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Challenging the Digital Humanities: A Response to Jon Saklofske

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Jon Saklofske's "Digital Doors of Perception: Illuminating Blake Through New Knowledge Environments" offers readers an introduction to NewRadial and Custom-Fade, digital research tools the building of which offered, in Saklofske's own intriguing turn of phrase, "a lucid form of artistically informed metacritical practice." Saklofske raises a number of questions that are integral to digital humanities work. How can humanists build tools informed by our own values rather than those of other disciplines? And should the building of these tools be considered a valid form of scholarship?

The original NewRadial, Saklofske asserts, was Blakean in its intentions: "instead of accepting the pre-rendered affordances and constraints of existing media forms, tools, systems and apparatuses to engage with Blake's work, I decided to create my own tools to work with the material." This bottom-up approach to Blake's works stands in contrast, Saklofske notes, to the *William Blake Archive's* goals, which are to make reliable and rigorously edited digital editions of Blake's works as widely available as possible. Evidence of the *Archive's* usefulness can be found in thousands of monographs, journal articles, student term papers, and classroom lectures and discussions (ephemeral as those last may be). But Saklofske's original implementation of NewRadial represented a different kind of scholarly use; rather than citing the contents of the *Archive*—either Blake's

creations or the editors' commentary on them—NewRadial remixed the building blocks of the *Archive* (the digital images) as content. As Saklofske notes, however, the batch downloading of images from the *Blake Archive* violated the *Archive*'s copyright and Terms of Use statements, which are necessitated by the image permission contracts (with museums, libraries and collectors) that make the *Archive*'s continued existence possible.

Saklofske's description of NewRadial—particularly in its second implementation—calls to mind, for me, artists like Brian Dettmer who use books as raw material for visual and tactile works of art.¹ Just as such sculptures foreground books not merely as repositories for words and works but as material objects with the potential to become art themselves, NewRadial was conceived as a tool not only for conveying knowledge but for thinking about scholarship *qua* scholarship. The most recent implementation of NewRadial seems a vast improvement not only because it solves the batch-download problem (which applies not only to the *Blake Archive* but to many proprietary or subscription-based databases) but because it is no longer isolated to single users' machines or dependent on metadata standardization. This newfound flexibility makes it applicable to materials across the web, making it a much more adaptable tool and thus one with the potential to generate “combinative, dynamic, conversational complexities” in our scholarship rather than the “narrativized and patently artificial paradigms” that continue to characterize the most common scholarly forms (monographs and journal articles). I find myself wondering how (and how soon) NewRadial 2.0 might be integrated with existing platforms for scholarly review and publication, where it might allow us to engage together and publicly in those acts of “surveying, connecting, grouping, annotating, discussing, arguing, and routing” that continue to be hidden or obscured by traditional modes of scholarly publication.

¹ See <http://briandettmer.com/art/>

This emphasis on revealing hidden or obscured labor suggests that Saklofske and I are engaged in similar projects. In my essay I assert that Catherine Blake's "care work" is analogous to scholarly and pedagogical "service"—both are consistently underappreciated and overlooked. When Saklofske asks whether "the process of creating a toolkit that one will then use to perform scholarly inquiry on a particular database [is] a form of scholarly inquiry itself?" he too is troubling the dichotomy between "scholarship" and "service." Of course, Saklofske answers his own question in the affirmative in his discussion of his Custom-Fade tool. He asserts that "[e]ach step of the design process highlighted specific features of Blake's pages that were crucial to consider when designing the interface affordances." Just as acts of "surveying, connecting, etc." are essential steps in the creation of finished works of scholarship and should be systematically revealed and acknowledged (as the new NewRadial has the potential to do), the Custom-Fade tool raised new scholarly questions about Blake even as it was being built. Thus in both the act of creating NewRadial and Custom-Fade and the act of writing about them here, Saklofske has offered a new model for creating, sharing, and disseminating scholarship in the digital age.