



PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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Department of English  
Miami University  
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Dear Members of the Search Committee,

I am writing to apply for the position of assistant professor in digital humanities at Miami University. I am a PhD candidate in comparative literature at the University of Texas at Austin, where I expect to defend my dissertation in June 2017. I focus on digital scholarship and archival studies, with emphasis on the ways that processes of textual inscription, circulation, acquisition, and digitization shape the way we remember America's colonial past.

My research begins with the fading of the utopian dream (or apocalyptic anxiety) provoked by the spread of digital media. Ideas about the printing press as an agent of change and the association between medium and message have given way to more nuanced arguments about the dynamic relations of technology, economy, and society. Yet the impact of these mechanisms on the most basic tasks of scholarly research remains underexplored. My dissertation, *Unreadable Books: Early Colonial Mexican Documents in Circulation*, offers new perspectives on how these mechanisms of textual replication shape our access to historical memory. Focusing on the documentary record of early colonial New Spain, my dissertation tells a story of textual reproduction that moves from Franciscan transliteration of oral histories, to nineteenth-century facsimile editions, to twenty-first-century digital repatriation projects. It shows how the hands of copyists, collectors, librarians, and machines leave their mark on the page, and on the past.

The significance of the dissertation rests on the way it approaches what I call the print-digital analogy, a commonplace of book history that imagines an association between the fifteenth-century spread of movable type and the twentieth-century rise of digital technology. The print-digital analogy is used to justify scholarship in both digital humanities and book history by affirming the parallels between the ideological transformations of early modernity and the revolutionary potential of our current moment. Through the lens of textual reproduction — and the associated processes of circulation, acquisition, and destruction — *Unreadable Books* offers a critical perspective on this analogy. I show that through the assertion of accuracy and

authenticity, transcription can serve as a vector of colonization. A transnational, translingual history of this practice reveals the slow processes of global change that underlie digital anxieties.

My work in digital scholarship adds a practical dimension to the theoretical and historical concerns of my dissertation research. The *Reading the First Books* project, which originated as a collaborative effort to develop new tools for the automatic transcription of historical printed books from New Spain, was awarded a Digital Humanities Implementation Grant from the NEH in 2015. As the manager of this multi-institutional project, I have facilitated the development of the tool, its integration into the Early Modern OCR Project, and its extension for indigenous Mesoamerican languages. In addition to co-authoring two articles published in top-tier computational linguistics venues, I have an article on automatic transcription forthcoming this fall from *Digital Humanities Quarterly*. A second digital project, *The Archaeology of a Book*, uses the Scalar web publishing platform to propose new ways of thinking about the scholarly editing of digital editions of historical printed books; it is described in my article “Representing the Social History of Early Modern Printed Objects,” published in *Scholarly Editing* (2016).

More recently, I have turned my attention to processes of textual circulation. “In Spite of the Hieroglyphics: Transcribing the Historical Record” is a new project developed from my dissertation that describes nineteenth-century transatlantic transcription networks, focusing on the cases of Lord Kingsborough, William H. Prescott, and Joaquín García Icazbalceta. This project, workshopped at the University of Texas and the University of Washington, will be submitted to the *Textual Cultures* special issue on Latin America in January 2017. My collaboration with the developers of the Ocular automatic transcription system has taken a similar turn, as we work to understand how Ocular’s statistical models can help scholars learn new things about the circulation of materials for print production across New World presses.

My student-centered pedagogical approach has developed directly out of my research on textual reproduction. Over seven semesters as an instructor of literature and composition at the University of Texas, I have found that the tedious labor of transcription, which reinforces cultural norms while offering opportunities for individual growth, is present in the literary practices of close reading and analysis. When this is tempered by the creativity fostered by digital projects and the diversity of a transnational curriculum, students from diverse backgrounds can explore their own pasts and inscribe their own futures. This approach is modeled in my workshop for the online publishing platform Scalar, which has been used by over 100 students in five classes. This workshop places the responsibility for learning in the hands of the students, while using discussion and debrief to consider the tool in light of issues involving access and representation. I seek by these means to prepare students for research in the humanities, while serving students with a wide variety of backgrounds and classroom objectives.

My work in digital scholarship, which moves naturally between linguistics, rhetorical analysis, and literary studies, is well suited to the structure of the English program at Miami University. The program’s strength in postcolonial and transnational studies makes it a particularly good match for my own research agenda, while my background in project-oriented digital scholarship brings new methodologies to the transatlantic study of literature and language.

I am confident that my experience with both interdisciplinary collaboration and digital pedagogy and workshop development will allow me to participate productively in the digital humanities program at the Humanities Center.

With this letter you will find my CV and contact information for three references. I would be happy to provide examples of digital projects and other additional materials upon request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Hannah Alpert-Abrams".

Hannah Alpert-Abrams