Bennett-Polonsky Humanities Labs
Spring 2021 Program Summary

The 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.

Spring 2021
Overview

The Digital Theory H-Lab team is grateful to have been granted a no-cost extension to complete funded activities in the 2020-2021 academic year. The lab would also like to thank the NYU Center for the Humanities for continued support and encouragement. This grant from Dr. Georgette Bennett in honor of Dr. Leonard Polonsky CBE has supplied the means for the lab to continue building on the experimental work it started during the pilot 2018–2019 academic year. During the spring 2021 semester, these funds allowed the lab to offer honoraria to guest researchers whom the Lab invited to present at Lab meetings; to hire an assistant for web-design maintenance; and to enroll members in online computer programming courses through a subscription to the Codecademy learning platform. The Lab's collaborative work has now yielded results in the form of publication of lab-incubated research as well as two applications for large-scale grants.

The lab's available funding from the original Bennett-Polonsky grant concludes with the current academic year. This now places the Lab's ability to continue operating in question. As noted above (and described below), the lab has made strong efforts to seek external funding and has efficiently extended funding originally meant for one year to three years. While one of the virtues of the lab is that it is not reducible to any one department or center within the university, this also poses significant challenges in terms of securing available resources (e.g., funding, administrative support, and meeting space). Building on our achievements listed above, the lab's central aims of the 2021–2022 year will be to continue to seek funding, recruit new members from the NYU community, strengthen institutional ties, and, in general, set in place infrastructure that ensures the Lab's continued existence. Without the continuation of an operating budget, the lab risks losing the momentum it has built through its explorations over the last three years. The Lab will receive the results of funding applications in the summer months of 2021.

During the fall 2021 semester, the Lab will continue to meet weekly as a local, core group, and monthly online with the extended, international network and guest speakers. In addition to continued research support among members, pending available funding, next year's activities will include hands-on coding workshops with faculty from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program and acquisition of skills, tools, and relations needed to build the ALMI prototype.

Outcomes and Activities
During spring 2021, the lab convened meetings via Zoom 2-3 times each month. Participants included core lab members (8) and affiliates (12) from various research institutions across the globe (MIT, Cornell, King's College London, NYU Prague, University of Southern Denmark, Michigan State University, UCLA). Invited speakers included Brian Cantwell Smith (University of Toronto), Paola Ricaurte (Tecnológico de Monterrey), and Matteo Pasquinelli (University of Arts and Design Karlsruhe). Inviting these distinguished researchers to take part in our discussions has increased the lab's visibility internationally among like-minded theorists seeking to develop spaces similar to the Digital Theory H-Lab. Matteo Pasquinelli invited the lab to be an official collaborative partner with his program in Critical AI Studies at Karlsruhe. Additionally, we already have close ties with the Department of Digital Humanities at King's College London and The Institute for the Study of Culture and Technology at University of Southern Denmark. With these partners we intend to submit proposals to funding agencies to support our interdisciplinary work, and continue the "Digital Theory Summer School" program that we initiated with King's College in 2019.

Dissertation Proposal Support for PhD Students
Lab members Claire Song, Ryan Healey, and Sam Kellogg presented first drafts of their dissertation proposals to the lab. Each one remarkably demonstrated research that *directly* came out of involvement with the lab. Lab meetings devoted to the proposals offered substantive criticism from a variety of perspectives that the students are unlikely to receive in such a systematic way in any other forum.

Lab-incubated Publications
The lab directly generated research that went into a forthcoming special issue of *Critical Inquiry* on "Surplus Data" co-edited by lab members Leif Weatherby and Jeffrey Kirkwood. The special issue looks at the ways in which quantitative media have come to pervade qualitative social spaces. Kirkwood's article addresses the economics of cryptocurrencies; lab member David Bering-Porter writes about data visualization, race, and W.E.B. Du Bois; lab affiliate Matthew Handelman presents a case study of the neural net chatbot Tay, which famously learned to deny the Holocaust within hours of her release. Weatherby teamed up with lab member Brian Justie, a graduate student at UCLA, to write "Indexical AI," on the semiotics of neural nets, illustrating the collaborative aspect of the lab. The issue will be released in 2022.

