundation's strong emphasis on tools over culturally engaged projects. In fact, neither "cultur*" nor "diversity" appears in a list of the five hundred most used words within the annual reports during this period. Strangely enough, the words "American" and "national" are utilized heavily during this time, suggesting that funded projects were focused on the dominant culture within the United States rather than other cultural groups. Although the words "Africa" and "African" do appear in limited frequency, this occurrence can be

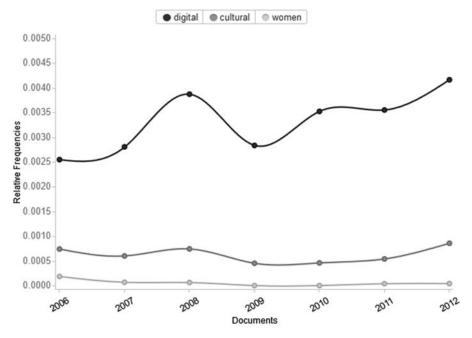


Figure 7.3. This figure compares the frequency of the words "digital," "cultural," and "women" to depict the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's funding priorities in the present age. Data for this visualization come from the foundation's annual reports (2006–2012).

attributed to funding initiatives for educational development in South Africa that preceded Randel. Evidence suggests that projects from this time period often did not engage with cultural topics with significant depth or weight. Figure 7.3 maps the frequency of feminist, cultural, and digital language in the foundation's annual reports produced under Randel's leadership.

Notably, the word "feminism" does not appear, and the word "women" appears only ten times within the entirety of this time period. A context analysis reveals that only two grants in this range focused specifically on feminist issues. The Black Women Playwrights' Group Inc. acquired \$50,000 in funding to support four playwrights' writing and production costs, and Spelman College received \$50,000 to encourage women to pursue mathematics education. The vast majority, however, do not mention women at all. This absence suggests that projects about feminist issues were not funded by the Mellon Foundation and/or that researchers engaged in feminist work did not feel comfortable highlighting this aspect of their research. Given the Mellon Foundation's dramatic shift away from feminist engagement, this is unsurprising. Additionally, as many feminist digital humanists had little to no engagement with the foundation prior to its large-scale support of technological initiatives, many scholars likely were and are unaware that Mellon's history is rooted in feminist activism.

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Recent statements by Mellon Foundation president Earl Lewis, however, suggest that the foundation may recommit itself to issues of inclusion and intersectionality. In his inaugural annual report in 2013, Lewis released the following statement:

Institutions, including philanthropies, also have history. And in that history, certain points of inflection occur that suggest shifts. . . . We do foresee significant modifications to our grantmaking priorities. Diversity initiatives have heretofore centered on enhancing the flow of diverse students, especially students of color, into and through graduate school and into permanent faculty positions. A signature component of that effort has been the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship program. That program remains a cornerstone of our plan, but we also will chart ways to expand the number of participants and participating institutions. Moving forward we also envision a Latino/a initiative that complements our work with Tribal Colleges and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Perhaps the biggest change, especially for a foundation that has prided itself on being quiet, will be the production of an annual report that synthesizes the very best scholarship on the value of diversity to social and civil life in democratic societies.²⁹

Here, Lewis acknowledges the foundation's problematic silences and underscores the need for more critically engaged scholarship. His use of the term "Latino/a" suggests that his push for diversity includes women, particularly women of color. Projects launched early in his tenure investigate best practices surrounding the conservation of Chinese art, the preservation of American Indian artifacts, and the development of theatrical productions. Although each of these projects likely includes work produced by women, the project descriptions do not mention either women's contributions or feminist ideologies. This absence raises the question, "Has the Mellon Foundation regained its sense of inclusiveness, particularly for feminist research?" An examination of the annual reports produced during Earl Lewis's tenure, as depicted in Figure 7.4, fail to provide a clear answer.

While the overall use of the term "women" increases from ten times in 2006–2012 to eleven times in 2013–2016, only three grants during this period are grounded in feminist thought. The Dallas Opera received \$500,000 to run an Institute for Women Conductors, Bennett College obtained \$490,000 to host a Leadership Development Institute for Women, and Artspot Productions attained \$75,000 to provide arts training to incarcerated women. Words like "cultural" and "public," on the other hand, become increasingly prevalent under Lewis's leadership. During the same period, there is a drastic decrease in tool-focused language, like "database," "information," and "coordinated." This shift highlights Mellon's movement from tool-centered projects to critically engaged research. Take, for example, the word "diversity." Although the word is mentioned only fifteen times in 2013, the prevalence of the word nearly doubles in each subsequent year. Additionally,

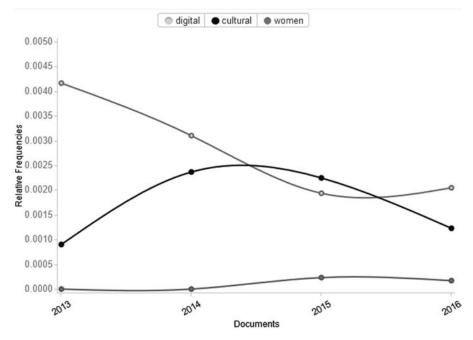


Figure 7.4. This figure compares the frequency of the words "digital," "cultural," and "women" to depict the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's funding priorities in the present age. Data for this visualization come from the foundation's annual reports (2013–2016).

