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Beyond Data Feminism. Towards Ethical Data Work in the (Digital) Humanities

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Beyond Data Feminism. Towards Ethical Data Work in the (Digital) Humanities

Abstract

With the proliferation of accessible machine learning tools, there is a pressing need for ethical frameworks within Digital Humanities. Although traditional source criticism is well established, Digital Humanities require a digital source criticism that considers both the historical sources themselves and the data creation process. Often misunderstood as solely gender-focused, Data Feminism provides such a toolkit for addressing bias and ethics. This working paper discusses how these principles originally focused on data science can be adapted to everyday Digital Humanities practice. It provides both theoretical grounding and practical examples, including a case study from our own work, demonstrating the relevance and application of Data Feminist principles for Digital Humanities.

Mit dem Aufkommen leicht zugänglicher Machine-Learning-Werkzeuge wird der dringende Bedarf an ethischen Prinzipien in den Digital Humanities zunehmend deutlich. Die Digital Humanities haben sich bislang nur unzureichend mit Fragen der Datenethik auseinandergesetzt. Während die Quellenkritik in den Geisteswissenschaften eine etablierte Methode darstellt, erfordert digitale Quellenkritik eine erweiterte Herangehensweise, die sowohl die Quellen als auch den Datenentstehungsprozess kritisch untersucht. Dieses Working Paper stellt die feministischen Prinzipien des *Data-Feminism-Manifests* von Catherine D'Ignazio und Lauren F. Klein vor und diskutiert deren Anwendungsmöglichkeiten in den Digital Humanities. Oft als rein genderbezogen missverstanden, bietet Data Feminism ein Instrumentarium zum Umgang mit Bias und ethischen Fragen. Dieser Beitrag präsentiert theoretische Grundlagen und praxisnahe Beispiele, einschließlich einer Fallstudie aus unserer eigenen Arbeit, um die Relevanz und Anwendung der Data-Feminism-Prinzipien für die Digital Humanities aufzuzeigen.

A (Feminist) Toolkit for Data Ethics

[1] With the growing accessibility of machine learning tools, applications and approaches, the Digital and Computational Humanities face an urgent need to focus on ethical frameworks, research integrity and quality assurance in research outcomes.[1] While traditional source criticism is well established in the historical disciplines, the nature of digital projects necessitates a digital source criticism that evaluates not only historical sources but also the processes involved in creating and curating data. Data Feminism offers a compelling framework for addressing ethical challenges, but it remains underutilized within Digital Humanities (DH).[2] This raises the questions: Why is there a hesitation to adopt a Data Feminist approach in the Digital Humanities, and how can the principles of Data Feminism be applied within a Digital Humanities framework?

[1] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020. This working paper builds on discussions and co-organized events of the Digital Humanities im deutschsprachigen Raum (DHd) working group ›AG Empowerment‹. However, the paper itself was written exclusively by the two credited authors, both historians by training, situated at German universities and research institutions, who were not introduced to feminism through formal training. ›AG Empowerment‹ is made up of predominantly female and non-binary early career scholars in Digital Humanities from the German-speaking areas with different disciplinary backgrounds in the Humanities. With our work, we hope to make a positive contribution to discourses aiming to make the Digital Humanities more inclusive, yet we as a group are not truly diverse, hence the working group name Empowerment. We approach our work through a lens of critical whiteness and believe, following the Data Feminism manifesto, that better outcomes for all can only be achieved through co-liberation, a process that requires participation by all and cannot be done *for* anyone. Accordingly, our goal is to help empower ourselves and others to participate in this process.

[2] *Data Feminism* has outlined seven principles to guide ethical data work in the Digital and Computational Humanities, grounded in intersectional feminist power analysis. It builds on works such as Noble 2018 and Eubanks 2018 and leverages intersectional feminist concepts like the matrix of oppression (Collins 2008) and the situatedness of knowledge (Haraway 1988). It also incorporates ideas like racial innocence (Bernstein 2011) and white fragility (DiAngelo 2019) to define the »privilege hazard« (D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 28–29), which refers to the inability of those in positions of power and privilege to foresee the potential harm that systems they design may cause due to their lack of lived experience. On Data Feminism for AI, see Klein / D'Ignazio 2024.

We argue that the limited adoption of Data Feminism in Digital Humanities can be attributed to a combination of misconceptions and practical challenges. One possible cause may be the assumption that Data Feminism principles only concern issues about gender or women in particular.[3] This, however, is not the case: Data Feminism, as articulated by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, focuses on power structures and how marginalization shapes data. In providing guidelines which operationalize feminist thought as actionable principles, the authors of *Data Feminism* make clear that a project can be Data Feminist in content, form, or process.[4] Yet misconceptions about what Data Feminism means and who it is for may offer an explanation why Digital Humanities practitioners only sparingly engage with its principles, likely underestimating their universal applicability. Data Feminism applies to all data-related projects because every project is inherently political, whether its agenda is explicit or implicit. The *Data Feminism* manifesto provides tools for addressing power imbalances in data work by drawing on feminist theory's longstanding critique of such structures. The principles build on established strategies that can be applied to (any) data work. As such, Data Feminism is a toolkit for dealing with ethical issues in data projects and thus, highly relevant for all of Digital Humanities. But despite its potential, Data Feminism has yet to achieve widespread recognition as a standard ethical framework for Digital Humanities. This likely limits its broader adoption, creating a barrier to entry that hinders the significant policy changes that could arise from widespread acceptance of Data Feminist principles. [2]

And, while the principles in Data Feminism are clearly articulated and memorable, they are broad guidelines that require adaptation to specific contexts and the operationalization of Data Feminism for a practical (Digital Humanities-)use.[5] Many practitioners lack the time or resources to engage deeply with feminist theory, creating a barrier to its adoption. Even those familiar with feminist principles may need to read and re-read the book to fully engage with its content, a time commitment that many Digital Humanities professionals cannot afford within their projects.[6] [3]

In this article, we aim to ›translate Data Feminism‹ for more traditionally minded (Digital) Humanists. We provide both theoretical context and concrete implementation examples to ease the burden on Digital Humanities professionals who might otherwise need to navigate this material independently. Thereby, we hope to encourage more practitioners to explore and apply these principles in their daily work, potentially motivating those who might otherwise be hesitant to engage with feminist methodologies. Ultimately, we hope to promote stronger ethical standards within the field, fostering a cultural shift in how data projects [4]

[3] For this reason, we have titled this article ›Beyond Data Feminism‹. This is not because we believe Data Feminism is somehow lacking or should be left behind, but to emphasize that despite its name, Data Feminism is not (just) about feminism or women. The reach of the proposed concepts and principles should extend beyond the disciplinary borders of what is typically associated with feminism. D'Ignazio and Klein make this important distinction when they explain that while women are not a minority, they are still not the dominant group within patriarchal structures and experience systemic oppression compounded by intersecting identities such as race and class. The authors refer to this as being minoritized (Smith 2016) within their specific context of power dynamics (D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 26). Wernimont / Losh 2018, pp. ix–x, for example, have criticized that critical Digital Humanities and feminist Digital Humanities are continually suffering marginalization as ›fringe interests‹ at the periphery of the field, even though women are not a minority in Digital Humanities (Eichmann-Kalwara et al. 2018). Data Feminism addresses the interplay of dominant and minoritized groups and how these dynamics shape how data is collected, archived, analyzed, and used. But due to women being a prominent example of a minoritized group, it is understandable why many may have erroneously confused this with being about women.

[4] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 18.

[5] The *Data Feminism* book serves more as a manifesto than a practical guide, although its core goal is to present actionable principles for incorporating intersectional feminist approaches into data work (Alvarado 2022). The same can be said, maybe even more so, for the more recent article *Data Feminism for AI* (Klein / D'Ignazio 2024) in which the authors of *Data Feminism* applied the principles originally developed for data science to the field of AI. The principles are very valuable but due to their nature as principles, they are not guidelines suitable for immediate practical implementation. Many demands in *Data Feminism for AI* concern policymakers more than individual Digital Humanities practitioners seeking to make a positive contribution to a more equitable AI landscape. As such, despite the stated aim that the principles of Data Feminism should operationalize feminist strategies for engaging with power structures in ways that are useful for those working with data, they largely remain general guiding principles. While they can serve as guides to one's modes of thinking and approaches to data, they are not yet fully operationalized in a technical sense that would translate directly into concrete, actionable steps for a typical Digital Humanities project without further ›translation work‹ (Pichler / Reiter 2022). On operationalization in Digital Humanities, see Pichler / Reiter 2022. On data work, see Alvarado 2022.