A different lab-incubated special issue will be published in fall 2021: "Automating Visuality," *MAST: The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory*, edited by Dominique Routhier, Lila Lee-Morrison, and Kathrin Maurer (forthcoming Fall 2021). Lila and Kathrin are lab members located at University of Southern Denmark. The lab was able to connect the editors with the publication, as lab member Jeffrey Kirkwood is on the editorial board of the journal. The issue will also feature contributions from various lab members.

These special issues build on the lab-specific publications that were published or otherwise accepted for publication during 2020:

- Leif Weatherby, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Data: On the Most Recent Confrontation of Data and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 46:4 (2020); "Data and the Task of the Humanities," *The Hedgehog Review* 22:2 (2020); "Intermittent Intelligence: Hans Blumenberg and AI," *New German Critique* (forthcoming, 2021).

- Sam Kellogg, "The Mountain in the Machine: Optimization and the Landscapes of Machine Learning," *Culture Machine* 20 (forthcoming, 2021).

Conference Collaboration with Oxford University
The Digital Theory Lab will be co-sponsoring an event in June at Oxford University, entitled "The Philosophy and Critical Thought of AI." The conference will feature presentations from lab members as well as invited speakers from other institutions. The conference is supported by the Mellon Sawyer Seminar at the History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge, The Institute for Ethics in AI at the University of Oxford.

Grant Proposals
The lab team has developed a project, *The Library as Artificial Intelligence,* that will provide opportunities for cross-disciplinary work across NYU. The NYU Libraries have already committed to working with us on this project, and we seek to leverage the resources from the DS3 program at NYU's Center for Data Science, creating opportunities to work directly with faculty and graduate students in the area of Data Science. The proposals were submitted to the American Council for Learned Societies (ACLS) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), respectively, during the winter of 2021.

Creative Pedagogy
With lab-related funds, Interim Director Joseph Lemelin was able to hire lab member Emma Rae Norton Bruml as a part-time course assistant for his graduate-seminar held in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication. Emma worked with Joseph to develop innovative assignments and a course website to experiment with pedagogical methods during online-only teaching. Lessons learned from these experiments will be carried over to regular in-person teaching in the future.

Digital Theory Lab Team
FACULTY/POST-DOCS
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Cliff Siskin, Department of English, Arts and Science
David Bering-Porter, New School
Joseph Lemelin, NYU Center for Data Science

AMINISTRATORS
Zach Coble, Head, Digital Scholarship Services, NYU Libraries

GRADUATE STUDENTS
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Benjamin Schluter, Department of German, Arts and Science
Ryan Healy, Department of English, Arts and Science
Tyler Harper, Department of Comparative Literature, 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 engages 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.

Spring 2021
Overview
The War Lab has continued with its different projects this past semester, taking advantage of Zoom in order to meet, as well as of the slowly re-opening situation concerning archives and libraries in Europe. The COVID-19 outbreak continues to severely hamper our ability to achieve some of our goals, and continues to postpone the conference that we are planning, but the in-person work of the Lab and the follow-up Zooms have helped a great deal with both individual projects and shared projects. Of these, several are worth mentioning, and we do so below.

Undergraduate Activity
Following-up on the undergraduate seminar that lab members Zvi Ben-Dor Benite and Stefanos Geroulanos co-taught in spring 2020, we have helped advise two senior theses: one, by Laurel Martin, which the student successfully defended, was on the effects of the Algerian war on Algerian and French-Algerian women in France; Ms. Martin received a Dean's Undergraduate Research Fund scholarship for her research, was the departmental nominee for the Best Thesis award in the College of Arts and Science, and was admitted to the History Honors Society, Phi Alpha Theta, upon graduation. The second thesis, currently ongoing, by Suhail Gharaibeh, is also on the connection between French colonial warfare and the organization/transformation of Algiers and Marseille in the mid-19th century. Mr. Gharaibeh has received a Dean's Undergraduate Research Fund fellowship and a Cecilia Bull Scholarship for his work. Other students who followed the undergraduate seminar also completed first-rate theses, including Era Gjonbalaj, on "Teaching Nationality: Mirash Ivanaj and Young Albania's Educational Reconstruction, 1933-34."

Geroulanos also taught a lecture course on "The Sciences of Power," with key findings on the intertwining of war, operational research, and cybernetics (during WWII and afterward) being central as much to the lectures as to the studies and essays pursued by the students. Past versions of this course did not look to the subject, so this marks an important change.

