

---

## Agora. Techno. Phobia. Philia: Gender, Knowledge Building, and Digital Media

---

**Martha Nell Smith** ([mnsmith@umd.edu](mailto:mnsmith@umd.edu))

University of Maryland (MITH)

**Carolyn Guertin** ([carolyn.guertin@gmail.com](mailto:carolyn.guertin@gmail.com))

University of Texas at Arlington

McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology

**Laura C. Mandell** ([mandellc@muohio.edu](mailto:mandellc@muohio.edu))

Department of English

Miami University

**Katherine D. Harris** ([kharris@email.sjsu.edu](mailto:kharris@email.sjsu.edu))

San Jose State University

---

The editors of a special issue of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, a prominent scholarly feminist journal, wrote in 1990 that “the degree to which American society has embraced and absorbed computer technologies is astonishing. The degree to which the changes provoked by computers leave prevailing inequalities is troubling.”<sup>1</sup> This observation preceded the development of the World Wide Web, which has enabled computational tools to suffuse much work of the humanities. The questions that have informed our work as feminist theorists and scholars—how do our items of knowledge come into being, who made them, for what purposes, and how does gender play a role in knowledge making—inhere in our digital humanities work. That the two fields are or should be inextricably intertwined seems, therefore, an inevitable fact of life. But is this just personal coincidence, a fact produced by the trajectory of our careers and interests? What is humanities computing anyway, and why should it be important for feminist cultural, social, and intellectual work? Concomitantly, can feminism enhance and improve the world and work of computer science, of humanities computing, of digital humanities? After all, “very early in life, computing is claimed as a male territory. At each step from early childhood through college, computing is both actively claimed as “guy stuff” by boys and men and passively ceded by girls and women. The claiming is largely the work of a culture and society that links interest and success with computers to boys and men.”<sup>2</sup>

A culture that says to use computing tools expertly one must know how machines work, or at least must be deft programmers,

dominates much of the world of humanities computing. It is as if those who have fretted over literary and other humanities fields becoming feminized or soft have been rescued by a field that is hard science. Thus through computing, humanities is being remasculinized. Scientific matters of mathematics and computation, objective and hard, are not subject to the concerns of gender, race, or sexuality. Either explicitly or implicitly, concerns that had taken over so much academic work in literature—of gender, race, class, sexuality—were assumed to be irrelevant to humanities computing.  $2 + 2$ , so the reasoning goes, always equals 4, whether you are black, female, queer, or straight. The codes always work, whatever one’s personal identity or social group, and, as matters of objective and hard science, are best dealt with by those who have been most interested in being engineers and computational scientists of critical inquiry. So surely those interested are also folks who do not want to clutter sharp, disciplined, methodical philosophy with considerations of the gender-, race-, and class-determined facts of life. After all, in the wake of the sixties, the humanities in general and their standings in particular had suffered, according to some, from being feminized by these things. Humanities computing seemed to offer a space free from all this messiness and a return to objective questions of representation.

Yet such dreams of a return to the “objective,” uncluttered by messy identity questions, are nostalgic. That humanities disciplines were in fact foundationally changed by feminist scholarship of the twentieth century is obvious from project development within humanities computing itself, and each of the panelists is deeply involved with a major digital humanities project informed by feminist scholarship—the *Dickinson Electronic Archives*, *The Poetess Archive*, *The Forget-Me-Not Hypertextual Archive*, a *cyberfeminist archive*, *The Assemblage Gallery*. Our work as feminists leads us to concur with social scientist Jane Margolis and computer scientist Allan Fisher that “the goal is not to fit women into computer science [digital humanities] as it is currently taught and conceived. Rather, a cultural and curricular revolution is required to change computer science [digital humanities] so that the valuable contributions and perspectives of women are respected within the discipline.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, this panel will posit ways in which the methods of feminist, queer, and race critical inquiry might benefit the work of digital humanists across the board (or screen, as it were) rather than serving as a special niche of interest (for example, the methods might benefit the multi-institutional NORA project, <http://noraproject.org>, and its second phase, MONK, tremendously).

Descriptions of the roundtable presenters are below and we trust will serve to show the range of experience and expertise on which we will draw to pose our questions, posit ways in which the messiness of such critical inquiry can advance digital humanities, entertain questions and suggestions before, during,

and after our session in order to collaborate with audience members in knowledge production.