[6] While it would, of course, be best if everybody could engage with the principles deeply, providing accessible entry points that can be seamlessly integrated into existing Digital Humanities work is more likely to have a significant impact and encourage a gradual shift towards better practices.

are approached. Regulatory bodies, such as grant agencies, could also benefit from these clearer guidelines, enabling them to set higher expectations for diversity, inclusivity and accountability in Digital Humanities work. This is especially crucial regarding the steady increase of machine learning and datafication, while ethics remain somewhat understudied and undertheorized in Digital Humanities.[7]

This article aims to bridge the implementation gap between Data Feminism's conceptual foundation and its practical application in Digital Humanities. By contextualising its principles and providing concrete examples, we seek to lower the barriers to entry and demonstrate its relevance for everyday Digital Humanities practice. Our discussion begins with an exploration of digital hermeneutics and source criticism for data work in (Digital) Humanities and emphasizes the inherently political nature of Digital Humanities work. We then provide an overview of Data Feminism, based on the original *Data Feminism* book, but tailored to the Digital Humanities context, offering strategies for its practical implementation. The article concludes with a case study from our own research on women's roles in historical letter networks, illustrating how Data Feminist principles can inform project design and implementation. In doing so, this article not only clarifies potential misconceptions surrounding Data Feminism but also offers practical pathways for its adoption in Digital Humanities. By making these principles more accessible and actionable, we hope to promote stronger ethical standards in the field, addressing the ethical challenges posed by the increasing integration of machine learning technologies with problematic development histories and dubious ethical standards. This work represents a step towards institutionalizing the Data Feminism principles as a universal ethical framework and toolkit for Digital Humanities, so that its transformative potential can be fully realized. [5]

1. Digital Hermeneutics and Source Criticism for Data Work in (Digital) Humanities

Issues with bias in machine learning algorithms increasingly highlight how Humanities skills, such as historical hermeneutics and source criticism, will be central to Digital Humanities work of the future. In fact, far from rendering the more traditional Humanities – or the sub-field of Digital Humanities that Camille Roth refers to as the ›Digitized Humanities‹[8] – obsolete, the AI revolution makes it more crucial than ever for the Digital Humanities to engage in critical data work.[9] In such data work, Data Feminism can serve as a methodology that complements what is known in the Humanities as source criticism.[10] [6]

In historical disciplines, source criticism is an accepted technique to identify bias in data and ask how historical sources are ›situated‹.[11] However, in Digital Humanities it must be applied on multiple levels and often for an entire dataset or collection rather than a single document. We must also acknowledge that we cannot simply recreate a dataset from scratch; instead, we are forced to work with what has been transmitted through the historical record. This means grappling with datasets that are inherently rife with problems in their very makeup. Any reparative measures we implement can only do so much to mitigate their harmful impact and contextualize the potentially problematic worldviews that this data perpetuates or documents. Accordingly, employing data feminist approaches to data work involves considering the data's history in two ways. [7]

[7] Cf. Berry 2022.
[8] Cf. Roth 2019.
[9] On data work, see Alvarado 2022. On critical code and data studies, see Iliadis / Russo 2016; Marino / Douglass 2023; Berry 2023a; Berry 2023b; Prescott 2023; Smits / Wevers 2021b.
[10] On (digital) hermeneutics, see Edmond / Lehmann 2021; Fickers et al. 2022.
[11] Cf. Haraway 1988.

First, the history of how the sources came into existence must be investigated, using historical-critical methods such as source criticism or hermeneutics, alongside questions about the sources' provenance and archival history.[12] Second, the history of how those sources became data must be examined. Questions arise, such as who was responsible for the digitization, what were the needs behind the data model, and whether historical-critical methods were considered during digitization and reflected in the metadata. Third, it is important to consider who created the metadata, whose interests the project serves, and what their goals were. Factors such as their societal position within a hierarchy of power and privilege, as well as the academic discipline relevant to the digitization, may, too, have influenced how it was digitized and which aspects either received special attention or were neglected. These considerations influence the affordances[13] of the resulting data, i.e. what can, cannot or should not be done with it.[14] [8]

Only those in relatively powerful positions are typically able to create data on a larger scale, archive it, and decide how it is treated. Thus, as the authors of *Data Feminism* point out, data generally emerges from structures of power and reflects societal hierarchies inherently worth making explicit. Data demands even greater scrutiny when it originates from particularly problematic sources, such as those known to contain racist slurs. However, even sources that may not appear problematic, such as metadata which are commonly perceived as neutral, can be rife with issues that warrant investigation. Such issues with one's sources may already be known or should be carefully examined during source criticism to uncover biases that may be present in unknown datasets. [9]

This involves not only analyzing the data itself but also consulting theoretical literature that addresses power structures from the relevant historical period. As the authors of *Data Feminism* and Noble 2018 have concluded, working with data does not require less theory or signal the end of theory – it requires more.[15] Without a strong theoretical foundation, those annotating data inevitably have to fall back on ›common sense‹, where stereotypes and biases reside, which can then become inscribed into the data, reproducing or even reinforcing those biases. If theoretical principles are not properly operationalized in the data, the results may fail to reflect the object of study accurately, and resulting algorithmic models may not actually engage with the information they claim to analyze in the way they are expected to. This issue is further compounded by the historical perception of tasks such as data entry, labeling, and metadata creation as menial work, unworthy of credit or attribution. Digital Humanities scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that this is, in fact, significant Humanities work, involving hermeneutic processes that significantly shape the final output.[16] However, due to this past perception, it is often impossible to trace who performed the work, preventing an investigation into the potential biases they may have introduced. Scholars reusing such data today cannot know past metadata creator's motivations – whether they were simply completing a task, had specific agendas, or held political views that, while considered acceptable or even standard opinions at the time, are now recognized as harmful or problematic. However, it must be noted that even political [10]

[12] These considerations familiar to Humanists and the hermeneutic method that undergirds our very discipline are perfectly congruent with the principles of Data Feminism: For instance, examining and challenging power (Chapters 1 and 2) and, particularly relevant for data in the Humanities, considering context (Chapter 6) (cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020).

[13] Cf. Norman 2013.

[14] This may, for instance, concern questions like wether the data created is following a research-driven or curation-driven digitization paradigm (cf. Flanders / Jannidis 2015). Research-driven modeling is often highly detailed but may not translate well to larger corpora, while curation-driven modeling tends to involve only non-specialized, surface-level metadata collection. However, curation-driven digitization is designed to accommodate a wide range of research scenarios, even if the data is not very detailed or particularly accurate. Such datasets, while potentially containing incorrect, untraceable or unverified details, are easier to compare on a larger scale and are often created as part of broader digitization efforts. Nevertheless, curation-driven modeling is still not ›neutral‹ modeling because the decisions and priorities of the projects and people involved are still reflected in the data model. Examples of concrete steps to be taken to mimize their impact in a Data Feminist source criticism will be given later.

[15] Referring to the 2008 *Wired* article *The End of Theory* (Anderson 2008), the authors argue that »correlation without context is not enough because it recirculates racism and sexism and perpetuates inequality« (D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 171–172), citing Safiya Umoja Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (Noble 2018) that showed how Google search reinforces bias beyond its correlation with sexism, racism and colonialism in our society. Contrary to Chris Anderson's deliberately provocative claim, the authors of *Data Feminism* argue »that we need more theory, not less. Without theory, survey designers and data analysts must rely on intuition, supported by ›common sense‹ ideas about the things they are measuring and modeling. This reliance on ›common sense‹ leads directly down the path to bias« (D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 162).

