

# Book Review of D’Ignazio, C., & Klein, L. F. (2020). *Data feminism*. The MIT Press.

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## 1.0 Situating the Book

It’s been 14 years since entrepreneur Clive Humby coined the phrase “data is the new oil.” Since then, it seems, data has only become ever more valuable (not to mention far more ubiquitous than oil). Data production has mushroomed at almost unimaginable rates, and efforts to collect, taxonomize, analyze, and apply that data have mushroomed along with it. Concomitantly, scholars across multiple fields, including writing analytics, have taken up deeply theoretical and ethical questions generated by this embarrassment of data riches: What data should be collected and why? How is it used? Whose labor is involved?

In their new trade book *Data Feminism*, Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein take up these questions and, in conversation with prior work on them both in academia and in general contexts, build a coherent ethical framework for answering them. As the title suggests, feminist theory is at the heart of this framework; specifically, D’Ignazio and Klein turn to intersectional feminism rooted in work by Black feminist theorists, including Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), bell hooks (1984/2015), and Patricia Hill Collins (2002). In doing so, they offer a compelling analysis of how data is currently created and managed, what effects that has in the world, and how it could be done differently. Their analysis is grounded in theories of power and how data produces, and often reifies, it.

Yet, D’Ignazio and Klein manage to strike a balance between complexity and readability; they never sacrifice nuance for simplicity, but the book is accessible for those previously unfamiliar with feminism, data science, or both. One way the authors create this readability is by richly illustrating their arguments using dozens of real data project examples, ranging from art projects at the scale of a few individuals (e.g., “Bruises—The Data We Don’t See,” an audio-visual representation of a mother’s caregiving for a daughter with a rare autoimmune disease,

featured in Chapter 7) to massive international big data efforts (see, e.g., the Global Database of Events, Language and Tone, or GDELT, which is roundly critiqued in Chapter 6).

Their book joins a number of recent works that use concrete examples and invitational rhetoric to make scholarly work accessible across fields and outside of academia. Many of these works are also squarely in critical technology studies, such as Ruha Benjamin’s (2019) *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*; Virginia Eubanks’ (2018) *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*; Safiya Umoja Noble’s (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*; and Cathy O’Neil’s (2016) *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. Many of these books build from the same theoretical foundation as *Data Feminism*, as do other recent books making feminist arguments aimed at multiple scholarly and public audiences, such as Kate Manne’s (2017) *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. D’Ignazio and Klein also cite the “design justice” community coordinated by Una Lee, Wesley Taylor, Victoria Barnett, Ebony Dumas, Carlos (L05) Garcia, and Sasha Costanza-Chock as an example of scholars and practitioners crossing field boundaries to effect change in varied contexts; Costanza-Chock’s (2020) *Design Justice: Community-led Practice to Build the Worlds We Need* and Lee’s (2016) *Generating Shared Principles for Design Justice* capture much of the theoretical impetus and practical applications of this collaborative work. The effort to reach multiple audiences is of course not new; many of the Black feminist writers without whose work *Data Feminism* would not exist, such as Crenshaw, hooks, and Collins as well as Angela Davis (2011), Brittney Cooper (2018), Tressie McMillan Cottom (2018), and Audre Lorde (1984), have had enormous influence on public discourse about feminism(s).

As an ethical framework, “data feminism” is not only theoretically sound and accessibly presented, but also eminently actionable. The book’s seven primary chapters each propose, explain, illustrate, and defend a single verb-driven principle, which are meant to provide implementable approaches to doing intersectional feminist data science. The seven principles are:

1. Examine power.
2. Challenge power.
3. Elevate emotion and embodiment.
4. Rethink binaries and hierarchies.
5. Embrace pluralism.
6. Consider context.
7. Make labor visible.

These principles will feel familiar to anyone well-versed in feminist epistemologies, which have long pushed back against patriarchal, colonialist Cartesian approaches to knowledge-making that devalue experiential, emotional pluralistic knowledges in comparison to the Western ideal of disembodied objective knowledge (see, e.g., Collins, 2002; Haraway, 1988; Fausto-Sterling, 2020). Bringing each principle to bear on every stage of a data project, D’Ignazio and Klein suggest, constitutes doing the work of “data feminism.”

