

Pratt AssProf Campus Visit - February 26, 2024

Dissertation:

- What is your dissertation about?
 - About digital tools and the way they handle language data. Using language that relates to queerness in literature as a text case. This is rich language, filled with subtle formulations of gender, sex, sexuality.
 - Goal is to examine how digital tools collapse these subtleties.
 - And in that collapse, to reveal a limitation of the tool, a reductive quality.
 - Not that reduction is a bad thing, it is necessary. But to excavate and understand how it works,
 - With the goal of working within it, or of building otherwise. New tools.
 - Each of the chapters looks at different tools, into their mechanisms, specifically focusing on programming logics and structures, which are also in language.
 - “Toolkit” is a practical application of my work, to explore hands-on, because this is where the radical interventions happen. Hands-on
- What is your main intervention with the diss?
 - My approach to technology -- to understand it critically, to explore its limitations, to think through alternatives, and to build new, more accommodating models
 - A queer studies perspective on data.
 - Taking from minority studies frameworks and applying it to technology.
 - The theories are there, we just need to bring them into conversation.
- WHY should this matter to people who have no interest in the literary?
 - It matters especially to people who have no interest.
 - We cannot just apply an engineering or aesthetic or design-based framework. That will not empower all users. We need new ways of thinking these things in combination with one another.
 - “Design Justice” field is an excellent example. It’s bringing a social justice frame to design questions.
 - “Black Digital Humanities” - another great example. Looking at histories of quantification specifically, changing the way we think about enumeration, which has historically been used to quantify black bodies as commodities.
 - Using it to represent black death. The names of the people who have been murdered by police.
 - It matters because our current systems don’t work for everybody. We need humanist perspectives in our builders and designers and maintainers of information systems.
- How is your diss different from others in your field?
 - I am both critiquing and building. Doing both.

- Queer DH has two strands, the ones who critique, take apart things, and the ones who speculate or build things. I'm doing both.
- Two chapters focus on both (with different effects) and the last is solely taking apart. Deep reading.
- What are your plans for publication? What presses/journals and timelines?
 - Preparing manuscript to submit to MIT and Minnesota, who also publish DH work.
 - If not, will try to publish my last chapter in a Humanities journal, like:
 - Visual/media studies: Camera Obscura; Signs
 - Others: Critical Inquiry; Differences; Representations
 - DHQ
 - In the meantime, researching the anti-trans legislation project.
 - Planning to publish in "Critical AI" journal, new out of Rutgers. Perhaps also DH Quarterly.
- What is your five year plan for your research?
 - Next year:
 - Seeking publication of dissertation as book or articles (3rd chapter)
 - Continuing research of anti-trans dataset, starting to write about it.
 - 2 years from now:
 - Attending conferences to keep up with AI Ethics:
 - FACCT; Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS)
 - Publication of anti-trans research in progress:
 - Trans Studies Quarterly; GLQ
 - Critical Inquiry; Differences; Social Text; Representations
 - 3-5 years:
 - Publishing book on how generative AI works under the hood by examining its perpetuation of bias and discrimination
 - Academic/theoretical, but accessible. For interdisciplinary audience.
- Any major grants you're planning to apply for?
 - NEH Digital Humanities Advancement Grants - 75K
 - NEH Dangers and Opportunities of Technology: Perspectives from the Humanities - 75K

School

- How would you build collaborations with faculty?
 - Data Analysis & DH faculty primarily.
 - Co-authoring research, co-teaching.
- How do you see yourself fitting into the department?
 - Starting a research group on Algorithmic Bias. Maybe a lab eventually.

Queer Studies & DH:

- What are the major debates in these fields?
 - QS: subjectless vs objectless critique

- Do we need identities/subjects to be queer in order to do queer theorizing?
 - Speaks to problems of subjecthood, what's assumed when we assume a subject. Power structures that make subjects possible.
- Objectless: what about subject/object divides? Aren't these problematic? Creating divisions, separations is a kind of violence. We are all connected.
 - Taking from philosophy of speculative realism, the idea that we cannot really know a thing in itself. All we know is our interpretations of it.
- Black-feminist inspired work is doing this best. They have methods based in sensing, embodiment, which gets around a lot of the questions of subject vs object and the space between them.
- DH:
 - How do we address the issues of environmental collapse and racial violence in our work.
 - What does DH *do*? Where is the cultural benefit?
 - Global south, decolonial perspectives.
- What is the biggest challenge in these fields?
 - QS: trying to apply itself to everything. Not everything can be queer or be queered.
 - The lens of transgression is not always going to be the best one.
 - Trans Studies: looking at the impulse to fit in despite resistance, rather than to take apart or totally resist. Or destory.
 - Some things can be critiqued, some things can be re-built with Queer Theory. But not all things.
 - DH: opposite problem.
 - What is unifying DH as a field?
 - Doing something digital, and a human is involved.
 - Should be more based on method, I think. But some folks/practitioners still take method for granted. Not taking stock of method at all (let alone being critical of it).
- How do you intervene in these fields?
 - I'm combining them! I'm thinking interdisciplinarily. I'm going from one to another, and then back. Reading them through the other.
 - Knowledge is too siloed. We need more work that brings different domains into conversations.
 - That brings critical theorizing to bear on hands-on practice.