[16] For example, see the recent work by Alvarado 2022.

views deemed unproblematic can influence a dataset and are worth acknowledging and making traceable.[17] For instance, imagine the major consequences on research possibilities in the seemingly minor case of manuscript metadata where scribes are always identified as men, despite there often being no evidence to support this assumption apart from received stereotypes about how the past works, possibly further shaped by the metadata creator's personal worldview.[18] This highlights the importance of crediting all data work in modern projects to ensure transparency and traceability, which are essential to understanding the biases built into algorithms. While transparency alone does not guarantee ethical outcomes, it at least allows for explainability.[19] This is particularly important regarding the demands for using AI to do this seemingly ›less important‹ data work in order to save resources in Digital Humanities projects. When researchers do not know who created the data one reuses or where it originated, achieving transparency in AI ethics becomes nearly impossible.

2. Digital Humanities Work is More Political Than it May Seem at First Glance

[11] Digital Humanities practitioners may assume that research ethics are not relevant to their work, as their subjects may be long dead.[20] They may equally assume that because their work is not actively political or activist, they do not require activist methodologies like feminism. However, this is a misunderstanding. In fact, every project is inherently political: Simply by selecting certain topics, materials, or sources over others, one makes a political choice, prioritizing time and resources for a particular project while others, potentially more deserving or urgent, are overlooked. This is evident in many Digital Humanities projects, where, despite the discipline's promise of innovation, much of the work focuses on the same canonical topics and sources. This is particularly true for projects that do not involve digitizing new sources, as they often rely on pre-digitized material selected through a politics of digitization that is neither fair nor equally representative of all historical materials.[21] This disparity is especially apparent in the digitization gap between the Global North and the Global South that clearly privileges data deemed relevant by Westerners who hold the power and resources to digitize and manage their digital cultural heritage.[22]

[12] As Mark Hall discusses in his 2019 contribution *DH Is the Study of Dead Dudes*, the Digital Humanities are at risk of perpetuating old canons when they keep analyzing data produced following former research agendas: The first data to get digitized in high quality was frequently chosen because of the availability of high-quality scholarly editions.[23] Former scholarly editing priorities focused on what was considered part of the exclusive canon of the supposedly best literature, including only what was deemed (Western and white) ›high culture‹ like, for instance, William Shakespeare or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.[24] When Digital Humanities apply new methods to old sources – commonly presented as a strength, maybe even the unique sales proposal of the

[17] Throughout our work, we frequently encountered the evolving nature of terms and conventions in the context of feminism and gender-inclusive language. It is essential to use these terms with critical awareness and to provide justifications for their use, both in the digital processing of historical sources and in accompanying texts. Even versioning metadata is necessary so that the temporality of these attributions or choices of words or labels remain transparent for future users of the data. Additionally, scholars must reflect on and make transparent their own societal positions of privilege and power that inevitably influence and inform their scientific practices. Our commitment to inclusive language reflects an intentional distancing from reactionary currents in feminism. However, the limited diversity among the members of our working group and among the German Digital Humanities at large means that we can only offer a perspective rooted in critical whiteness when discussing intersectional forms of discrimination. See also Ravulo et al. 2023.

[18] We are grateful to Hannah Busch for this insight into her research in Digital Forensics for catalog metadata that are leveraged in machine learning applications, see Busch 2019. On inclusive metadata practices, see Mandell 2019; Mähr / Schnegg 2024.

[19] On explainability in Digital Humanities, see Berry 2023a; Berry 2023b; El-Hajj et al. 2023; Ries et al. 2023.

[20] This naive approach to ethics is illustrated by Rehbein's reflection that he rarely considered moral or legal issues in his research, believing that studying long-dead historical figures or past events had little impact on the present (Rehbein 2016, p. 631).

[21] Cf. Zaagsma 2023.

[22] Cf. Fiormonte / del Rio Riande 2022.

[23] Cf. Hall 2019. On the discourse around dark sides of Digital Humanities, see also Smithies 2022.

[24] Cf. Hall 2019.

field – they may, in fact, reinforce old canons that many in traditional humanities have already moved beyond to look at a more diverse range of sources. In doing so, Digital Humanities research may further amplify research priorities of the past which are already overrepresented in available data.

[13] But, of course, the problem extends beyond the issue of research priorities: The traditions, sources and collections Digital Humanities build upon are inherently shaped by hegemonic norms and structures rooted in patriarchal, colonial, racist, capitalist, and other systems of power. Digital Humanities research engaging with the material, visual, and textual cultural heritage collected by dominant groups risks perpetuating these hegemonic patterns through their data-driven research if power dynamics are not critically examined and contextualized. This issue is not limited to the design of new epistemological frameworks aimed at preventing the digital reproduction of discriminatory structures; it also includes a critical interrogation of the processes by which data and sources are accumulated. Often, collection practices are based on colonialist, Eurocentric, and cis-male viewpoints, raising important questions about how the Digital Humanities will address archival gaps that hinder the exploration of narratives beyond those centered on cis-male, white experiences. This historically rooted imbalance is evident in the fact that data concerning marginalized groups is frequently absent from archives, and when preserved, they are often filtered through the perspectives of hegemonic groups. As a result, archives simultaneously produce and perpetuate both visibilities and invisibilities, as well as expressabilities and inexpressabilities.[25]

[14] This suggests that Digital Humanists need to be more self-critical and aware of our practices than we may initially think, questioning the self-image of rebellious innovators breaking away from the received confines and problematic traditional structures of academia. This sense of ›vocational awe‹ – a term originally coined by Fobazi Ettarh and applied to Digital Humanities by Melissa Terras – can obscure the field's internal challenges.[26] These include domination by privileged white Westerners, precarious employment conditions, and gender imbalances. ›Vocational awe‹ describes a profession's uncritical belief in its own inherent goodness, which can blind its practitioners to the field's flaws – a phenomenon that D'Ignazio and Klein describe as a ›privilege hazard‹ in the context of Data Feminism.[27] While not all of Digital Humanities practitioners may be in positions of power, many Digital Humanities practitioners are in positions of privilege. This comes with the responsibility to use it well.

3. Data Feminism for the Digital Humanities

[15] But how can Data Feminist approaches be operationalized within Digital Humanities? What research areas could serve as practical entry points for those wishing to apply Data Feminism methods? Addressing the challenges posed by Data Feminism requires the Digital Humanities community to build structures that critically confront biases and imbalances. But we are not empty-handed in dealing with these challenges: Lessons can be drawn from various projects, which offer valuable insights for opening up spaces for dialogue within the field. The ›Full Stack‹ Feminism project, for example, aims to create a toolkit that integrates feminist methods and design principles to promote more socially conscious technologies and infrastructures in Digital Humanities: This involves applying feminist design principles, decentering traditional voices, and incorporating intersectional feminist methodologies into Digital Humanities projects.[28] In addition, there is an extensive body of research that can be drawn on for applying Data Feminist principles to the Digital and Computational Humanities. Beyond the foundational work on feminism and intersectionality in Digital

[25] The Digital Humanities im deutschsprachigen Raum (DHd) working group ›AG Empowerment‹ has already touched upon these issues throughout a series of panels and workshops held at DHd2023 (Trier / Belval) and DH2023 (Graz) that are documented in blogposts and the original conference abstracts: Borek et al. 2023a; Borek et al. 2023b.
[26] Cf. Ettarh 2018; Borek et al. 2023c.
[27] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 28–29.
[28] Cf. Liu 2020; Webb et al. 2023; Webb 2023; Webb / Fox 2022.