the number of projects mentioning the word "diversity" appears to increase each year. According to Figure 7.5, the word "diversity" was typically clustered, or utilized, by a small set of projects: note that nearly half of the mentions of "diversity" in 2013 appear to be relegated to three projects. In more recent years, however, there is a growing number of projects highlighting "diversity": it appears to be a central focus of seven projects in 2014, ten projects in 2015, and fifteen projects in 2016.

A similar trajectory occurs with the word "public." Although mentioned only twenty-eight times in 2013, the term "public" is utilized fifty-three times in 2014, forty-nine times in 2015, and sixty-two times in 2016. Like "diversity," the word "public" is often clustered, with an emphasis in seven projects in 2013, thirteen projects in 2014, twelve projects in 2015, and sixteen times in 2016. Within this time period, the most common phrase using the word "public" is "public humanities," which occurs twenty-two times and becomes especially prevalent in 2016. Such language highlights the increasing number of digital humanities projects participating in publicly engaged scholarship.

Such trends align with Earl Lewis's statement on the role of the Mellon Foundation: to provide creative and inclusive alternatives to Western culture's prevailing issues surrounding race and discrimination. These funding activities also fulfill Alan Liu's desire for 4Humanities: "to use new technologies to help the humanities communicate with, and adapt to, contemporary society." In other words, the Mellon

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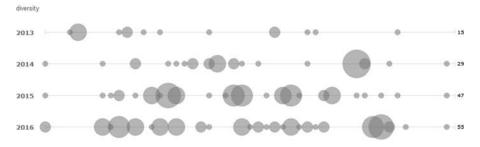


Figure 7.5. This figure shows the frequency of the use of the word "diversity" in the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's annual reports from 2013 to 2016.

Foundation appears to be moving in the direction advocated by a growing number of digital humanists. It is actively funding and promoting projects that engage in critical digital humanities. At the same time, there are still some notable absences in the data. At no time between 1988 and 2016 do the words "woman," "women," "female*," or "fem*" appear in the top five hundred words used in the annual reports, suggesting that projects openly advocating for feminist ideologies do not receive funding, or, equally likely, that these projects feel the need to mask their philosophical lens in order to receive consideration. Either option suggests that feminist researchers experience significant difficulties receiving financial support for their work. Funding feminist projects, therefore, appears to be the next great hurdle for funding agencies to tackle. Although growth has been minimal, an analysis of the Mellon Foundation's annual reports suggests that the organization may be transitioning back to its feminist roots. We can only hope that this growth will continue under the guidance of newly appointed foundation president Elizabeth Alexander, a poet and storyteller lauded for her engagement with critical issues and social justice. As such, the time to propose large-scale feminist digital research is now.

Notes

- 1. Although a number of sources for this piece utilize the term "diversity," it is often used as a catch-all phrase to describe everyone except white men. As such, it does not adequately address the concerns of particular groups, nor does it contextualize the specific concerns of these disparate communities. For these reasons, "diversity" is used only to quote or to reference resources cited in this piece. Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, "Mission."
 - 2. 4Humanities, "Mission."
 - 3. Liu, "Where Is Cultural Criticism."
 - 4. Earhart, "Can Information Be Unfettered?"
 - 5. Smith, "Human Touch Software."
 - 6. Bianco, "This Digital Humanities."
- 7. Liu, "Where Is Cultural Criticism"; McPherson, "Why Are the Digital Humanities"; Bailey, "All the Digital Humanists."

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- 8. Lothian and Phillips, "Can Digital Humanities."
- 9. Earhart, "Can Information Be Unfettered?"
- 10. Smith, "Human Touch Software."
- 11. Smith, "Human Touch Software."
- 12. "About #TransformDH."
- 13. "About."
- 14. Wernimont, "Whence Feminism?"
- 15. Wernimont, "Whence Feminism?"
- 16. Earhart, "Can Information Be Unfettered?"
- 17. Martin and Runyon, "Digital Humanities."
- 18. Martin and Runyon, "Digital Humanities."
- 19. Martin and Runyon, "Digital Humanities."
- 20. Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Report of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 1990, 15
- 21. The Mellon Foundation's annual reports (1969–2016) are available on their website: https://mellon.org. Each document used in this analysis was downloaded as a .pdf and converted to .rtf for use in Voyant.
- 22. Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Report of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 1994, 43.
- 23. Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Report of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 2002, 8.
 - 24. Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Report of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 1997.
 - 25. Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Report of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 2000.
- 26. Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Report of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 1988, 20.
- 27. Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Report of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 2005, 8.
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 - 30. Liu, "Where Is Cultural Criticism."

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