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To cite this article: Jon Saklofske (2011) Remediating William Blake: Unbinding the Network Architectures of Blake's Songs, European Romantic Review, 22:3, 381-388, DOI: [10.1080/10509585.2011.564462](https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2011.564462)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2011.564462>



Published online: 15 Jun 2011.



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Remediating William Blake: Unbinding the Network Architectures of Blake's Songs

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The poetic parallels, figurative overlaps, and thematic frictions between the pages of William Blake's dynamic *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* establish a local area network architecture that is both complementary and antagonistic to the traditional pathways generated by/through bookspace. While this tension between connective paradigms contributes to the revolutionary vitality of Blake's work, its full implications have been stultified by generations of reproduction that privileged the organizational paradigms related to the printed book and its circulatory systems. However, flexible and fluid digital distribution, primarily via the *William Blake Archive* and its participation in *NINES*, extends the material bounds of Blake's printed work into a wide area network. This not only transcends Blake's distributive frustrations, but the sharing and communication functions engendered by network architectures encourage a more explicit recognition, re-imagining and extension of the networked features and applications of Blake's multimedia *Songs*. Unfortunately, as Blake's work has migrated to the digital arena, traditional doors of print-based perception have often been reinforced by unimaginative and anachronistic interfaces. *NewRadial*, a data visualization application, more fully illuminates the network architecture at the heart of Blake's Romantic creativity, and demonstrates the ways in which our current technological networks can extend interpretative possibility.

We no longer have to use books to study other books or texts. (McGann 168)

Literature is not exhaustible, for the sufficient and simple reason that a single book is not. A book is not an isolated entity; it is a narration, an axis of innumerable narrations. (Borges 164)

The call for papers for this "Networks of Romanticism" session implied that a recognition of the social and technological networks at the heart of Romantic period art, literature, and culture provides a foundation upon which we can comparatively and self-reflexively explore the impact and implications of current digitally-enabled methods and tools on such historical material. A complementary reinforcement of this would be to recognize that complex networks of interconnectivity between all aspects of the history and culture of the period have been revealed through excessive critical attentions and, optimistically, that the difficulty that results from such a density of understanding is more effectively negotiated through the application of digital technologies and tools – which give us the power not only to archive and organize the material, but also to improve the ways in which we communicate, aggregate, and correlate our work related to such material and the ways that it is embedded in history

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and culture. Networks are not new – however, our networked technologies as well as the increasing prevalence of decentralizing network structures that resist hierarchical distributions now put us in a position to better comprehend their existence and effects in relation to traditional spheres of mediation, subjectivity, and meaning in the Romantic period.

This is a position that can be supported by recognizing connections between the networked conditions of the period, digital network technologies, and the networking functions of Digital Humanities methodologies and applications. The inherent features of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and its print and digital circulation histories serve as useful examples of this synergy. What I will begin to consider here is a mutually illuminating feedback loop between the networked character of Blake's ideas and media and our twenty-first century transitions between print-based and network-based modes of perception. Overall, this paper will examine how network structures within the meaningful excesses and shifting functions of Blake's *Songs* invite and justify a metaphoric reconsideration of Blake's work through computer and social network models, then discuss how digital technologies can productively engage with this overlap between eighteenth-century ideas and twenty-first century perceptions. Blake's interest in the ways that perception is framed by perspective, his experiments with the relationship between words and images, his engagement with and resistance to the form and production of book technology and the tensions generated in his work between print-based logic and network-based comprehension, establish his *Songs* as a complex local area network that has scalable applicability to wider area networks of technologically-mediated criticism.

