



Bennett-Polonsky Humanities Labs

Spring 2020 Program Summary

Digital Theory Lab

The Digital Theory Lab creates a space for cutting-edge, interdisciplinary humanities research and collaborative pedagogy that address the increasingly pervasive role digital technologies play in contemporary life. It is widely acknowledged that ubiquitous computing, artificial intelligence, and data-driven media are rapidly reshaping how people think and act in unprecedented ways. Traditional strengths of the humanities such as cultural analysis, interpretation, and critique would seem to make humanistic inquiry indispensable for understanding these shifts. However, the broad social and technical challenges posed by emerging technologies exceed the reach of individual disciplines and expertise, calling for new, collective research methods. The Digital Theory Lab responds to these challenges by placing humanistic inquiry in an experimental, project-based setting and facilitating encounters not only among humanities disciplines but between the humanities and technical sciences. By gathering students (undergraduate and graduate), faculty, visiting scholars, and engineering practitioners in pursuit of novel questions and research approaches, it seeks to cultivate competent digital citizens equally fit for understanding digital technologies and parsing their meaning-making roles in our society. Through shared research projects, intensive seminars, informed popular writings, and public events, the Lab offers an opportunity for the humanities to move beyond limited models of disciplinarity and engage emergent forms of the digital in real time.

2019-2020

The Digital Theory H-Lab ended its first year with unspent funds due largely to the unexpected reduced need for course releases. The Lab team is grateful for permission to reallocate the remaining funds, thus supporting continued activity and enabling the lab to bid for large-scale external funding to begin in 2020-2021.

The Digital Theory Lab convened in the fall of 2019 as the Digital Theory Seminar, a credit-bearing graduate seminar with participants from the departments of Media, Comparative Literature, English, Film, and Data Science, as well as post-docs and professors from many departments, including some from the New School and NYU's Bobst Library. The seminar studied Gilbert Simondon's *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* alongside texts from the cybernetics movement, the founding movement of the digital era. This work has come to be recognized as one of the most important approaches to digital theory and helped to lay further groundwork for our study of Deep Learning, to which we turned in the spring of 2020.

Meeting weekly in the spring, the team continued to study the Artificial Intelligence techniques collectively known as "Deep Learning." A series of talks was organized by Joseph Lemelin, Humanities and Science Postdoctoral Researcher at the Center for Data Science, and featured Lab affiliate from King's College London, Mercedes Bunz, and lab member from The New School for Social Research, David Bering-Porter. The Digital Theory Conversations series, organized by Leif Weatherby, held three events, including one on digital capitalism (featuring Lilly Irani from UCSD and NYU's own Caitlin Zaloom and Finn Brunton) and one on digital techniques and climate (featuring Shannon Mattern from The New School and John Durham Peters from Yale). The intended colloquium with Nan Da on her work on computational literary studies had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The team would like to hold this event as soon as circumstances allow, and they request permission to utilize the funds for this purpose in the coming academic year.

The group continued to meet on zoom during the pandemic, and this allowed affiliates from all over the world to join. In several sessions, members joined from Los Angeles, Ann Arbor, New York, London, Copenhagen, Prague, and Sweden—truly a Global Network Digital Theory Lab. This group agreed to continue to meet over the summer and into the fall; and will continue to meet regularly on zoom to allow the international members to participate. Publications from Mercedes Bunz, Leif Weatherby, David Bering-Porter, and Sam Kellogg are forthcoming or have already appeared due to the ongoing collaborative research of the Lab. Bunz, with Weatherby's participation, has been granted a "Creative AI as a medium in artistic and curatorial practice" Lab by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, with the Digital Theory Lab as an official partner, alongside the New Museum in New York and the Serpentine Gallery in London. This group will meet 2-3 times in the coming year, pending pandemic conditions, and will use the DTL's zoom platform to convene in the interim.