Lab Projects
Doctoral lab members Anne Schult and Alexander Langstaff spearheaded the organization of a special issue of the journal *Central European History* on the issue of periodization and the use of the "Thirty Years' War" motif in the twentieth century. They have assembled a small and distinguished group of scholars, some of them junior, some more established, who are pursuing the project in the journal, including subjects like the debate over the period 1914-1945 as a single "European civil war" (Enzo Traverso). Upon completion of first drafts, they plan to hold a workshop, ideally in-person, for which we would greatly appreciate a no-cost extension.

Ellis, 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" 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. Given the amount of material we have, we are currently discussing whether a book would be a more suitable outlet than a journal article.

Ben-Dor Benite and Geroulanos have moved ahead with researching a project on the place and figure of the battlefield in global history, which is expected to become a book. Primary research, however, has not been possible due to COVID-related restrictions.

Doctoral students Anne Schult, Jonas Knatz, and (relative newcomer) Lauren Kirk are carrying out research in Europe through the summer. Anne Schult's project concerns war, refugees, and the transformation of the science of demography in the later interwar period, with particular reference to WWI and to colonial warfare. Lauren Kirk's project concerns the development of theories and practices of social hygiene in the later 19th century and the ways that these inflected the perception of colonial subjects. Jonas Knatz is concentrating on the postwar period, the return of former soldiers to factory floors (specifically in Germany), and the efforts made by sociologists to understand this changing workplace, both in relation to the end of the war and in relation to the advent of automation (which was often described in continuity with the war). All three are very grateful for the research support that they have received from the H-Lab for pursuing their research.

Looking Ahead
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 creative intellectual atmosphere that we feel we have established. We also seek a no-cost extension to hold in the coming academic year an in-person workshop on papers submitted for the special issue of *Central European History*, and an in-person conference. The conference, organized by lab members Ben-Dor Benite, Ellis, and Geroulanos, pursues a rethinking of the relationship of borders, sovereignty, and war. The conference was scheduled for late May 2020, with twelve scholars invited (and confirmed) to present work in addition to the lab team. The conference was first postponed to spring 2021; now we hope to hold it in late Fall 2021.

War Lab Team
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Elizabeth Ellis, Department of History, Arts and Science

GRADUATE STUDENTS
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Matyas Mervey, Department of History, Arts and Science
Marcela Prieto Rudolphy, NYU School of Law
Anne Schult, Department of History, Arts and Science
Jennifer Trowbridge, 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.

Spring 2021
Overview
The Multi-Species Lab, together with NYU Animal Studies, hosted "Seeing Octopuses" on February 1, 2021. The event featured Pippa Ehrlich (co-director of My Octopus Teacher), Peter Galison (historian and philosopher of science, Harvard University), Adi Khen (PhD candidate, Scripps Institution of Oceanography), and Peter Godfrey-Smith (philosopher of science, University of Sydney).

Looking Ahead
The Lab had hoped to hold a final, culminating event featuring artist Kent Monkman in spring 2021; unfortunately, however, the artist cancelled. Another event is planned for fall 2021. We look forward to reporting on this event in our next interim report.

Multi-Species Lab Team
FACULTY
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Una Chaudhuri, Departments of English and Environmental Studies, Arts and Science; Department of Drama, Tisch School of the Arts; Director, Center for Experimental Humanities
Robert Slifkin, Institute of Fine Arts
Marina Zurkow, Artist; Instructor, Tisch Interactive Telecommunications Program

GRADUATE STUDENTS
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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 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 explores the following overlapping themes: designing collectivity (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).

Spring 2021
Overview
During the spring 2021 semester, the Rad Lab continued with field/archival research, guest visits, and in-person field recordings and interviews that had been postponed due to the pandemic. A graduate seminar was taught by Elaine Gan, and Karen Holmberg offered a spring tutorial for exceptional students from the fall 2020 undergraduate course. Elizabeth Henaff hosted an exceptional fall 2020 undergraduate student for independent study with the Laboratory for Living Interfaces research group she leads at Tandon, where the student learned techniques in molecular biology and biological data analysis. Tega Brain worked with an Integrated Design and Media graduate who had supported the undergraduate course as a teaching assistant.