Job talk

- Why is exploring data from a humanities angle important to students of information?
 - Because they will be designing and maintaining systems of information, and it's important to have a perspective of how those systems encode ideologies and power structures and assumptions, and how these affect all kinds of users.

- Not just the user, but the community.
- About bringing knowledge bases across disciplines.
- What does the literary/sex/gender allow me to bring into Info studies?
 - Allows me to explore specific facets of oppression: gender, sex, sexuality.
 - Thinking about gender, desire, biology, as they intersect with language.
 - So it's a narrowing of focus.
 - These are highly regulated concepts.
 - Even today, especially today with the anti-trans legislation.
- What are other theorists / projects doing similar work, how do you depart?
 - Matt Kirschenbaum: beautiful close readings of tech, showing me this was possible in the first place.
 - Tanya Clement: DH practitioners working in poetry. Using tools to analyse rhythms and rhymes in poetry, but it's about the embodied engagement---for her, that's the critical act.
 - I bring the queer frame. The focus on sex, gender, sexuality.
 - Queer DH folks; michas cardenas, Zach Blas, Jacob Gaboury
 - Those who take a critical look, taking apart a tool to look for queerness: like Gaboury with NULL value as a refusal
 - Those who build or speculate systems, like Queer OS or TransCoder: which do not work but take a queer ethos for building. Functions that interrupt repetitive processes (like Performativity); that disrupt reproductive futurism (nonTeleo).
- What is different between Queer and Trans analytic?
 - Affective mode: queer is shamed, sad, and proud too. Strong emotions. Trans deals with irony, satire.
 - It says things literally, you can only tell difference in tone.
 - Queer wants to rebel; trans wants to pass. Trans has a lot of similarity with disability.
- What does your analysis show ABOUT data?
 - That all data is constructed according to certain assumptions.
 - There are invisible inferences in any data structure.
- How would you approach this in the classroom? Concrete teaching example activity or assignment.
 - Hands-on practice. I would teach them the mechanism of how the tool works, and they would use it.
 - Have them choose a dataset, and encode it, for instance.
 - They would decide beforehand what they wanted to tag.
 - Then afterward, they would assess how effective that schema was, or what was revealed in the process.
 - Mix the hands-on work with conversation/discussion around theoretical texts in minority studies, like Latinx or Black Feminist Studies.
 - To get a sense of how folks are theorizing difference and resistance within larger systems of oppression.

Teaching

- How would you teach:
 - **INFO-601 Foundations of Information**
 - “the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the information field”
 - I would follow the core texts in existing syllabi, wouldn’t change it too much.
 - I would add a humanist dimension to information, like N. Katherine Hayles work on cybernetics, for example. How information lost its body.
 - Tracing the elisions that had to be made to conceptualize information as totally separate from its material instantiation.
 - **INFO-664 Programming For Cultural Heritage**
 - “to ideate and then create a linked open data project”
 - Looking at DH projects on archives and exhibitions.
 - Projects from indigenous communities, thinking about methodology.
 - Thinking about data gathering and data preparation, sorting, categorizing. Schemas.
 - Building a project from the ground up, from proposal to plan to execution in parts.
 - **INFO-643 Information Architecture & Interaction Design**
 - “designing digital interfaces from a user-centered perspective through an exploration of the dual practices of information architecture and interaction design.”
 - I would combine the “User-centered” approach with critical consideration of design structures, looking into systems and how they organize information.
 - Critical look at information architectures and what ideologies they encode. What assumptions are being made about content within the form?
 - Readings in DH from feminist and critical race perspectives.
 - **Data Analysis**
 - “statistical analysis skills, leading to more advanced statistical techniques such as non-linear regression, time-series and spatial statistics, quasi-experimental methods, and machine learning.”
 - Would use quantitative tools in data analysis in Python. Pandas, scikit-learn, building to machine learning with transformers.
 - From linear regression to logistic regression, because these are relatively simpler ML tasks.
 - Final project in sentiment analysis (based on logistic regression), maybe with a dataset that they prepare and use to train a model.
 - Data ethics.
 - **Digital Humanities**
 - What is DH? How does it intervene in various fields? Debates.

- Focus on DH projects that feature marginalized groups: Black DH, Indigenous DH. The transatlantic slavery archive.
- Participatory Humanities and Public Humanities, closely related.
- **Projects in Digital Archives**
 - Digitization practices & “born digital” archives.
 - Processes for Digitization.
 - Media archaeology, how do we preserve older media forms?
- What other courses would you teach and how would you teach them?
 - **“From the Command Line to Chatbots: History of the Interface”**
 - History of personal computing
 - Command line interfaces, languages; To GUIs with apple; To touch screens; to Chatbots.
 - How is the relationship between human and computer changing over time?
 - **Minimal computing web development**
 - Static web development; Markup languages to web pages
 - What do we get out of minimal approaches?
 - Using less resources. Sustainability.
 - **Data gathering with web scraping & APIs.**
 - Talking about open vs accessible vs free information online
 - How copyright is changing
 - **Critical and/or Feminist Data Studies**
 - Mixing Black feminist, queer, indigenous studies readings into data
 - **The Archival Impulse**
 - Preservation and Recovery
 - Archival studies theoretical accounts. From Derrida to Dinshaw.