Catherine Blake was an Insect?
A Response to Ashley Reed

Jon Saklofske

While all of these articles work against the industrialist reflexes and capitalist habits at the heart of scholarly production, reasserting a humanist complexity within digital defamiliarizations, Reed’s paper confronts these ideas in the most direct way. Linking the invisibility of Catherine Blake’s labor of care to some of her own work experience as former project manager of the William Blake Archive and also to the materialist, masculinist and capitalist echoes that persist in the frontier spaces of DH and critical making, Reed importantly asserts that an ethics and practice of care can and should be more broadly acknowledged and incorporated into ecological models of cultural production and scholarly communication.

Is the work reported on in these three papers indicative of a movement towards critical perceptions that embrace a Blakean ecology? While each piece approaches this question in a different way, buttressed by different theoretical sources, thoughtful automations, prototypical tinkering and political theorization, all work towards a disruption of limited and limiting models of authorship, influence and scholarly work. It’s important to note that, despite such harmonics, these articles don’t always sing together, indicating the amount of work that remains to be done. Reed’s characterization of William Blake as an ecology parallels Whitson’s decomposition of Blake, and his notion of an algorithmic condition that sees Blake as a complex function makes room for Reed’s call to include Catherine Blake as a key component in that Blakean ecology. However, do bots such as @autoblake and tools such as NewRadial move us further away from Reed’s call for increased attention to the role of care work and invisible labor? Or do the digital decomposition processes advocated by Whitson (which involve dematerializations while demanding that machines be included in a richer notion of creativity’s ecosystem), and Saklofske’s commitment to the development of open-source environments that foreground process over product effectively answer Reed’s complaint against materialist DH economies?

The additive aspect of Reed’s model is its most salient feature. Too often, scholarship, shaped by the perceptual habits and cognitive limits that feed human understanding, tends towards reductive categorizations and simple solutions. This aesthetics of simplistic elegance that still frames things like scientific pursuits, computer programming and editorial motivations recalls Edmund Burke’s feminized idealization of beauty as defined by masculinist interests and desires. Reed’s model
pushes past this framing and welcomes a confrontation with complexity that embraces decentralization, interdependence and inclusivity. This ecosystem metaphor invokes an entirely interdependent system that counters the exclusivity of materialist and capitalist practices necessarily criticized by Reed, but when she likens Catherine to an essential insect in Blake’s ecosystem—despite the illuminating aspects of that association—I wonder whether we still need to play with other models (or at the very least, weigh them against each other). For example, conceiving of Blake as a network rather than an ecosystem significantly alters certain aspects of understanding while still preserving many possibilities that are enabled through the ecosystem paradigm. Network structures are similarly decentralized, but are also not so interdependent that the failure of one node collapses the entire system. Perhaps the idea of a network doesn’t preserve the existence of power relations or scale in the way that the ecosystem association does, but it certainly allows nodes to exist in multiple relational positions to each other.

Reed reveals that the current trajectory of the William Blake Archive focuses on the materiality of Blake’s work and is based on a data model that marginalizes everyone who isn’t William Blake. I agree that the marginalization of “Related Material” reinforces the invisibility of Catherine Blake’s participations/contributions and that search engine improvements (among others) could correct some of the exclusionary mediation that the Archive imposes on its subject. However, could most of the corrective scholarly efforts be achieved with what is done with the Blake Archive’s material (especially because it’s indexed through NINES and ARC)? The Blake Archive functions like a rich hub or seed that encourages a potential radial of researched contexts. Perhaps it’s how the archive could be used in other applications (as long as the designers of those applications remain cognizant of invisible care work in their source material and in their own critical making efforts). The Blake Archive’s open access policy, even with the limits that Reed identifies, has still helped to fuel a next-stage shift towards the kinds of practices that she calls for here.

In relation to the article’s final suggestion that we should recognize the ecologies of creativity that make both art and scholarship possible: This recognition is possible in that DH (in its young state) has generated many necessary debates regarding the nature of scholarly work and output. DH practice sometimes resembles an “Emperor’s New Clothes” scenario: While it promises change, it often delivers another version of problematic traditions and habits. However, it also starkly exposes some of those habits in a defamiliarized way, sparking renewed attention and interrogation and prompting revisionary perception and practice.