As the foregoing suggests, the Digital Theory Lab has flourished in its second year. In spite of the difficult global circumstances, the lab is forging ahead and even expanding our efforts. The biggest outstanding issue for the Lab is to secure a position for Joe Lemelin, who will convene the Lab in its 3rd upcoming year as a researcher. His role in the Lab has been crucial to our ongoing collaborations with the Center for Data Science, and the hope of a true dialogue between the technical disciplines and the Humanities.

Digital Theory Lab Team

David Bering-Porter, New School

Zach Coble, Head, Digital Scholarship Services, NYU Libraries

Lisa Gitelman, English, Arts and Science; Media Culture and Communications, Steinhardt

Tyler Harper, Doctoral Student, Department of Comparative Literature, Arts and Science

Ryan Healy, Doctoral Student, Department of English, Arts and Science

Sam Kellogg, Doctoral Student, Media Culture and Communications, Steinhardt

Joseph Lemelin, NYU Center for Data Science

Benjamin Schluter, Doctoral Student, Department of German, Arts and Science

Cliff Siskin, Department of English, Arts and Science

Yuanjun Song (Claire), Doctoral Student, Department of Comparative Literature, Arts and Science

Leif Weatherby, Department of German, Arts and Science

The War Lab

The War H-Lab explores the ways in which major human sciences—psychology, psychoanalysis, cybernetics, anthropology, etc.—were crucially transformed by the shifting conceptions and practices of warfare between 1910-1955. It focuses on WWI, interwar France, Germany and Britain, WWII, anti-colonial revolutions taking place during this period, and the beginning of the Cold War. The lab will engage recent historiographical and methodological innovations (the advent of a new international history, indigenous studies and Native American history, intellectual, legal and economic history), and disciplines that have been largely absent from historiographical or social-science-oriented approaches to war—including literature and aesthetics—and their attention to representation, memory, and trauma. By re-framing the overall picture around a war/knowledge axis, the lab will ask: How did major human sciences transform as a result of their entanglement with concepts of war and conflict between 1910 and 1955? And: In what ways might attempts at a new periodization and a more comprehensive understanding of conceptions of war and its role in social and political transformation open up a new field of inquiry? In addition to exploring historically how war has been coupled with knowledge, the War H-Lab will take a rapid-response approach to current events, offering intellectual engagements far broader in scope than would be possible for any one individual to provide.

2019-2020

The War Lab has continued with different projects this past semester, despite the considerable difficulties posed by the CoViD-19 outbreak. The list below is not exhaustive:

- Professors Ben-Dor Benite and Geroulanos co-taught an undergraduate seminar over the spring semester on the precise subject of war and knowledge, which involved 16 undergraduates from different departments. The course drew upon the themes and problems developed over the course of the fall semester in order to lead students to think epistemologically and historically. The students' final papers were excellent, including those on subjects as diverse as the idea of balkanism in the 1990s and its relation to the 1990s wars and to the production of political, academic, and public knowledge about the region; radio's influence and the western representations of the Rwandan Genocide; periodization and power in twentieth-century Europe; peasant rebellions in 19th century China and their mobilization in the Maoist period; the history of Israel's security doctrine; the image of the voluntary freedom-fighter and revolutionary from the Spanish Civil War to Carlos the Jackal.
- Professor George and doctoral students Anne Schult and Alexander Langstaff are organizing a special issue of a journal (under review at present at *Central European History*) on the issue of periodization and the use of the "Thirty Years' War" motif in the twentieth century, both in Europe and beyond (more recently in the Arab world). They have in turn assembled a small and distinguished group of scholars, some of them junior, some of them more established, who would pursue the project in the journal as well as in a workshop which they hope to organize and hold as soon as possible.
- Professors Ben-Dor Benite, Ellis, and Geroulanos organized a conference to pursue a rethinking of the relationship of borders, sovereignty, and war. The conference was scheduled for late May 2020, with twelve scholars invited to present work in addition to the Lab team. The conference has been postponed.
- Professors Ellis and Geroulanos, and doctoral student Jonas Knatz, are writing a long article on the concept of "primitive warfare" since World War II and its uses both by anthropologists (and international organizations) at least nominally intent on aiding Indigenous Peoples, as well as by states aiming to "integrate" or to other these same Peoples. This will be submitted to a major journal and, in parallel, will serve as the basis of more public articles and editorials.
- Professors Ben-Dor Benite and Geroulanos are now working on a project on the place and figure of the battlefield in global history, which is expected to become a book.