**M**artha Nell Smith is Professor of English and Founding Director of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH) at the University of Maryland. Author of more than 40 articles, including “Electronic Scholarly Editing” in the *Blackwell Companion to Digital Humanities*, her publications include *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson’s Intimate Letters to Susan Dickinson*, with Ellen Louise Hart (1998); *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*, with Cristanne Miller and Suzanne Juhasz (1993); and *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (1992). With Mary Loeffelholz, she is editing the *Blackwell Companion to Emily Dickinson* (forthcoming in 2007). She is also Coordinator and Executive Editor of the *Dickinson Electronic Archives* projects at the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH) at the University of Virginia. With Lara Vetter, she is a general editor of *Emily Dickinson’s Correspondence: A Born-Digital Inquiry*, forthcoming from the Mellon-sponsored University of Virginia Press Rotunda Electronic Imprint. Her digital humanities work is an extension of her work as a feminist literary theorist and scholar. Because her interest in the possibilities afforded by computers as powerful and empowering tools of humanities scholarly work became so keen as the World Wide Web was gaining precedence, her work in humanities computing has been powerfully influenced by cyberculture and new media studies. As a digital humanities specialist she has focused on the sociologies of knowledge production in our technology-saturated world—what data is reproduced and made accessible, and to whom, and what new knowledge has been produced by computational tools. Her questions, suggestions, and models will be drawn from the multi-institutional data mining and visualization NORA Project (<http://noraproject.org>).

**C**arolyn Guertin is an Assistant Professor of Digital Media and Director of the eCreate Lab in the Department of English at the University of Texas at Arlington. During the 2004 to 2006 academic years, she was a Senior McLuhan Fellow and SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto ~ most recently giving the closing keynote address at “Re-Reading McLuhan: An International Conference on Media and Culture in the 21st Century” at the University of Bayreuth in Germany. She does both theoretical and applied work in cyberfeminism, digital narrative, digital design, media literacy (or postliteracy) and performance. She is a founding editor of the online journal *MediaTropes*, and a literary advisor to the Electronic Literature Organization. She has written textbooks on hypertext and literature and information aesthetics, and is currently working on a new book project called *Connective Tissue: Queer Bodies, Postdramatic Performance and New Media Aesthetics*. Guertin

is best known as curator and founder of *Assemblage: The Women’s New Media Gallery* <http://tracearchive.ntu.ac.uk:80/traced/guertin/assemblage.htm>, the only site devoted exclusively to born-digital art and lit by women on the Web ~ soon to be relaunched in a 2.0 version. She will be examining the trend toward personal media and participatory culture that is a product (or fallout) of the politicizing of diversity, the women’s movement, and queer issues. Where notions of interactivity focused on the technology as the most important component, participatory or user-generated culture—from wikis to podcasts to FaceBook to *Second Life*—puts the backchannel into the foreground, and puts people of all genders back as active users in the system.

**L**aura Mandell is Associate Professor in eighteenth-century and Romantic British literature at Miami University. Her book, *Misogynous Economies: The Business of Literature in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, discusses the feminist potential of anti-feminist writings produced during the long eighteenth century. She has published essays in *ELH*, *MLQ*, *European Romantic Review*, *Studies in Romanticism*, and *Nineteenth-Century Prose*. She has edited *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Poetess Archive Database* (<http://unixgen.muhio.edu/~poetess>), a TEI-encoded bibliographic finding aid and full-text resource about the men and women who wrote popular poetry in Britain and America between 1750 and 1900. Within the next year, this resource will contain author and title information from tables of contents of all the major anthologies and literary annuals. Within the next few years, it will expand to periodicals.

**K**atherine D. Harris, Assistant Professor, San Jose State University, has created an online hypertextual archive of the first literary annual, the *Forget Me Not*, re-presenting various aspects of the book as well as the poetry, prose and engravings: “Forget Me Not: A Hypertextual Archive of Ackermann’s 19th-Century Literary Annual” <http://www.orgs.muohio.edu/anthologies/FMN/Index.htm>. With Laura Mandell, she serves as an editor of *The Poetess Archive Database*, which now contains a bibliography of over 4,000 entries for works by and about writers working in and against the “poetess tradition,” the extraordinarily popular, but much criticized, flowery poetry written in Britain and America between 1750 and 1900. Their presentation for this panel will not be a show-and-tell of these archives, but an in-depth consideration of ways in which the feminist theories that have identified the scholarly needs for this resource and informed their development can advance the work of digital humanities at large.

1. Jean F. O'Barr, ed., *From Hard Drive to Software: Gender, Computers, and Difference*. Special Issue of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16:1 (Autumn 1990).
2. Jane Margolis and Allan Fisher. *Unlocking the Clubhouse: Women in Computing* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London England: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 4.
3. *Unlocking the Clubhouse*, p. 6.