In the same way that Blake's composite art demands a holistic critical consideration of all of the co-existing elements that appear on each page, *Songs* is a dynamic collection of related and interdependent poems that affect and impact each other in harmonic and dissonant ways. At all scales, then, the elements of Blake's work are not isolated or exclusive – they exist in a complex relativity to each other and to other conventional symbols and contexts. Blake's minute particulars serve as nodes in larger relational networks and each node in this network mutually imposes on the others. The critical response to *Songs* attests to the depth, complexity, and multiplicity of these connections and exchanges. A useful illustration of this excessive potential can be found in Saree Makdisi's "The Political Aesthetic of Blake's Images." Makdisi experiences some difficulty in his attempt to offer a written example of the networks of association that assemble around a repeated image in Blake's work: Death's Door. This difficulty is not related to any sort of ambiguity, arbitrariness, or meaninglessness, but to the sheer excess of inter-textual referentiality. Reflecting on this process, Makdisi observes that "the stable, self-containment of a single illuminated book is suspended by the wide virtual network of traces among different plates, different copies and different illuminated books" (114). Further, "far more than most literary and artistic work, Blake's reminds us of the extent to which all texts are open and virtual; and hence, far more than most, it frees us from the determinism of those texts that pretend to be closed and definite" (116).

The network established within Blake's *Songs* creates tensions between network complexity, inconsistency, and the procedural traditions and conventions of printed text and the form of the book. Like most publishers, Blake did not bind his own books. To prepare each copy for sale, he arranged the order of the pages, covered them with wrappers, and then tied the package together with string through a number of stab holes in the left margin (Viscomi 57). This packaging readied the printed material into

a pre-bound book form that, like the bound book, promotes progressive linearity and sequential communication. However, Blake's *Songs* defy these established frames of print technology in fundamental ways. The poetic parallels, figurative overlaps, word/image dialogues, symbolic inconsistency, and thematic echoes and oppositions between these pages establish a decentralized, nonlinear, and rhizomatic network architecture that antagonizes – from within – the systematization of communication and the traditional pathways of meaning generated by and through the space of the printed page and the correlation of these pages into bookspace.

Other features of Blake's *Songs* work against the formal limitations of their printed materiality. Each copy of *Songs* is, in effect, its own edition, since Blake avoided the opportunity for mass reproduction by customizing each print through a variety of hands-on post-production processes. As a result of this careful customization, the individual differences between each copy of the pages in the collection are striking. To complicate things further, over 30 years of production through multiple printings has left us with 25 existing copies of the collected *Songs*, four individual copies of *Experience*, and over 20 individual copies of *Innocence*. Aside from seven copies of the collected *Songs*, most editions do not follow a standardized order of pages or a consistent categorization of poems under the *Innocence* and *Experience* headers: For example, no two copies of the separately printed *Innocence* pages share the same order (Blake Archive). Also, each page is printed on one side only, and is, in essence, its own "object" in the collection. Avoiding inherent recto-verso relationships allows for the pages to be seen iconically or individually within the larger collection, and their mobility between editions supports this perspective. This dynamic print history of *Songs* results in a work that collectively resists the expectations associated with reproductive consistency and standardization through print culture practices. Such resistance is staged within an inventive use of the very form that contributed to such practices: the book. While it is true that the history of the printed book is filled with creative, flexible and inventive applications and utilizations of this specific technological form, there are also traditions, standards, and common practices related to this industry that specifically shape and encourage particular interpretative expectations, practices, and paradigms.

It could be argued that a holistic and comparative understanding of the differences between editions of *Songs* is not important, given that individual buyers of Blake's work would have limited access to such comparative opportunities. Although Blake's books were neither one-of-a-kind works of art nor mass-reproductions, they were made and sold as individual and unique copies, and this kind of distribution did not encourage the kinds of critical correlations described above. However, the value of the critical opportunities enabled by the online *William Blake Archive* is that we are given the opportunity to perceive Blake's corpus in a manner akin to his own creative understanding, to negate the isolating and divisive effects of material distribution, and to overcome the restrictive kinds of critical work that this material dependency encourages.

While this tension between the formal systems, traditions, and interfaces of bookspace, and the networks of meaningful excess generated by the form, content, and printing history of Blake's work contributes to the revolutionary vitality of *Songs*, its full implications have been stultified by generations of print reproduction (following Blake's death) that have sustained linear, progressive, and hierarchical paradigms and by the industrial circulatory systems of the printed book. Through *Songs*' reductive publication history, Blake's images have been removed from his written poems,

individual works have been removed from the context of the larger *Songs* collection, problematic editorial decisions relating to punctuation have been made, and the instability of the order and contents of *Songs* have been minimized through the mass reproduction and distribution of only a few copies of the collection. This mass reproduction and circulation of Blake's work through broad economic distribution systems has exposed amputated and distorted versions of his creations to a larger audience than he ever could have imagined.