The Rad Lab has allowed members to weave together research and teaching. Further opportunities have opened up as a result of the activities, including an invitation for Elaine Gan to write a monograph on the methods and syllabus used to study the American chestnut. Lab research has also opened up new areas for teaching, which we hope to build upon in the coming years.

Graduate Seminar
Lab member Gan ran an interdisciplinary graduate seminar ("Experimental Media for Radical Ecologies") with seven NYU graduate students and a visiting graduate student from the University of Copenhagen. The seminar hosted guest speakers, conducted research interviews, and undertook site visits for fieldwork. Guest speakers (all visits were on Zoom and recorded for the website) included:

- Sigrid Jakob, mycologist, NY Mycological Society / Green-Wood Fungi Phenology Project (continuing from 2020 RadLab)
- Andrew Mathews, anthropologist/forester, UC Santa Cruz
- Neil Patterson Jr., SUNY ESF Center for Native Peoples and the Environment
- Stephen Vitiello, sound and visual artist, Virginia Commonwealth University
- Ernst Karel, sonic/sensory ethnographer
- Pawel Wojtasik, filmmaker (continuing from 2020 RadLab)
- Elaine Ayers, historian, NYU Museum Studies (continuing from 2020 RadLab)
- Eben Kirksey, anthropologist, Deakin University
- Bart Chezar, Prospect Park

Research interviews with the following individuals were also conducted:

- Bill Powell, geneticist, SUNY ESF
- Roland Wade, historian, Kissena Park Conservancy
- Tom Bigelow, mycologist, NY Mycological Society
- Paul Sadowski, mycologist, NY Mycological Society
- Rachel Strickland, installation artist, Spontaneous Cinema
- Catherine Landis, SUNY ESF Center for Native Peoples and the Environment

The class was able to complete a few field trips to local sites, including the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, Prospect Park, and Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, and Kissena Park in Queens NY. Unfortunately, we were unable to visit other locations as planned, owing to the pandemic, but expect to visit them in the summer (see below).

Students produced multimodal/multisensory projects, drawing on topics raised by guest speakers, course readings, and seminar discussions. Projects included creative writing, video poems, algorithmic botanical drawings, mind mapping, and augmented reality. Three students will continue to expand/deepen their field research and media production over the summer. We will be working on a curated collection to represent the collaborative research in a website, to be developed during Summer 2021.

Aside from the website, Gan will also present the research-in-progress in two other formats: [multimedia essay for ASAP Journal](#) (special issue on "Becoming Undisciplined" for Fall 2021, co-edited by environmental humanities scholars Heather Houser and Stephanie LeMenager); and [multimedia presentation](#) for a conference at Zem/Brandenburg Centre for Media Studies on June 17-18, 2021.

Spring Tutorial
Students who produced exceptional work in the fall 2020 undergraduate course were invited to participate in a Spring 2021 tutorial. This resulted in an exhibition of art-science work displayed at 11 Nolan House on Governors Island in a show titled PHREATIC! (May 1 - June 6, 2020). The work was a mix of influences from the fall course and reflected inspirations from all three of the faculty who taught it (Holmberg, Henaff, Brain), and also strongly invokes Gan's work from the graduate course offered in spring 2021 (Gan). This show was a popular draw on the island. A limited run of 100 catalogs for the PHREATIC! art-science exhibition will be produced in summer 2021.

Looking Ahead: Summer 2021
During the summer, Gan will work with graduate students from the spring seminar who have expressed interest in continuing with research and assisting with completion of the website (Pfeiffer, Dupuy, Vassallo, Mocan). They will conduct additional field visits to record video interviews for a film. Locations include SUNY Syracuse, NY Botanical Gardens, and American Chestnut Foundation. Resulting materials will be made available online with a website to be launched in August 2021.

To further address the question "How do environments become data?" Brain and Henaff will continue to explore the use of photogrammetry and experimental photographic capture techniques. They will create digital scans of two sites in the Brooklyn area that we have been studying in our research focused on urban water, flooding and climate change. The aim of this work is to (1) understand how the experimental digital method of photogrammetry might complement or augment other modes of inquiry. We are already collecting sensor-based data and molecular-based data at these locations and are interested in building a multiplicity of perspectives of the field sites, (2) generate digital artifacts, i.e. the scanned representations of these environments (3) research how to incorporate this methodology in future flood-related curriculum development and (4) contribute these artifacts and curriculum resources to the RadLab platform.