The spring semester was at best challenging and, for the most part, frustrating. Events, including at least two relevant talks, organized in collaboration with the Intellectual History Workshop, had to be canceled, as was the planned conference on borders, sovereignty, and war. The Lab team intends to continue meeting in the coming year, both for the purpose of further pursuing research and writing, and to continue the astonishingly creative intellectual group that they have established.

War Lab Team

Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Arts and Science

Elizabeth Ellis, Department of History, Arts and Science

Stefanos Geroulanos, Department of History, Arts and Science

Lauren Kirk, Doctoral Student, Institute of French Studies / Department of History, Arts and Science

Jonas Knatz, Doctoral Student, Department of History, Arts and Science

Alexander Langstaff, Doctoral Student, Department of History, Arts and Science

Matyas Mervej, Doctoral Student, Department of History, Arts and Science

Marcela Prieto Rudolph, Doctoral Student, NYU School of Law

Anne Schult, Doctoral Student, Department of History, Arts and Science

Jennifer Trowbridge, Doctoral Student, Department of Anthropology, Arts and Science

The Multi-Species Lab

The unfolding climate crisis poses a fundamental challenge to the humanities because of the questions it raises about human agency, power, and the relationship of humans to—and in—the world we inhabit. We are confronted by the paradox that while human activities have physical world-altering effects, the scale of these effects puts them beyond human control: although we ourselves have changed the planet in frightening ways, we find ourselves increasingly helpless in the face of those changes. This paradox—the fact that the “Anthropocene” names the age of maximum human influence *and* maximum human vulnerability—forces us to reconsider our fundamental assumptions about the historical trajectories our species has been pursuing, along with the concepts of agency, freedom, and responsibility that underlie them. It forces us to question and redraft the prevailing definition of “the human”—the foundational concept of the Humanities—and of the boundaries, inclusions, and exclusions through which that definition has been framed.

The Multi-Species H-Lab proposes to identify strategies and develop practices of reading, writing, living, self-care, earth-care, and community engagement that open up the focus, usually centered on the human, to understand life—including human life—as a plural and enmeshed phenomenon. The Lab is conceived as an experimentally oriented contribution to the rapidly emerging field of Environmental Humanities, with intellectual foundations drawn from such fields as animal studies, environmental philosophy, science studies, and ecocriticism. The Lab also recognizes the veritable explosion of artistic engagement whereby artists, art collectives, curators and other practitioners are addressing the social and emotional complexities of our physically changing world.

2019-2020

The past two semesters were extremely productive, satisfying, and successful for the Multi-Species Lab project. The Lab team spent the fall 2019 semester in regular meetings focused on designing the experimental course they would offer in the Spring 2020 semester. These preparatory meetings centered upon readings, guest visits, and discussions about how to construct collaborative projects and a collaborative lecture schedule. Fairly early in the process the team decided to foreground two principles in the design of the course: collaboration, and experimental practice (thinking by doing and making, rather than thinking by writing.) Accordingly, each guest speaker was invited to emphasize questions of doing and making—practices and processes—rather than narrative, and they were told that the team was hoping to steal and adapt their ideas for forthcoming student assignments and suggested practices in the course. All six guest speakers were very game for this, and almost all of them returned for a second visit in the spring. The grant money was essential to this feature of the course, and—as the students later agreed—was a key component of the course’s success.