Humanities[29], numerous studies directly engage with Data Feminism.[30] However, much of the existing Digital Humanities work focuses on recovering the contributions of historically overlooked women.[31] This suggests that Digital Humanities has not yet fully embraced the broader applicability of Data Feminism to diverse areas of data work beyond these specific, though important cases. Data Feminism is organized into principles that can be applied at various stages of the research process. The following overview is organized according to the chapters of the original book, *Data Feminism*, which are themselves structured around these principles.[32]

Principle 1: Examine Power

[16] A key tenet of anti-discriminatory activism is that to address an issue, one must first investigate and name it. This is step one of any activist or reparatory work and it is the focus of Principle 1. The goal is to address bias from the outset of a project rather than applying superficial technical fixes that only hide the problem after harmful outcomes have already occurred and have been called out, as it is unfortunately a relatively common approach to ›fixing‹ issues with AI.[33]

[17] As discussed in the previous section, many Digital Humanists believe themselves to be largely unaffected by ethical issues, but most data repositories stem from colonial collections and / or contain problematic categories and classification systems.[34] The historical record overwhelmingly reflects the perspectives of those in power, leaving marginalized histories underrepresented. While we cannot recover or re-survey unrecorded histories, Digital Humanists can diversify datasets by focusing on neglected stories, making absences and missing data visible and even collecting ›counter data‹.[35] This aligns with the growing body of work on postcolonial, global, and Black Digital Humanities, or critical race theory.[36] Accordingly, when starting a data project, instead of immediately starting to work with a dataset, one must take a step back to ask: How did this dataset come into existence and which institutions were responsible for its later archival storage, processing, datafication and modeling?[37]

Principle 2: Challenge Power

[18] After examining power structures, the goal is to tackle bias at its root: structural oppression.[38] To challenge power, practitioners of Data Feminism must build on Principle 1's analysis of power structures, making the issues they cause, the resulting harms and unequal outcomes visible. This way, they can be labeled as problematic sources of inequality. In doing so, the power structure is being questioned and challenged, and dominant groups can be held accountable through public scrutiny. Once this is done, further action

[29] Cf. Risam 2015; Wernimont 2015; Losh / Wernimont 2018; Bordalejo / Risam 2019; Block 2020; Wiens et al. 2020; Smyth et al. 2020; Earhart 2022; Gao et al. 2022.
[30] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020; Lang et al. 2023; Rezai 2022; Juen 2021; Keck 2021; Borek et al. 2023a; Borek et al. 2023b.
[31] Cf. Buurma / Heffernan 2018; Aleksander 2014; Hall 2019; Dang 2020; Dickel et al., n.d.; Wreyford / Cobb 2017; Bui et al. 2021; Keck 2021.
[32] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020. Somewhat confusingly, the chapters each have a title and subtitle, which can interchangeably be used as references.
[33] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 60–61.
[34] Cf. Sever 2020; Carbajal 2021; Lampe 2021.
[35] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 28–34.
[36] On postcolonial Digital Humanities or decolonizing Digital Humanities, see Risam 2018a; Risam 2018b; Aiyegbusi 2019; Murray 2018; Guiliano / Heitman 2019; Kuster et al. 2019; Roy / Menon 2022; Mohamed et al. 2020; Kühnl 2020; Doğtaş et al. 2022; Elwert et al. 2023. On global Digital Humanities, see Fiormonte 2012; Fiormonte et al. 2015; Fiormonte 2021, Fiormonte et al. 2022; Fiormonte / Rio Riande 2022; Earhart 2018. On Black Digital Humanities, see McPherson 2012; Johnson 2018; Steele 2021. On critical race theory in Digital Humanities, see Sheth 2017; Gairola 2022. See also Stoler 2002 for a critical archival studies perspective.
[37] The section on digital source criticism has covered this issue in some detail, so we refrain from reiterating it here.
[38] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 63.

may be taken, but the first and crucial steps are identifying and naming the problem, thus making it visible. For instance, in a Digital Humanities context, Julia Flanders urges us to critically examine the ›full stack‹ of technology as a cultural text and seek ways to ›build otherwise‹.[39]

Having identified power structures, D'Ignazio and Klein recommend challenging them by collecting ›counter data‹ to fill gaps caused by institutional neglect,[40] analyzing inequitable outcomes across groups, and auditing algorithms.[41] This may help close the accountability gap[42] and helps address archival silences.[43] Even if measures like collecting counterdata in the strict sense are frequently impossible for data built on historical sources, as it is impossible to simply re-collect historical datasets after the fact, one can still address their blind spots by asking what is missing in the dataset and why, to later be able to focus on the answer to these questions in framing the results. However, it has to be noted that marginalized groups can equally be overrepresented in data, such as criminal or surveillance records. [19]

Encouraging diversity in the field through teaching and making resources accessible is another viable step that is relatively simple and straightforward to implement. Regarding the data itself, we can either attempt to fill data gaps through careful research or at least name and quantify the missingness in one's data. [20]

In Digital Humanities, this can include ensuring fair credit and training for those performing tasks that are essential but often considered ›menial‹, engendering long-term benefits beyond the immediate and hopefully adequate financial compensation the contributors receive for their labor. Representing diverse perspectives in the makeup of the project team and simply having staff competent to speak on these issues to point attention to them is already surprisingly effective. [21]

Another strategy involves visualizing what is present and absent in the dataset – highlighting which topics are covered, whose stories are told, and whose are forgotten or misrepresented. By making these gaps visible, we take the first step toward increasing diversity and incorporating a plurality of voices. Adding supplementary historical sources or testimonies of the existence of marginalized figures, even if they are not fully represented in the dataset, may also help achieve this. [22]

Principle 3: Elevate Emotion and Embodiment

This principle emphasizes valuing diverse forms of knowledge, including emotions. This may appear somewhat cryptic and possibly irrelevant to those unfamiliar with feminist methodologies, but this chapter is about data visualizations. Data Feminism critiques the illusion of neutrality often present in data visualization, which Donna Haraway refers to as the »God trick«[44]. Visualizations, though designed to appear neutral, are actually persuasive and shaped by context.[45] [23]

[39] Cf. Flanders 2018. For applications in project management, see Neubert 2024.
[40] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 53
[41] Cf. Raji et al. 2020; Brown et al. 2021; Metaxa et al. 2021; Paullada et al. 2021; Koshiyama 2021.
[42] Cf. Raji et al. 2020.
[43] Cf. Klein 2013; Ortolja-Baird / Nyhan 2022.
[44] Cf. Haraway 1988.
[45] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 82.

A feminist strategy for valuing diverse forms of knowledge involves being transparent about one's knowledge limits (the situatedness of one's knowledge) and visualizing uncertainty or absences in data.[46] This can include documenting the context of historical figures or incorporating testimonies to reflect a plurality of perspectives and thus acknowledge that visualizations are always bottlenecks in representing data or displaying research results. There are many creative ways to make absences in data visible (and readable).[47] [24]

In pointing out the inherent situatedness of data and the in-built perspective in any data visualization, D'Ignazio and Klein challenge the masculinized metaphors commonly used in data science, such as the genius myth surrounding data analysis ›wizards‹ or ›ninjas‹, and the megalomaniac fantasies of dominion evident in referring to highly questionable and fallible products as ›foundation models‹. All that happens despite the fact that these models are significantly incomplete in worldview and problematic both in their underlying data and the outputs they produce as a result.[48] [25]

As evident in this principle, Data Feminism advocates an approach that is, in many ways, diametrically opposed to the ›move fast and break things‹ ethos of computer science and Silicon Valley. Many scholars have criticized this mindset for encouraging the use of poor-quality datasets, adopted without critical reflection or adequate efforts to create more appropriate ones. When such care is dismissed as too much work, AI becomes ethically problematic – as is arguably the case at present. Continuing with this fast-paced approach, without adopting a more critical perspective on data, is unlikely to lead to improved outcomes in the future. This insight is also reflected in the trend toward data-centric AI, which calls for greater emphasis on data quality.[49] This shift, too, is ultimately motivated by economic incentives: Better data is expected to yield better results. Since models quickly become outdated, it may be more practical for stakeholders to focus on improving their data rather than continuously trying new models in the hope that these will somehow resolve underlying issues in the dataset. But the move from a model-centric to a data-centric approach has also been championed as a promising way to re-humanize data and allow more time for meaningful, high-quality data work. This is a promising development, especially for the Digital Humanities. It acknowledges that the prevailing ethos in computer science may not be conducive to producing ethically sound research. [26]