The history of interpretation practices related to William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is likewise influenced by its print and circulation history and by print culture paradigms overall. It is a history of the progressive and sequential uncovering of relational complexity in each of the composite texts, in the relationship between these texts, the relationship between images and words within and between pages, and the ways that individual works or groups of works impact on an understanding of the title's seductive, but ultimately artificial binary. Expansive critical studies have related this work, and its production, circulation, and printing histories to Blake's other work, and to other pre and post Romantic-period authors and artists. In other words, scholarship has collectively inscribed and uncovered wide area networks of meaningful association within and around Blake's *Songs* – and this is essentially the function of critical scholarship as a whole – but while individual print-based critical approaches and specific exchanges effectively generate, reinforce, and continually remap particular systems of association around Blakean nodes in an effort to extend specific vectors of meaning and understanding, their procedurality prevents them from fully participating in and impacting the cumulative network of critical discourse. While each of Blake's poems offers a small, self-contained procedural argument, the collective network of *Songs* has produced a relational excess (as seen through the cumulative history of critical response). Similarly, the systematizing tendency of each critical contribution is overwhelmed by the intricate network of cumulative critical response. As a result, these individual responses become increasingly insufficient ways of exposing and reflecting on the meaningful complexity and interrelationship between Blake's texts and constantly expanding critical contexts.

It is not that the history of critical discourse opposes the networked qualities of Blake's *Songs*. However, each instance of print-based critical engagement creates a localised and selective mapping of network architectures within and around Blake's work that reproduces the same tensions between limiting form and meaningful excess found in *Songs* itself. Citations, critical surveys, and literature reviews within newer articles, essays, and books create edges (connections) between current and previous studies (which themselves become nodes). To borrow terminology from social network analysis, many of these bridges feature weak ties and, as a result, citation is more akin to transplantation or repurposing than network bridging because the information flow is largely unidirectional, filtered, and procedural. One could argue that critical quotation and citation, like the publishing history of Blake's *Songs*, involves a print version of recombination, and is thus already an "unbinding," potentially eliminating the need to appeal to network paradigms. However, just as a republication of a few of the songs in an anthology subjects Blake's work to another version of systemization through editorial reorganization instead of "freeing them" into a networked environment of intertextual possibility, so too does the process of citation return quotations to procedural circumstances rather than exposing them to radial opportunities.

The traditional print-based practice of critical interpretation that academic careers are still built upon reinforces a hierarchical branching relationship of interpretative inheritance and information aggregation rather than radiality. Radiality is “the degree an individual’s relations reach out into the network providing access to many and diverse others” (Valente and Foreman 90). Network radiality thus shifts the critical focus from a unidirectional information flow through a specific path of chronological inheritance or rejection to the cumulative effects of each node on all of the others. It is a model of influence in which the wider effects of local changes can be more clearly understood and chronological progressions coexist with synchronic affect. The suggestion that Blake’s *Songs* creates a network structure that is localized but invites wide area connections, does not replicate the efforts of E.J. Ellis, W.B. Yeats, and Northrop Frye to map coherent Blakean “systems.” A network enables all of its nodes to communicate with all other nodes, and establishes interconnective possibilities that support anti-systematic, multi-directional and even contradictory exchanges. Some connections will host much more traffic, but such pathways are not and do not become exclusive.