With regard to the principle of collaboration: the team hit upon the idea of dividing the students into working groups, each assigned to an admittedly vast topic, gesturing towards an ideal of inclusivity in a context of unimaginable scale variety (the context being nothing less than multi-species life!) The groups were: Plantscapes, Waterscapes, Foodscapes, and Petscapes. The groups were formed very early in the semester and charged with preparing to run one class session later in the semester. One instructor and one graduate Teaching Assistant was assigned to each group. A half-hour was set aside every week for the groups to meet together with their instructors and TAs.

The three main assignments of the course were crafted to sequentially build knowledge within each topic, starting with an extremely specific item (a single member of a single species) within it. The first assignment foregrounded the practices of observation, empathy, and imagination, requiring each student to enter deeply into the experiential world of their chosen species. The second assignment sought to add the elements of social/ethical awareness and responsibility to the relationship, by crafting some form of (imagined) expression on behalf of the chosen species. The final assignment required the additional layering on—and considerable expansion and polishing—of a platform or artifact through which the public could engage fruitfully with the chosen species and the worlds in which that species is embedded. Throughout the course, the team

perused, studied, and encouraged experimentation with a large variety of mediums and genres across different platforms.

The final two sessions of the course were devoted to sharing and responding to the final assignments, after which the team asked the students to use the following week to submit an essay reflecting on the course. Those reflections confirm the feeling that team members all had—that this was an extremely successful experiment in combining the methods of the humanities with the potentialities of the lab. Many of the students mentioned that they were Environmental Studies students who had never suspected that there was this dimension of empathy, imagination, and experimental possibility to the subject, and that this dimension gave them hope about something they had long been found difficult and frustrating: how to engage their friends, families, communities in this urgent subject.

Multi-Species Lab Team

Yanoula Athanassakis, Associate Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, Director of NYU's Environmental Humanities Initiative, Departments of English and Environmental Studies

Una Chaudhuri, Departments of English and Environmental Studies, Arts and Science; Department of Drama, Tisch School of the Arts; Director, Center for Experimental Humanities

Grace Anne Marotta, master's student, Experimental Humanities

Nick Silcox, Doctoral Student, Department of English

Robert Slifkin, Institute of Fine Arts

Marina Zurkow, Artist; Instructor, Tisch Interactive Telecommunications Program

The Radical Ecologies (Rad) Lab

Increasingly, our relationships with “natural” phenomena are being mediated by algorithms, screens, and machines: consider, for example, remote sensing of geological activity, or modeling of atmospheric climate change. As new computational methods (e.g., machine learning and artificial intelligence) promise to further improve the fidelity of systems sciences, which assume that more data equals better knowledge, we contend that these methods simultaneously reproduce colonial systems of dispossession and extermination, as well as structure significant blind-spots rendering invisible the radical ecologies surrounding us today.

The Radical Ecologies H-Lab aims to question connections and collisions between power and ecology by incorporating materials, experimental methods, and field-based techniques into human-centered modes of social and cultural analysis. The Rad Lab will address what we call “radical ecologies,” namely, collective forms of life that question how we understand stability, indeterminacy and risk; toxicity and temporality; geo-sociality and science fiction; and multi-scalar holobionts (assemblages of different species into ecological units) and infrastructures.

The Rad Lab will explore the following overlapping themes: designing indeterminacy (as a way to contend with rapid environmental change and increasing unpredictability); temporality (recognizing the simultaneous existence of differing time scales and also emerging novel temporalities); power (as manifested through engineering and science); multi-species relations (ecologies as models for collaborative survival); and toxic animacies (coexistence and collaboration in the context of environmental disturbance).