Principle 4: Rethink Binaries and Hierarchies

This principle, presented in the chapter titled ›What Gets Counted, Counts‹, challenges us to rethink systems of classification that perpetuate oppression, such as the gender binary.[50] Classification systems are inherently reductive and often fail to accurately reflect reality.[51] While some models can be useful, they by definition construct rather than describe reality: Advocating that Digital Humanities practitioners should more accurately refer to their data as *capta*[52], Johanna Drucker stressed »that even the very act of capturing data in the first place is oriented by certain goals, done with specific instruments, and driven by a specific attention to a small part of what could have been captured given different goals and instruments. In other words, capturing data is not passively accepting what is given, but actively constructing what one is interested in«[53]. Understanding data as models which, according to general modeling theory[54] are designed as partial, abstracted representations of an object of study at a given time and captured for specific purposes, allows us to account for the differences between »the data we have and our objects of study«[55]. [27]

[46] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 88.
[47] One example we used in our work in Historical Network Research are Graph Comics which give more context to your data and research through visualizations: Suárez Cronauer et al. 2024.
[48] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 82. See also Klein / D'Ignazio 2024.
[49] Jarrahi et al. 2023; Zha et al. 2023; Jakubik et al. 2024.
[50] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 97.
[51] Cf. Crawford 2021, pp. 123–150.
[52] Cf. Drucker 2011. Lavin 2021 has contributed a terminological discussion of *›data‹* and *›capta‹*.
[53] Cf. Schöch 2013, p. 3.
[54] Cf. Stachowiak 1973, pp. 131–132.

Counting or categorizing data abstracts them from their context, often dehumanizing people to some extent.[56] Thus, Data Feminism urges us to question whether it is the categories themselves or the classification system that is flawed.[57] Classifications often hide underlying hierarchies,[58] and those who stand to benefit from being counted are often also at risk of harm: This is referred to as the *paradox of exposure*, meaning that those who could benefit from ›being counted‹, because their lives and stories have been historically overlooked, are endangered by the availability of more data that could be used to track them against their will.[59] For instance, people of color are disproportionately persecuted, as studies like Virginia Eubanks' *Automating Inequality* have demonstrated.[60] While it might seem beneficial for algorithms to be trained on diverse data, enabling them to better recognize the faces of people of color, for instance, it may be better for communities of color if such algorithms – especially those used in surveillance – remain flawed. The paradox of exposure also concerns the Digital Humanities. This is particularly evident in contexts with a troubling history, such as slavery and colonialism, where people were dehumanized and frequently reduced to numbers. Quantitative methods risk replicating this dehumanization by similarly reducing human beings with complex identities, lives, and stories to mere data points.[61] In order to mitigate this, projects like Colored Conventions represent the black voices that were historically overshadowed through their data and explicitly ask users to humanize the individuals represented by contextualizing and telling their stories.[62] [28]

Principle 5: Embrace Pluralism

To develop the most complete knowledge, multiple perspectives must be synthesized, with emphasis on local, Indigenous, and experiential ways of knowing.[63] We must resist the urge to systematically ›clean‹ data in ways that strip it from its original context, as this can lead to misunderstandings and even epistemic violence, where dominant groups impose their knowledge systems over others.[64] Embracing pluralism in Digital Humanities can be seen in, for instance, the application of the CARE data principles[65] or in discussions of Indigenous data governance and ethics.[66] For a Digital Scholarly Edition project, a useful approach could be to follow the methodology of the ›Colored Conventions Project‹[67] by adding one understudied, unknown, or minoritized person for each individual already represented in the data (most likely white men). To counterbalance this, practitioners of Data Feminism could focus on understudied sources and even digitize certain materials that have been overlooked.[68] We could also bring attention to individuals who are absent from the dataset or who are relatively invisible on its periphery by proportionately dedicating more time and research to them. The lack of good metadata for some individuals, often in contrast to the well-documented famous white men, can often be addressed with additional background research. Consequently, a straightforward way for Digital Humanities to embrace pluralism is to invest time in researching overlooked individuals, as they may still exist in the historical record. Additionally, digitizing sources that document a plurality of perspectives – especially ones not yet captured or digitized by large institutional initiatives – can [29]

[55] Cf. Schöch 2013, p. 2.
[56] The authors of a study about representation at ADHO conferences state that »by ›distant reading‹ DH and turning our ›macroscopes‹ on ourselves, we offer a critique of our culture, and hopefully inspire fruitful discomfort in DH practitioners who apply often-dehumanizing tools to their subjects, but have not themselves fallen under the same distant gaze« (Eichmann-Kalwara et al. 2018, p. 73).
[57] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 105.
[58] Cf. Klein / D'Ignazio 2024, p. 104.
[59] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 105.
[60] Cf. Eubanks 2018.
[61] Cf. Eichmann-Kalwara et al. 2018, p. 73.
[62] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 118–119; Foreman et al. 2021.
[63] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 125.
[64] Epistemic violence, as defined by Spivak 2010 denotes »the harm that dominant groups like colonial powers wreak by privileging their ways of knowing over local and Indigenous ways« (D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 133). Fox 2023 investigates how diffraction, a feminist methodology, can disrupt dynamics in which only some are granted the authority of produce knowledge or define what counts as knowledge.
[65] Cf. Egan / Murphy 2022.
[66] Cf. Guiliano / Heitman 2019.
[67] Cf. Foreman et al. 2021.
[68] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 118–119; Foreman et al. 2021.

help address the biases of digitization politics, which often prioritize the canon over marginalized voices.[69] In implementing this strategy of attempting to fill gaps either through additional research (data enrichment) or adding new records through digitization, practitioners of Data Feminism can attempt to mitigate or repair the harm caused by their exclusion from the historical record. This is a very practical everyday way that existing inequalities can be perpetuated through Digital Humanities work but also, thankfully a simple and easy way accessible to all those who make the time to do this work and who deem it important enough to make it a priority.

[30] Yet if this important and necessary work is not included in a project from the outset, project employees often find that they need to prioritize working on their ›main tasks‹ and this ›nice to have‹ extra data about individuals who are only marginal to the main project goals falls off the todo list during busy times. Of course, grant funding institutions are also accountable for contributing to this work by making sure necessary resources can be dedicated to it. However, to be fair, not all the responsibility lies with those distributing the funding (although feminist projects have seen less sustained funding in the past).[70] Grant funding institutions are far from the sole perpetrators: The authors of this article have been consulting on many a grant application in which the proposal writers were clueless as what to say in the diversity section. The strategies outlined above are actionable ways of not only acing the diversity section in one's grant proposal but also, helping move the Digital Humanities towards more equitable data practices. Importantly, this is not simply a quick fix that can be applied to the data after the fact and should not be used as a fig leaf or ›pinkwashing‹ method to tokenistically signal the presence of marginalized individuals in one's data. Instead, this strategy should be integrated into future practices of data creation and enrichment from the ground up.

Principle 6: Consider Context

[31] Principle 6 ›Consider Context‹ is based on Haraway's feminist theory of situated knowledge which asserts that the social, cultural, historical, institutional, and material conditions are just as relevant to the production of knowledge as the identities of the persons involved.[71] Datasets, therefore, are never raw inputs; they must be understood in relation to the ›situatedness‹ in which they were produced, and thus, to their context.[72] Accordingly, Principle 6 is especially closely aligned with digital source criticism we described earlier. It offers a solution to close the gap between quantitative and qualitative research by acknowledging that everything we include in our research has a history and therefore represents a specific perspective on the world, and this is especially true for data. It is a central part of the research process to examine this perspective and contextualize it before jumping to conclusions, especially in the case of quantitative research.