Print-based practices have usefully established a robust history of scholarly critical communication relating to Blake’s work and have, over time, exposed the excess and difficulty at the heart of *Songs*’ network. However, printed critical work allows a writer to join conversations about Blake only via a soliloquy, and, if Jerome McGann is correct in seeing “a page of printed script or text ... as a certain kind of graphic interface” (199), then our academic critical practices continually impose this interface perspective on work that inherently resists such uniformity or “single vision.” These technologies are ill-equipped to illuminate the radial excesses of Blake’s work and unsuited for a synchronous consideration of centuries of critical feedback and extension. Additionally, ideologically subjecting Blake to critical methods that exclusively rely on the print culture apparatuses that he resisted is akin to viewing a revolutionary movement via the conservative principles that the movement asserts itself against.

Importantly, though the excesses generated by networked properties of *Songs* work against the book form that *Songs* is ultimately but loosely bound by, the fact that Blake “modded” the book, yet still relied on its paradigms means that the book form is essential to our interpretative understanding of Blake’s work. Further to the above comparison, while viewing something through the very paradigms that it resists is an ultimately problematic strategy, ignoring the conservative context that generates the revolutionary reaction in the first place is equally ignorant. Blake’s work is thus a space that engenders unresolved stress between linear hierarchies and radial networks of meaning, paralleling the tensions that accompany our present moment of media in transition and providing a site for revisionary critical lucidity, experimentation and expansion.

Although it is important not to lose sight of the original published form of Blake’s *Songs*, flexible and fluid digital distribution, primarily via the *William Blake Archive* and its participation in the *NINES* federation, alters the material and economic conditions required by the print industry, extending the material bounds and spatial reach of Blake’s printed local area network into wider area and social networks. While this transfer does not eliminate the bottleneck caused by material and economic conditions, it does broaden the opportunity for participation. This not only transcends Blake’s distributive frustrations, but the sharing and communication functions engendered by the marriage of the local area network (LAN) of Blake’s unconventional pages and the literal wide area network (WAN) architectures that sustain the online

William Blake Archive and enable the *NINES* COLLEX application (in which users can collect, annotate, and share collections of media drawn from a variety of distinct archival initiatives including the *William Blake Archive*) encourages a more explicit recognition, re-imagining, and extension of the networked features and applications of Blake's multimedia pages. Unfortunately, as Blake's work has migrated to the digital arena, limits related to traditional doors of print-based perception have often been reinforced by unimaginative interfaces. While the *Blake Archive* is currently working on an interface redesign and the incorporation of new tools for the comparison and correlation of digital versions of Blake's work, its present interface is still dependent on many print culture paradigms. Its exclusion of critical social network opportunities (something which *NINES* partially resolves through its exhibit-building aspects) calls attention to the transitional tensions that persist as artefacts of migrations to digital technologies.

While print-based technologies have significantly and meaningfully expanded the perceptual field surrounding Blake's original *Songs* over the past two centuries, there comes a point where the system architecture related to print technology is not robust enough to support the efficient flow of a critical mass of information. Often, such limitations are not perceived until or unless a new horizon is discovered, or new tools enable abilities that were unimaginable prior to their invention. Growing digital networks do not initiate a process of obsolescence and replacement, but a recognition of opportunity to collect traditional procedures, methods, technologies, and tools in the same way that *Songs* collects the categories of Innocence and Experience, the poems and the visual art in a field where they are not mutually exclusive but interdependent. To this end, I propose an anachronistic imposition – onto Blake's work – of digital network paradigms not only to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the ways that his pages explore and disrupt meaningful continuity and reductive procedurality with meaningful, radial excess, but also to introduce the possibility of unique critical sandboxes that extend beyond the procedural boundaries of print technology and culture.

NewRadial, a data visualization application that I have been developing with the help of Jean-Marc Giffin, a computer science graduate from Acadia University, and Dr. Rick Giles, a professor in Acadia's Jodrey School of Computer Science, depends on the *William Blake Archive*, the technology of the internet, and the model of aggregation, archive federation, and social networking pioneered by *NINES*' WAN model.¹ *NewRadial*'s purpose, as an application, an interface into accessible archives, is to step beyond "archive fever," and illuminate the network architecture at the heart of Blake's Romantic creativity while demonstrating the ways in which current technological and social networks can effectively catalyze such understanding by exceeding the procedural limits of print technologies and isolated critical dialogue. Simply put, *NewRadial* is an online workspace in which users can rearrange, group, and connect various pages from one or many editions of Blake's *Songs*, and add commentary to such groupings and connections which then becomes part of a shared database of critical work. These connections and comments are visually mapped on to the graphic representation of Blake's pages and thus, at a glance, users can see both Blake's work and a visualization of the critical associations that have been made between the pages of his *Songs*. It is a scalable, web-based WAN field that gives users the ability to:

- (1) generate, accumulate, and interconnect specific LAN pathways through Blake's work

- (2) quickly reorganize nodes (Blake's pages) into spatial, temporal or customized conceptual groupings
- (3) customize one's perception of Blake in a collaborative space that preserves and accumulates traces of other critical paths
- (4) map, sort, and add commentary to Blake's variations and to other critical encounters with Blake's work.

NewRadial is simultaneously a tool and a theoretical approach, a technology and a methodology that uses a social network model to generate and feed a cumulative critical network relating to Blake's *Songs*. It visualizes networks of meaning and critical work, inviting the user to participate in WAN architectures of interpretative correlation by constellating and commenting on nodes comprised of Blake's LAN pages. Most importantly, *NewRadial* establishes a participatory geography of creative and critical networks, re-visualizing critical work as a social network in which multiple users can collaborate in a single workspace on a cumulative and complex understanding of Blakean excess.

While networks are nothing new, computer-based networks offer metaphoric models for the processes by which William Blake creatively resisted the perceptual limits imposed by print technology. A twenty-first century lens of critical perception, facilitated by digital shifts and technologically enabled methodologies, allows us to recognize inherent and latent aspects of Blake's networked approach to ideas. Together, the characteristics of Blake's late-eighteenth century work and ideas, plus a digital perspective generated by our familiarity with twenty-first century computer technology, synchronically highlight the opportunities inherent in critical approaches that focus on network (rather than print) paradigms. This can and should inspire further renovations and innovations in critical systems and tools through which those systems can be tested and compared. Our print- and language-based systems of scholarly communication (conferences, journals, and books) are traditions (and economies) that already work well and are (sometimes) managed effectively by committees, publishers, editors, and systems of peer-review. I am not suggesting that we replace these, but that we multiply and expand these opportunities by considering alternative network-based models. How can we extend (without imposing) our print culture successes into network models and digital tools to encourage further critical illumination? Inspired by the tensions inherent in Blake's lucid use of and resistance to print technologies and traditions, the use of digitally inspired ideas and tools reminds us that the book is as much a perceptual frame, a technology, as the internet and that because both shape information and communication flow in radically different ways, each has a profound effect on interpretative potential. *NewRadial* is not an ideal, a model, or a best-practices example. It is a tool that enables a particular kind of critical approach, an opportunity to inclusively and visually map the historical mass of print-based critical approaches to Blake's work onto a visual, nodal network comprised of the original songs and to move beyond the correlative and material limits of print-based criticism by participating in and contributing to a WAN critical field which, via data visualisation, does not depend exclusively on language-based representation (taking a cue from Blake).

Marshall McLuhan, drawing from Edward T. Hall's *The Silent Language*, suggested that media tools are extensions of man – this meshes with and provides a solution to William Blake's complaint relating to the limits of perception: digital mediation, network paradigms, and computer-based tools for critical engagement, like

the print technologies that preceded them and which still echo through them, are extensions of the senses, extensions of human ability, keys that help to unlock the doors of limited and limiting perception. At the very least, as they help to comprehensively map the current horizons of cumulative critical perception, they also provide the means and models for us to productively sail beyond such horizons, to expand our networks of critical connection and meaningful exchange.

Note

1. *NewRadial*'s current build can be found here: <http://sourceforge.net/projects/NewRadial/>
Instructions for users can be found here: [http://socrates.acadiau.ca/courses/engl/jsaklofske/](http://socrates.acadiau.ca/courses/engl/jsaklofske/NewRadial/)
Modification instructions are here: <http://socrates.acadiau.ca/courses/engl/jsaklofske/NewRadial/devdocs.zip>

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