2020

The Radical Ecologies Lab started as the Spring 2020 semester began in late January. The four co-conveners decided to hold weekly meetings on Wednesdays from 2-5pm. Before campus closing, meetings took place at either Bobst Library or the Tandon School of Engineering; after closing, they have continued to meet online via Zoom. A few of meetings have been attended by co-conveners only, but most have also involved other regular participants, including NYU librarian Margaret Smith, students at NYU (Nabil Hassein, Diana Zhu, Meg Weissner, Maria Paz Almanera from Media, Culture and Communication), visiting students (Feixuan Xu, Fulbright/Hong

Kong; Thaddeus Pompidou, Fusion), and visiting artists/coordinators (Jemila Macewan, Elaine Ayers, Isabella Vento). Thus, the RadLab meetings have been consistently lively as co-conveners try to work through overlapping interests (what we know and agree with in common) as well as contrasting perspectives or approaches (our blindspots and disagreements), while at the same time engaging with new insights and questions from visitors and guest speakers. Meetings have ranged in size from 4 to 12 participants.

Meetings have taken on various forms: (1) project presentations and discussions of interdisciplinary practices; (2) guest speakers from the arts, sciences, and humanities, all with a shared focus on the intersections between environments, ecologies, digital media/visualization, and data; (3) hands-on workshops of digital techniques; (4) field trips; (5) brainstorming of syllabi and teaching objectives for undergraduate and graduate courses. Below is a summary of activities to date:

- Internal discussions of practices: The semester started with each co-convener presenting an overview of projects/publications, theoretical/artistic commitments, and course descriptions. While each co-convener's practice is interdisciplinary, they rely on different kinds of mixes between qualitative and quantitative work; text, image, and data; empirical/field/historical research, design/representation, and analysis. They also have different objects of study, ranging from plants, microbes, and genomes to volcanoes, flooding, and artificial intelligence. With such a broad array of interests, they have committed a good deal of the first semester to working through what a "radical ecology" might actually mean, and the possible lenses and tools with which "it" might be studied and taught at university-level.
- Guest speakers: Eleven guest speakers attended meetings in spring 2020; two have postponed to the fall. Each has given an informal presentation and Q+A on their projects, backgrounds, methods, guiding questions or statements, and insights on teaching. To tackle the broad theme of radical ecologies, guests include researchers and artists who work with apparatuses such as climate models, film, sound, maps, and exhibitions, as well as materials such as ice, rocks, bacteria, carbon, waste, fungi, and water. Presentations were not structured beforehand, allowing the talks to be exploratory. The following speakers we welcomed:

Holly Jean Buck, <https://www.ioes.ucla.edu/person/holly-buck/>

Karolina Soebecka, (Artist, carbon cycles) <http://cargocollective.com/karolinasobecka>

Sandra Volny (Artist, sound and environments) [Sound and Space Research](#)

Ryan Hoover, [\(Artist and professor, biological fabrication\) MICA](#)

Jemila Macewan, <https://www.jemilamacewan.com/>

Sonali Mcdermid, climate scientist, NYU <https://as.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/as/faculty/sonali-mcdermid.html>

[Agnieszka Kurant](#) (interdisciplinary conceptual artist): collective-intelligence, non-human intelligence (AI, microbial/bacterial; nature-culture-technology).

[Christine McCarthy](#), geoscientist, Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory

[Marie-Luce Nadal](#), artist/scientist

Blacki Migliozi, data journalist, NY Times

[Pawel Wojtasik](#), filmmaker

[Karen Barad](#), feminist theorist/physicist, University of California Santa Cruz (postponed)

[Ernst Karel](#), sound engineer/ethnographer, Sensory Ethnography Lab, Harvard University (postponed)

- Hands-on workshops: Two workshops took place: Co-convener Elizabeth Henaff led the team through the process of sequencing DNA based on her research, from collecting microbial samples at the Gowanus Canal to reading through base-pair sequences using our own laptops. Data journalist Blacki Migliozi from the New York Times led the team through his intricate process of researching multiple

data sources and generating digital maps to visualize flooding along the Mississippi River, as well as to convey complex stories through interactive media.