[32] Contrary to claims like ›The End of Theory‹[73], Data Feminism argues that theory is crucial to prevent bias.[74] Data must be interpreted within its context, echoing Johanna Drucker's notion that data are ›capta‹: constructed and interpreted, not simply given.[75] Data are not neutral; they reflect unequal social relations and power dynamics.[76] The concept of ›data settings‹[77] encompasses both technical and human processes that

[69] On digitization politics in digital history, see Zaagsma 2023; on the canon: Hall 2019; Dziudzia / Hall 2020.
[70] Cf. Wernimont / Losh 2018, p. xv, who have stated that »while intersectional and critical digital humanities work has always been part of the community, it has not yet seen the kind of sustained funding similar to projects that have centered canonical works or dominant theoretical frameworks«. See also Cole et al. 2018; Boyles 2018.
[71] Cf. Haraway 1988.
[72] Cf. Gitelman 2013.
[73] Cf. Anderson 2008.
[74] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 162.
[75] Cf. Drucker 2011.
[76] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 149.
[77] Cf. Loukissas 2019.

shape data collection and structure. Numbers must not be allowed to ›speak for themselves‹, as they often stem from biased settings and can reinforce an unjust status quo.[78] Without context, data can perpetuate systemic biases, as seen in Google's algorithmic reinforcement of racism and sexism.[79]

To fully understand data, a power analysis of the knowledge infrastructure behind datasets is needed.[80] As suggested by a prominent group of pioneering AI ethics scholars, Data Feminism advocates for creating dataset biographies or ›datasheets‹ to reveal whose interests a dataset serves and consequently, its potential silences and missing data.[81] Critical data studies and code audits are increasingly used in Digital Humanities and represent an effective way of considering context in AI settings.[82] However, such work is resource-intensive and requires sustained funding, which remains scarce for projects focusing on non-canonical, critical Digital Humanities work.[83] [33]

In practice, making the data or data visualizations' perspectives visible may begin with documenting all contributors to projects, including their backgrounds, responsibilities, and contributions, for example, using the CRediT (Contributor Roles) taxonomy.[84] This goes to show just how interrelated the principles of Data Feminism are: Making perspectives visible involves, again, recognizing and properly crediting metadata work, which has often been dismissed as menial and therefore not acknowledged, credited, or versioned, making information provenance and even changes simply untraceable. This lack of transparency in how data comes into existence introduces additional uncertainty into historical data, which already carries its own set of challenges and ambiguities. The data Digital Humanists create today may later form the basis for quantitative analyses and, if left unchecked, can become a source of bias in future research. When changes and responsibilities are intransparent, data becomes potentially useless for further automated reuse through algorithmic methods. Such problematic data may be thought of as ›Schrödinger's data‹: Later users of the data cannot determine if it's good or bad until we have the necessary additional information, leaving us in epistemic limbo. This introduces yet another unnecessary black box into machine learning or big data scenarios, where algorithms alone already pose significant challenges to interpretability, reproducibility, and explainability.[85] [34]

Importantly, making contributions and perspectives transparent is not about assigning blame,[86] but about providing a clear, reusable understanding of the data setting and knowledge infrastructure that produced the data, reducing guesswork for future researchers.[87] It is always easier to document something while people are actively working on it rather than reconstruct it later. Nevertheless, there is value in a third-party audit or review by an independent infomediary who has no vested interest in the work.[88] [35]

[78] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 171. For a reflection on an example where lack of historical contextualization led authors to very misguided interpretations, resulting in public criticism of the paper, see Fafinski 2020.
[79] Cf. Noble 2018.
[80] Cf. Borgman 2015.
[81] Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 168–171; Gebru et al. 2018.
[82] Cf. Berry 2023b; Smits / Wevers 2021.
[83] Cf. Wernimont / Losh 2018.
[84] Cf. Holcombe 2019.
[85] On explainability in Digital Humanities see Berry 2023a; Berry 2023b; El-Hajj et al. 2023; Ries et al. 2023.
[86] Scholars need not fear that widespread adoption of Data Feminism will cause them to be blamed disproportionately for minor mistakes (although it should help in fairly assigning responsibility and holding individuals or organizations accountable for significant harms caused by their data or AI systems). The ethical approach of Data Feminism avoids focusing solely on the moral qualities of individual actors (virtue ethics), but recognizes instead that we are all part of systems of bias, oppression, and injustice (D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 60–61). While we may experience privilege in some areas, we may also be marginalized or minoritized (Smith 2016) along other axes of intersectionality. This means we are all accountable for contributing to positive change, but not solely responsible for being socialized and existing within systems of oppression that are larger than any individual. The tendency in society to blame and shame individuals as scapegoats for systemic issues is itself a form of oppression, or rather, a tool by which oppressive systems maintain the status quo, as it shifts attention away from the root problem, allowing the system that caused it to continue unchecked (Price 2024).
[87] Specific knowledge infrastructures (Borgman 2015) are required to create data, accordingly, it is them that make data possible in the first place (D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 153). To make this explicit, D'Ignazio and Klein recommend creating data(set) sheets or biographies (Krause 2017; Gebru et al. 2018 / 2021; D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 168–171) and conclude that ultimately, as data

Principle 7: Make Labor Visible

In digital projects, much of the labor remains invisible and largely uncredited. Data Feminism urges us to acknowledge and make this hidden work visible. In Digital Humanities, for example, the field's (male) founding figures often benefited from feminized or collective forms of labor that went unrecognized.[89] D'Ignazio and Klein recommend using a media production studies approach to examine how datasets, algorithms, and models are created.[90] [36]

The Digital Humanities are ever dominated by ongoing discussions concerning its definition which frequently intersect with issues of labour and representation.[91] Understanding who performs Digital Humanities labour and under what conditions is an essential part of defining Digital Humanities. Understanding who performs the work and who is represented by the data is a key issue of data ethics. This leads us to question who is contributing to Digital Humanities work and goes uncredited. Like the larger AI sector, Digital Humanities projects also rely heavily on underpaid, uncredited ›ghost workers‹ like book digitizers or even the underpaid Amazon Mechanical Turk employees responsible for the data behind many machine learning applications.[92] The Digital Humanities are complicit in this exploitation if Digital Humanities scholars reuse this data and base their research on it without acknowledging this legacy. While identifying all such labor is difficult, practitioners of Data Feminism can begin by using tools like the CRediT (Contributor Roles) taxonomy[93] to properly credit contributors in their own Digital Humanities projects. [37]

When Data Feminism urges us to examine who performs the work, who benefits, and whose needs are prioritized,[94] this also concerns the power Western Digital Humanities practitioners hold and may not even be aware of: Even Digital Humanities practitioners in precarious positions hold relative privilege when they belong to the Global North. As such, their work can inadvertently perpetuate biases that harm underrepresented groups globally or reinforce dominant standards that contribute to the epistemicide of global knowledge systems, for instance by unintentionally imposing Western norms of knowledge production.[95] [38]

4. A Data Feminist Approach to Historical Letter Network Data

To apply the information discussed previously, we present an example of Data Feminism in practice from our own research: Applying Data Feminism as a framework to women's networks in the correspondence of Early Romanticism.[96] The study focuses on a quantitative analysis of women's roles and functions within [39]

professionals (›infomediaries‹), Digital Humanists are well equipped to do such data work. This can help indicate silences in datasets and missing data or potential conflicts of interest that may have influenced what was recorded and whose knowledge was subjugated (D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 171–172).

88 Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 168–172.

89 Cf. Terras / Nyhan 2016; Nyhan 2022; Nyhan 2023.

90 Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, pp. 184–185.

91 On the definition of the field, see Roth 2019; Piotrowski 2020; Piotrowski / Fafinski 2020; Piotrowski / Neuwirth 2020. On labor, see Boyles et al. 2018; Ross / Pilsch 2022; Terras / Nyhan 2016; Nyhan 2022. On representation, see Bordalejo 2018; Eichmann-Kalwara et al. 2018.

92 Cf. Wernimont / Losh 2018, p. xxii; Gray / Suri 2019.

93 Cf. Holcombe 2019.

94 Cf. D'Ignazio / Klein 2020, p. 47.

95 Cf. Fiormonte / del Rio Riande 2022; Risam 2022. On postcolonial Digital Humanities or decolonizing Digital Humanities: Risam 2018a; Risam 2018b; Aiyegbusi 2019; Murray 2018; Guiliano / Heitman 2019; Kuster et al. 2019; Roy / Menon 2022; Mohamed et al. 2020; Kühnl 2020; Doğtaş et al. 2022; Elwert et al. 2023. On global Digital Humanities: Fiormonte 2012; Fiormonte et al. 2015; Fiormonte 2021; Fiormonte et al. 2022; Fiormonte / Rio Riande 2022; Earhart 2018. On Black Digital Humanities: McPherson 2012; Johnson 2018; Steele 2021. On critical race theory: Sheth 2017; Gairola 2022.