The specific technologies we propose to explore are (1) photo-based photogrammetry and (2) LIDAR-based scans. These are complementary techniques as the former provides full-color rendering of 3D spaces, but with limited 3D resolution, and the latter provides high-accuracy 3D resolution, but with no color information. Mapping the former onto the latter generates high-resolution, full-color virtual analogs of the scanned environment. This digital artifact can be the basis for high-accuracy simulations (like the flood maps released recently by DEP), artistic interventions around the topics of flooding, a tool for advocacy for affected neighborhoods, and an important digital archive for the quickly-changing landscape of our coastal city impacted by climate change. As Brain's module in the undergraduate Radical Ecologies class noted, flooding and water management are key issues for New York City in the face of a climate changed future. As Elizabeth Henaff's module focused on, these metrics are entangled with other biological metrics such as the urban microbiome. As such, methods of experimental photography that focus on the capture of topographic and depth data are well suited to augmenting existing modes of environmental sensing and data collection. Furthermore, these capture

methods produce new experimental representations of field sites in ways that are both visual and volumetric, and provide an opportunity for furnishing an alternative imagination for our environment and ecology.

Brain and Henaff have ongoing research projects studying urban water and flooding in NYC, including a multi-year project involving collaborators at NYU Tandon School of Engineering, CUNY, NYC Mayor's Office of Resiliency and NYC Department of Environmental Protection. This project has so far led to the development and deployment of water level sensors in flood-prone areas of Brooklyn and Queens, including the neighborhoods of Gowanus and Hamilton Beach. This research has produced (1) the development of sensor-based data-collection methods for assessing the frequency, severity and duration of street-level flooding and (2) development molecular-based data collection methods for assessing the microbial impact of sewage-containing water on flooded surfaces. These research projects were the basis of the curriculum Brain and Henaff developed for the Radical Ecologies undergraduate course, taught in collaboration with co-PI Holmberg in Fall 2020. Our interest in photogrammetry was also catalyzed by Holmberg's workshop on this topic, given in the class.

This work will produce a number of outcomes. We will develop a series of experimental captures of field work sites in Brooklyn, preparing and realizing these as short experimental volumetric videos (of 1-2 min). These captures will be accompanied by a short critical text that examines these images in relation to the scholarship of the undergraduate Radical Ecologies class and Lab. We will also be able to export visual assets from these scans to constitute imagery to be published with articles that we are preparing on flood sensing in Brooklyn as a part of the FloodSense project.

Radical Ecologies Lab Team
<u>FACULTY</u>
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Diana Zhu, Media, Culture and Communication
Meg Weissner, Media, Culture and Communication
Maria Paz Almanera, Media, Culture and Communication

The Asylum Lab

The Asylum Lab was conceived as an intervention in the increasingly anomic and confusing landscape surrounding im/migration and asylum in the U.S. Extensive reporting by some U.S. media, human rights advocacy groups, and activist groups have revealed a humanitarian disaster of extraordinary proportions, much of it hidden from the public eye behind the walls of detention centers across the U.S., in encampments on the southern side of the U.S.-Mexico border, and increasingly, in towns across Central America. But while journalists and advocates have done an admirable job reporting on the facts on the ground, very little (if any) work has been done regarding how records are being kept of the crisis that is unfolding before our eyes. In fact, it became clear that traditional mechanisms of government accountability and transparency are no longer reliable, in part due to government agencies' failure to comply, in part due to the shifting of record keeping from paper files to digital record-keeping.

An additional blind spot in public awareness concerns the issue of scale. Journalists tend to work with narratives and focus on individual stories. Of course they report on numbers, but conventional statistics tend to work with column graphs and dots. Making the connection between a column or a dot, and the story of a human being stuck on the migration routes or caught in the asylum system, remains extremely difficult. Public history

and digital humanities have an important role to play in producing ways of representing the anomic landscape of U.S. immigration and asylum in ways that are emotionally and aesthetically responsive to the nature and severity of the crisis.