- Field trips: The lab team visited with two organizations on field trips (further trips are postponed until the campus reopens): Co-convener Karen Holmberg organized a trip to NYC Harbor School in Governors Island, where the team visited marine biology classrooms, the Billion Oyster project, metal shop, and underwater robotics labs. Co-convener Elaine Gan worked with the New York Mycological Society, participating in walks with mycologists to observe and identify fungi in Kissena Park and Staten Island. Because of pandemic restrictions, the lab team is currently rethinking how to conduct group field visits, and whether fieldwork remains a viable method for Fall courses.
- Syllabi: The lab team has begun to configure possible course components, formats, and teaching objectives for the fall. The undergraduate seminar (led by Brain, Henaff, Holmberg; cross-listed between Gallatin School of Individualized Study and the Tandon School of Engineering) and a graduate seminar (led by Gan; cross-listed between Experimental Humanities and Tandon) will run simultaneously. While the team is still discussing and designing the actual components, they anticipate that the seminars will have a combination of readings and lectures, guest presentations, design/prototyping exercises, and group research trips (pending university regulations). The undergraduate and graduate seminars will meet separately and come together at key dates during the semester for shared workshops and guest speakers. These are pending further discussion throughout the summer.

Radical Ecologies Lab Team

Maria Paz Almanera, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication

Tega Brain, Department of Technology, Culture and Society, Tandon School of Engineering

Elaine Gan, Department of XE: Experimental Humanities and Social Engagement, Graduate School of Arts and Science

Nabil Hassein, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication

Elizabeth Henaff, Department of Technology, Culture and Society, Tandon School of Engineering

Karen Holmberg, Gallatin School of Individualized Study

Meg Weissner, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication

Diana Zhu, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication

Future Bennett-Polonsky Humanities Labs

Below are summaries of labs that will launch in the fall 2020 semester. Both Lab teams are working closely with the Center for the Humanities to address challenges posed in the likely event that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect University operations.

Asylum Lab

The Asylum Humanities Lab is conceived as an intervention in the current humanitarian crisis caused by a U.S. government that tries to stop people who seek protection from persecution in their home countries from having their cases heard in the U.S. The silencing of refugee voices is the overdetermined result of interactions among political, legal, and administrative determinants. The scale of the crisis is extraordinary. The aim of the Asylum Lab is to explore strategies for safeguarding the records and stories of refugees in ethical and effective ways that would serve the interests of current asylum seekers as well as the U.S. public and activist groups. Through explorations of humanistic and narrative approaches to individual storytelling, radical approaches to oral history, and statistical approaches to big data we hope to create a matrix that makes individual cases readable and big

data intuitive to the public. The humanitarian crisis needs to be comprehended in its impact on individuals, but its full extent cannot be grasped unless also understood as a crisis of scale.

Asylum Lab Team

Sibylle Fischer, Associate Professor, Spanish, History, CLACS

Ellen Noonan, Clinical Associate Professor, History; Director of the Archives and Public History Program

Benjamin Schmidt, Clinical Associate Professor, History; Director of Digital Humanities

Knowledge Alphabets Lab

The Knowledge Alphabets Lab will focus on the problem of translation in natural and digital languages. We aim to redefine translation theory today in the light of new developments in artificial intelligence (AI), machine translation, biotranslation, aesthetic practices and forms of knowledge production that are translation-based, or that define translation in a particular way as epistemology, transference, methodology, and mode of interpretive cognition. We hope to achieve a better understanding of how translation works in AI, deep learning and predictive processing by focusing on the unit of translatability. We will investigate what a knowledge alphabet is today and how it is related (or not) to its particular medium, whether vowel, letter, script, alphanumeric cipher, algorithm, bitmap, pixel, meme, RNA molecule, semantic or syntactic linguistic function, transliterative icon, acoustic value, or meme.

Knowledge Alphabets Lab Team

Emily Apter, Silver Professor of French and Comparative Literature, and Chair, Department of Comparative Literature

Alexander Galloway, Professor of Media, Culture and Communication, Steinhardt

Nina Katchadourian, Artist and Clinical Associate Professor, Gallatin

Nadrian Seeman, Margaret and Herman Sokol Professor of Chemistry