96 This PhD project is situated in Digital Humanities at Philipps-Universität Marburg and has the working title »Epistolares Schweigen oder hidden figures? Kreatives Kapital, Rollenzuweisungen und Funktion weiblicher Korrespondenz im Briefnetzwerk der Frühromantiker*innen«. For more information about the PhD project, see here. Furthermore, the PhD project is part of the DFG project ›Korrespondenzen der Frühromantik. Edition, Annotation, Netzwerkforschung‹, see: https://briefe-der-romantik.de/. The enrichment of data with LOD was part of the work in the project group based in the Academy of Science and Literature Mainz together with Aline Deicke and Clara Seibold.

the letter network and, among other aims, explores whether women's often overlooked creative potential can be formalized through historical network analysis. The letters as data are collected in context of the ongoing project ›Correspondence of Early Romanticism‹, which compiles and analyzes letters exchanged between Romantic authors from 1790 to 1802 by reusing existing editions, supplementing them with original manuscripts, and adding inferred letters to fill gaps. In the following, we discuss lessons learned from this work.

[40] Women and individuals beyond the cis-male category are particularly affected by the limitations of historical archival practices. In many collections of cultural heritage, gender is not documented at all or when it is, not as a self-identification but is instead externally imposed. But this gender data gap can distort both the interpretability and validity of historical research findings.[97] In the context of the Romantic period, dominant historical narratives, which are still prevalent in current scholarship, often reflect patriarchal assumptions. Women are frequently represented as muses, assistants, or passive observers, rather than as autonomous individuals with their own agency or as creators.[98] Our project takes a critical stance on these inherited perspectives, framing such female perspectives within the concepts of care work and mental load. Acknowledging these dimensions is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences and contextualizing their roles in historical networks of correspondence.

[41] In order to do so, our work explores how digital methodologies can be used to make visible the structural absences and biases in historical datasets. Transparency in data creation and annotation, as well as an active engagement with the epistemological implications of missing data, are essential to this approach. Gender-sensitive representation, though only one aspect of appropriate data modeling, requires careful attention. Retrofitting historical classification systems to accommodate current understandings of gender identity is not straightforward and involves ethical and methodological challenges. Widely used standards such as the PICA acquisition schema, TEI-XML, or gender modeling in Wikidata typically do not accommodate fluid gender identities, for a long time did not distinguish between sex and gender, and rarely account for temporality or uncertainty. In most cases, these models enforce a binary framework that contradicts both current theories of gender and, crucially, the complexities in the lived reality of historical individuals.[99] Gender is shaped by the cultural and institutional norms of a given time period and therefore inherently possesses a temporal dimension. However, digital encoding systems, if they allow for differentiated gender encoding at all, rarely account for this temporality. They often lack mechanisms to record the temporal context of the attribution, as well as the context in which the metadata was created, including underlying assumptions and the definitions of terms at that time. Since terms used to describe marginalized groups frequently shift in meaning, sometimes becoming slurs or being reclaimed, it is essential to include contextual information for both the historical period being described and the time when the metadata is added, along with the cultural situatedness of the metadata creator. Moreover, gender attributions are subject to change, which is why it has been proposed to model gender as an event to account for its temporality.[100] A further complicating factor is the difficulty of reconstructing gender identity from historical records, particularly where the documentation itself is sparse or biased. For example, in the case of Anastasius Lagrantinus Rosenstengel (1687–1721), there is scholarly debate as to whether this individual was a lesbian woman living as a man or a trans man, which is not easily resolved with available records.[101] In most historical contexts, individuals were assigned a binary gender in line with cultural expectations, which was reflected in their gendered first names,

[97] On the gender data gap, see Criado-Perez 2020; Jahnke et al. 2024; Neuber et al. 2024. The term *gender data gap* was popularized through Criado-Perez 2020. However, we distance ourselves from her binary conception of gender.
[98] For instance, the *GenderedCHContents* (Kyvernitou / Bikakis 2017) ontology supports making such gendered representations explicit.
[99] Cf. Illmer 2022.
[100] Cf. Andrews et al. 2024.
[101] Cf. Steidele 2021; Almstedt 2024.

and only few historical sources document forms of non-binary identification.[102] Our work does not claim to resolve these complexities, but it seeks to identify patterns of gendered roles within the constraints of and social frameworks represented in our source data.

[42] However, such sophisticated forms of gender encoding remain rare and often elusive in the Digital Humanities. This also applies to the underlying data of our case study: The scholarly editions our project builds upon seldom annotate gender as a research category.[103] To make gender analyzable as part of a dataset audit examining the gender data gap, the dataset was semi-automatically enriched with gender information.[104] This was annotated as ›assigned_gender‹ to acknowledge the provisional and externally attributed nature of these classifications. This facilitates future reinterpretations or corrections and provides transparency for subsequent researchers. In this context, it must be noted that the act of classifying, as discussed in Data Feminism's Principle 4 (›Rethink Binaries‹), is inherently contentious and thus, must be critically assessed in each instance to determine whether it causes more harm than benefit. However, stopping to classify is not an option either: Our data exists within pre-defined systems that we reuse more than we redefine them and it has already been classified in various ways. The digital ecosystem as a whole is built on classification and categorization. Therefore, it may be more constructive to leverage existing classifications and make them our objects of study, recognising that they do not represent reality accurately or holistically. Rather, they reflect a dominant view of reality that privileges a narrow range of perspectives over a plurality of voices. As the well-known saying goes, »All models are wrong, but some are useful« (George Box). Studying our models can help us learn about the world through the discrepancies between these representations and the realities they are meant to encode.[105]

[43] The initial enrichment process involved matching individuals with *Gemeinsame Normdatei (GND)* authority record identifiers and importing gender information using OpenRefine. For individuals lacking a GND-ID or gender data within the GND, the Python library ›gender-guesser‹ was used to infer gender from first names.[106] Because gender assignment is inherently problematic, this step was followed by manual verification.[107] The method is neither definitive nor neutral, but it serves as a starting point to interrogate what can be known within the limits of existing authority records and software. As Dominique Schirmer notes, there is an inherent tension between the ›requirements of reproduction‹ and ›dangers of reproduction‹ when gender must be inferred to enable analysis.[108] Without such annotation, gender cannot be operationalized as a research variable. Yet the act of assigning it introduces new uncertainties. To acknowledge the limitations and challenges of gender assignments made by third parties, automated or not, and to indicate their provisional nature, we recorded this as ›assigned gender‹. This facilitates future reinterpretations or corrections and

[102] On the history of non-binary gender: DeVun 2021. On queer voices in Digital Humanities, see Webb 2022.
[103] Cf. Scott 1986.
[104] A dedicated study by the authors of this working paper introducing dataset audits for mitigating data gaps in historical data is forthcoming (Lang / Suárez Cronauer 2026, forthcoming). While we acknowledge that automatically assigning gender based on first names is highly problematic, and that modeling gender involves complexities the Digital Humanities have only begun to address, our case study demonstrates that even a simple dataset audit can expose data gaps within authority control records and, by extension, other reconciled data sources.
[105] For a great example of using digital methods to scrutinize skews in the system of Digital Humanities, see also Eichmann-Kalwara et al. 2018. On learning about reality through a process of iterative modeling, see McCarty 2003, p. 1232: »Research in humanities computing begins then, in the breakdown, when tools become models. It proceeds in an iterative cycle of constructing, testing, analyzing, and reconstructing these models in order to discover how the thing imitated maybetter be known.«
[106] The enrichment of the database with external information was done within the project's Digital Humanities group, including the work of Aline Deicke and Clara Seibold.
[107] Importantly, automated classification tools, and indeed most digital tools, tend to perform better on data from the centre or mainstream of the data they were trained or built on. This means that minority groups, often only represented as sparse outliers in data, are less likely to be classified accurately, placing scholars in a double bind: On the one hand, such tools can ease the burden of filling in large amounts of missing data; on the other, the groups most affected by these gaps are also the most likely to be categorized incorrectly. There are several possible approaches to this problem. One is to do the work manually, as some activists choose to do, considering the extra time invested is a meaningful way to honour those lost voices as part of a curatorial ethics of care (Caswell / Cifor 2016). For more information see, for example, recent work on counting feminicide D'Ignazio 2024. Another is to use the tool but follow it by manual verification or even tool criticism. We chose the latter approach of using tools to speed up processes and make this important work feasible within project time constraints, while following up with careful manual verification. Building on the concept of strategic essentialism (cf. Eide 2016), Suárez Val 2023 has conceptualized this as strategic datafication.
[108] Cf. Schirmer 2023.

provides transparency for subsequent researchers. While our database remains a work in progress and is not yet complete, these preliminary figures offer insights into the persistent challenges associated with historical research data, particularly in terms of gender representation.