Spring 2021
Overview
The Spring 2021 undergraduate seminar, "Asylum in Crisis," which met for 75 minutes each on Tuesdays and Thursdays, was hosted by the History Department and cross-listed with Spanish and Portuguese, and the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. The seminar met remotely on Zoom. Tuesday sessions, led by Professors Fischer, Noonan and Schmidt, were typically devoted to lectures about the history and contemporary state of immigration and asylum and joint activities for all students. On Thursdays, students met in Zoom break-out rooms for the practical element of the course. These groups were led by graduate student team members Alexia Orengo Green (History), Bárbara Pérez Curiel (S&P), and Bryan Zehngut-Willits (History). The Spanish project group, led by Curiel, focused on writing about asylum and migration for the media. In addition to analyzing media representations of migrants and asylum seekers in the U.S. and Spanish-language press, the students were guided to writing book reviews and original opinion pieces on the topic of migration. The History group, led by Orengo Green and Zehngut-Willits, studied how archives preserve immigration information and explored how to digitally categorize and interpret information contained in publicly available federal immigration files, resulting in a co-created digital exhibit. The final projects of both groups will be publicly available through a dedicated website and through the December issue of the undergraduate journal in the Department of Spanish & Portuguese, *Esferas*.

"Asylum in Crisis" offered students a unique interdisciplinary approach to a dauntingly complex political issue. It combined legal history, digital history, archive science, media study, rhetorical analysis, U.S. imperial history, and global history of migration and brief excursions into local histories of the countries where many migrants originate. Source material included recent literature on the migrant experience, podcasts, visualizations of statistical materials on the web, archival documentary sources and print media sources. In many ways it was an experimental class, conducted in the spirit of public history—not from the perspective of the knowing specialist, but from the viewpoint of an engaged public. The question of how information is gathered, who has access to it, and how it is processed was at the center. Eleven undergraduates from across NYU Schools, almost all of them with a personal migration background, but none with a specific disciplinary background in History and/or Spanish, were invited to think of scholarly instruction as an enabling device to produce public-facing work. The goal of the class was not the mastery of the history of immigration and asylum in the US. Rather, we hoped to lead the students to a better understanding of how information is stored, made publicly available (or not), how it eventually reaches the public, and how one might nowadays intervene in public debate. The final projects for both groups were conceived as an invitation to write for the public rather than for a professor; to become aware of the specificities and limitations of academic language; to try out different genres or styles of writing; and to process data points contained in archives in a way that makes such data accessible to the public at large.

At the end of the class we asked the students for anonymous feedback on the collaborative and experimental conception of the class. Here are some fairly representative responses:

- I never had a class in college where there were as many teachers as the students, but I really liked it. Because of this aspect, I think we could really feel like working together although we had our own project to work on. I liked how we had lots of discussions but also the class was structured.
- The unique approach to asylum and migration that I experienced in this class gave me a completely new perspective to my personal research. It allowed me to think critically about the sources I received my information from and how they may affect the larger narrative of immigration studies.

- I found the collaborative nature of the class really helpful; I think it was more informative than a lecture-style or more individualistic class would be. I found it really informative to be able to hear from others in the class, especially since the History and Spanish groups were studying the same topic from different perspectives; I think that this approach really allowed for a more holistic understanding of asylum.

Looking Ahead

The pandemic has affected our ability to hold a large in-person event, as we had planned. Our topic continues to involve deep investigation and crossing multiple disciplinary boundaries, which requires trust, time, and open-ended discussion, all made possible by in-person discussion. We ask that we be granted permission to use the Lab's unspent funds for continued work toward developing more expansive activities that will enhance public understanding of immigration and asylum records. This work will take two forms.

Over the summer, we will further develop the website begun by History students in the "Asylum in Crisis'' course to create a more fully-fledged digital archives model for making government records about immigration more easily searchable by and legible to students, scholars, and the general public. This work will help us to prepare for the fall, when we would like to convene a small group of scholars, lawyers, and activists to undertake a half-day working session digging further into questions of record keeping, archives, ethics, and the administrative state.

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

GRADUATE STUDENTS
Alexia Orengo-Green, History
Bryan Zehngut-Willits, History
Sarah Sklaw, History
Jason Ahlenius, Spanish & Portuguese (research assistant for the Lab)
Bárbara Pérez Curiel, Spanish & Portuguese
Laura Rojas, Spanish & Portuguese

The Knowledge Alphabets Lab

The Knowledge Alphabets H-Lab focuses 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, bio-translation, 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, trans-literative icon, acoustic value, or meme. In broadest terms, the H-Lab aims to define a professional growth-field at the disciplinary juncture of literature and media studies, humanities and computational sciences.