This work is in contrast to many other, often more established, ways of doing data projects, such as the memorably named “Big Dick Data” approach critiqued in Chapter 6, whose title informs us “The Numbers Don’t Speak for Themselves.” “Big Dick Data,” the authors write, “is a formal, academic term that we . . . have coined to denote big data projects that are characterized by masculinist, totalizing fantasies of world domination as enacted through data capture and analysis” (p. 151). In addition to being a lovely example of their writing’s clarity, this quotation also captures the spirit of the authors’ efforts to push back against ways of working with data that, at best, create inaccurate models of the world, and at worst, do active harm to humans and non-humans alike. As such, *Data Feminism* reads at points like a manifesto, in the best of ways.

While this book does not specifically target writing analytics, its relevance to the field is hopefully clear by now. The feminist framework D’Ignazio and Klein offer, as well as the seven guiding principles for enacting the framework, are in some ways content-agnostic; they’re an ethics and a heuristic, not an immutable methodological roadmap. Like any other form of data-driven research, writing analytics is steeped in ethical questions that call for intentional and reflexive attention by researchers. This book demonstrates what that attention might look like and offers guidelines for developing a methodological ethics that can inform any particular method or strategy of inquiry.

## 2.0 Establishing Background

*Data Feminism*’s accessibility across multiple academic fields and non-academic contexts is perhaps unsurprising, given the multidisciplinary and extensive experience of both authors. Both authors clearly bring a suite of expertises to their collaboration, including deep familiarity with a variety of academic endeavors, from design studies to digital humanities. The resulting book is transdisciplinarity at its best: insights, methods, and examples from multiple fields put into conversation, all accorded respect, none (that I noticed) seeming cherry-picked or included just for name-checking purposes.

The authors also committed in refreshing ways to making their work accessible, open, and community-driven. During the peer review process, they posted a manuscript draft online that was part of “open peer review,” inviting feedback from all interested readers. Just after the book’s conclusion, D’Ignazio and Klein offer a brief section titled “Our Values and Our Metrics for Holding Ourselves Accountable,” in which they articulate the values they brought to the writing of the book, such as an insistence on intersectionality, as well as metrics informing their choices of examples to include and citation politics to practice. Following the book’s publication, MIT Press made the e-book free to read, and D’Ignazio and Klein hosted a weekly reading group via web video conferencing, during which they discussed one chapter at a time and answered questions from readers in attendance. Their ethos as authors is unmistakably audience-oriented, and the audience they imagine themselves orienting towards is pluralistic and engaged.

### 3.0 Value Contribution

The authors' ability to weave together so many disparate strands and seemingly dissimilar examples of data projects is likely also due to the fact that they themselves have extensive experience *doing* data projects. This is one of the great strengths of this book: many of its principles will ring true for people who have worked with data or in data analytics. As someone who's created, cleaned, scraped, stored, categorized, and visualized data myself, I felt a frisson of recognition while reading D'Ignazio and Klein's stories about how hard it is to generate or find a dataset that can do the work you want it to do, or how fraught it is to clean and organize data that you didn't generate, and don't know the origins or limitations of.

Given that sense of recognition I felt while reading, I do wonder how this book would strike someone new to working with data in an intentional way. Would the stories of complexity and messiness hit home in the same way? Would it be discouraging in its accounts of complexity and messiness? My hope is that it would in fact be encouraging, as this book lays bare the simple fact that data projects aren't made by magic. They're built by decision-making and labor, just like any other designed human product. As a result, they'll *always* be complicated when done well, not because anyone's done anything wrong, but because someone's asked the right questions. Often, as is apparent in the examples D'Ignazio and Klein critique in the book, problems in data projects emerge from people *not* following the principles and ethics they espouse, often in service of expediency.

Thus, I believe this book's primary contribution to writing analytics lies in its potential as a pedagogical text, though not just for students. While it's appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate students in writing theory and methodology courses, it's also appropriate for writing analytics researchers whose work isn't yet informed by intersectional feminist principles or conversations in data ethics that have been developing over the past several decades. While it is not a methodological how-to guide, it can function as a reference for those willing to take the time to make their data projects not just good according to institutional metrics, but *good* in a fundamentally ethical sense.

### 4.0 Directions for Further Research

D'Ignazio and Klein's *Data Feminism* is a primer that is anything but elementary. This book provides clear, well-argued recommendations for how to engage in data projects. It is not itself, however, a data project per se. As a sort of theoretically informed survey of existing data projects, data science, and data ethics, *Data Feminism*'s potential for guiding future research is immense. Writing analytics researchers would do well to incorporate the book's seven principles into not just new, but existing, data projects in order to deepen their understanding of and relationship with the lives of their data and the effects their data have in the world.

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