[44] The enrichment of data with gender information and the using of gender as an analytical category enables more complex, diverse perspectives on datasets. With ›assigned_gender‹ added and embedded as information in data about persons in historical sources, we are able to address and filter marginalized groups like women in corpora in which they otherwise would be hidden from quantitative historical research. Thereby, we are able to ask new research questions and open the field of quantitative historical research for debates on gender aspects. In the presented use case, for example, we find a significant disparity in male and female gender data, which raises critical questions about the historical sources underpinning the database. The imbalance reflects both the archival loss of women's writings and the biases of earlier collection practices: Research, such as Wernli 2022, indicates that many letters authored by women in the early 19th century were lost, destroyed, or only preserved through editorial frameworks that reduced women to gender roles defined by patriarchal norms. Whether as housewives admiring their spouses, assistants supporting their husbands, or muses serving as passive inspiration for male authors, these gender roles reflect persistent patterns of positioning women in relation to male figures, rather than as independent agents. This historical imbalance not only perpetuates gender disparities in datasets built upon these sources, it also shapes how datasets are constructed for data availability reasons. These figures exemplify the gender data gap within historical authority records and its implications for digital historical research.

[45] While our method of assigning gender based on first names is limited, its utility lies in enabling an initial audit of the dataset. This implements a key principle of Data Feminism: The value of making absences visible. Even a preliminary analysis can expose the effects of data gaps, prompting further investigation and opening up space for new research questions to be asked. For instance, which roles are systematically attributed to male versus female correspondents? How does gender distribution shape access to particular topics or social functions within the letter network?

[46] Embedding ›assigned_gender‹ into our dataset allows us to extract and examine the participation of historically marginalized groups, in this case women, in a corpus where they might otherwise remain invisible. This in turn facilitates the integration of gender history and feminist critique into quantitative historical research. While this approach does not yet account for non-binary identities or fluid gender expressions and may be considered crude in some respects, it lays a foundation for future work that explicitly addresses gender distributions in our corpus, a possibility the original state of the data did not afford. This serves as a good example of how projects can make important contributions by providing structured data on issues such as gender representation. Although the measure is relatively simple, it still requires reflective depth to be implemented responsibly within the limitations of digital systems that inherently classify. It also requires proper documentation, such as through the use of datasheets, to help future users understand how the dataset was created and what kinds of research questions it can or cannot support.

5. Conclusion: Making Data Feminism Work in Practice

[47] Data Feminism, as conceptualized by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, represents a strand of intersectional feminism that critically examines the predominance of white, cis-male perspectives in data science. In it, the authors have attempted to operationalize existing feminist strategies to be used in data science and AI contexts by defining seven key principles to guide such work. Data feminist critique extends beyond data analysis to encompass the modeling, collection, curation, and presentation of datasets, even the development of algorithms and digital infrastructures.

Data Feminist approaches hold significant potential for advancing more ethical research within the Digital Humanities; however, they have not yet been fully integrated in the German-speaking Digital Humanities community. A notable implementation gap exists in the development of concrete guidelines and frameworks for embedding Data Feminist principles into everyday Digital Humanities project practices. Addressing the challenges posed by Data Feminism requires the Digital Humanities community to build structures and establish best practices that critically confront biases and imbalances. Fortunately, there is much work that the Digital Humanities community can draw on. We have developed this guide to provide essential information, offering an accessible entry point and outlining strategies specific to Digital Humanities for implementing ethically responsible scholarship. We hope that we have not only provided an accessible introduction to the Data Feminism principles for Digital Humanists through providing a Digital Humanities implementation example, but also offered an entry point into the available secondary literature, opening up the rich body of sources from the Digital Humanities and related fields for those interested in beginning to work with and explore these ideas further. [48]

To make Data Feminism effective in Digital Humanities, it is essential to engage seriously with its principles rather than using them as a form of pinkwashing.[109] Furthermore, the time and resources needed to enrich data and fully implement ethical approaches to data in practice should not be underestimated. Lastly, raising awareness of Data Feminism by incorporating it into teaching and academic curricula is crucial to ensuring its influence on future scholarship and practice. [49]

As we have argued and the authors themselves have pointed out, the term *Data Feminism* leads many to the misconception that the framework is relevant only to feminism and feminists. We hope to have dispelled the common misconception that Data Feminism is solely about women or activist issues. Data Feminism offers feminist methodologies to address problems that affect everyone working with (historical) data. We hope to have convinced the Digital Humanities community of its broad usability and applicability, particularly given its strong alignment with established traditional historical methodologies like source criticism, to which it can be seen as an extension for the digital sphere. In doing so, we have presented Data Feminism as a universally relevant framework for conducting ethically sound data work. [50]

In this context, one may wonder whether this truly fulfills the aspiration stated in the introduction: to illustrate how Data Feminist principles can inform project design and implementation. Are such seemingly simple steps enough to make data or projects feminist (irrespective of what people may typically imagine when they encounter the term)?[110] Is this ›genuinely Data Feminism‹ or simply quality assurance and good scientific practice? This is the false binary we have aimed to debunk in this article. Data Feminism is one method within the broader toolkit of quality assurance in research and should be viewed as a way to enhance good scientific practice. It is a framework that more scholars should integrate into their everyday research. Scholarship that does not account for a plurality of perspectives – even, and especially, when that plurality is lacking in the data – is not good scholarship. Research that fails to acknowledge the role of power structures in shaping datasets and historical records during analysis and interpretation must be considered significantly lacking in quality. [51]

Can what we have provided truly be considered a how-to guide to Data Feminism in the Digital Humanities? Perhaps not, as the presented case study is only one small example of how Data Feminism can be applied, inspired by the many other examples discussed in relation to the Data Feminism principles. Our [52]

[109] This requires integrating more theory and methods from specific academic disciplines into Digital Humanities research, while avoiding a simplistic return to traditional humanism, which Bianco has termed ›retro-humanism‹ (cf. Bianco 2012). Risam 2015, picking up the term, argues for a stronger relationship between theory and praxis in the Digital Humanities by applying developments like cultural studies, feminism, postcolonial studies, critical race studies, or queer studies to them.

[110] Feminism means grappling with hidden power structures, so any project that engages with these structures could reasonably be considered feminist to some extent, even if it does not focus on topics typically associated with feminism, such as gender studies. Entire fields, such as critical archival studies, could likewise be understood as feminist under this broader definition.

implementation example is not a definitive solution but rather a call to action: an invitation for others to engage in similar work and contribute their own approaches. It represents a first step toward making a dataset ready to even begin asking critical questions about issues such as the gender data gap.

[53] Were we able to offer an easy how-to for fully applying the principles? Not exactly. Like the principles of research ethics and good scientific practice, applying Data Feminism requires interpretation and adaptation to one's specific context. One researcher's dataset may already include gender assignments but may lack other forms of representation. Data Feminism encourages us to scrutinize our data and tools holistically, making us more aware of potential pitfalls and inspiring us to take active steps to address them. In this spirit, we have aimed to bridge the implementation gap between the *Data Feminism* manifesto and the daily working practices of Digital Humanists and more traditional historians. We hope that with these guidelines in hand, others will find it easier to identify which steps, whether simple or more complex, can help make data work in the Digital Humanities more inclusive, ethical, and rigorous.

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