Spring 2021

Overview

The lab team met regularly throughout the semester via Zoom. The intellectual chemistry, energy, and intellectual adventurousness of the lab team exceeded all our expectations; our only regret was not having the opportunity for in-person meetings.

Lab Activity and Outcomes

Following is a summary of the lab's most felicitous outcomes:

- There was a direct beneficial impact of the lab on the research, writing and teaching of the faculty co-organizers.
- Our discussions shaped dissertation topics and teaching fields for a majority of the graduate students: in many cases, the advances they made on their projects will significantly accelerate time-to-degree. We covered a range of issues: the problem of defining a natural language, philosophy of mathematics and mathematical notation, computational poetics, the tricky issue of defining units of "language" (including visual language and translation: alephs, punctuation, icons, emoticons, memes, etc.).
- In addition to thinkers from outside NYU (Louise Amoore [Durham University], Nick Montfort [MIT] and John Peters [Yale]), we brought in NYU faculty colleagues to share work-in-progress relevant to our topics: Lisa Gitelman on emojis, Nina Katchadourian giving a walk-through of her recent show, Zakir Paul on intelligence from Bergson to AI, Allison Parrish on computational poetics, and Mark Sanders on Coeztee's interest in computer programming and its impact on his writing.
- We created a network of speakers and researchers through the visitor invitations, our feedback, we were told consistently, proved to be immensely productive. We engaged the graduate students as respondents to the speakers, enhancing their participation and initiative. Many students followed up with speakers after the sessions.
- We gained from spontaneous extra sessions that were focused on one aspect or background of our reading, several of these organized by students.
- We drew on the specializations and creative talents of the graduate students in our undergraduate seminar, with two serving as TA's for the course and several others coming in to lead discussions on topics close to their work.
- Grad students from the lab formed panels at conferences and presented their work. One notable example: a webinar on March 10 "Canguilhem in the 21st Century: The Normal and Covid-19" at the 38th Annual 20th and 21st Century French and Francophone International Colloquium" (with four H-LABBERs plus philosophers Stefanos Geroulanos and Catherine Malabou).
- Our undergraduate students entered into the spirit of the lab, doing collaborative research and experimenting with translation across media through unit-based research (pixels, logos, memes, emojis). Their oral presentations were uniformly outstanding, and they clearly had a lot of fun, which, in a pandemic year, was no small accomplishment.
- A new undergraduate minor in Translation Studies is being planned, to be housed in Comp Lit (in CAS) and Liberal Studies. The proposal has received enthusiastic support from Dean Dinshaw and we expect it will go forward once it is officially approved next fall. The lab's undergraduate course became a model for one of the paths in the minor. The focus and structure of the course encouraged curricular innovations that extend the reach of translation theory and practice to media studies, the computational humanities, digital literacy and the study of Neural Machine Translation in linguistics.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead at the future life of the lab, which engaged graduate student participants, undergraduates and distinguished invited speakers from within and outside NYU, we request that our remaining funds be carried

over through the fall semester 2022. We had originally budgeted funds to pay for travel, lodging, meals and honoraria for guest speakers as well as lunches for participants. Given the pandemic we were unable to spend some of this money.

Having polled all lab members, there was universal agreement that our sessions had enabled us to break ground in emergent fields of the humanities, many of them dealing with the intersection of philosophy and media theory, literary approaches to language and computational linguistics, and aesthetic, political, and digital determinations of units of translatability (all being impacted by research in neural machine translation). Our work in the H-LAB spilled over directly into the undergraduate seminar, co-taught by Apter and Galloway, with guest lectures by several lab participants. The course met with positive responses from the undergraduate students, and a number of them explicitly mentioned that the course had inspired them to pursue further study in the areas of research that we covered.

Our plan for AY 2021-2022 is to schedule monthly in-person meetings to continue the Lab's work and prepare for a conference in September 2022. We envisage a public-facing, capstone 2-3 day event involving presentations by lab members, representatives from the undergraduate class (who did remarkable research working in collaborative small groups), some of our previously invited speakers, and several new speakers.

Knowledge Alphabets Lab Team
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