

Bennett-Polonsky Humanities Labs

Spring 2022 Program Summary

Lab Activity

Overview

The Bennett-Polonsky Humanities Lab program has now completed its fourth year and has to-date launched seven labs, with three more set to launch in the 2022-23 academic year. The program has supported a tremendous variety of activity, with each lab employing diverse methodologies to explore their chosen theme and producing equally varied outcomes. Following is a very brief summary of the status of each lab, with a more fulsome report provided subsequently. The theme/mission and membership of each lab is provided as Appendix 1.

Brief Status Report

Digital Theory (fall 2018 launch): Although no longer funded by the program, the team continues to be active, meeting bi-weekly as well as holding regular monthly international meetings.

Multi-Species (fall 2019 launch): Completed spring 2020.

War (fall 2019 launch): Active on a no-cost extension, the team met periodically to develop individual and collaborative work. The lab intends to hold a culminating event fall 2022.

Radical Ecologies (spring 2020 launch): Completed summer 2021.

Asylum (fall 2020 launch): The lab is no longer funded under the program but meets regularly and is reflecting on and synthesizing work undertaken to-date in order to prepare for a number of public presentations.

Knowledge Alphabets (fall 2020 launch): With key members on leave, the team will reconvene in summer 2022 to begin planning a conference for fall 2022.

Cross/Currents (fall 2021 launch): The lab team continued to meet regularly and also taught the undergraduate seminar “Cross-Currents Lab: Ocean as Myth and Method.” The team seeks a no-cost extension to bring several community-based projects and events to fruition

Consent (fall 2022 launch): The Consent Lab will launch in fall 2022.

Books to Blockchain (spring 2023 launch): Originally intending to launch in spring 2022, the lab has deferred for one year to allow key faculty to focus on tenure milestones.

Abolition Humanities (spring 2023 launch): Recently selected for funding, the lab will run for the 2023 calendar year.

Meetings and Research

Although no longer funded under the Bennett-Polonsky H-Lab program, **Digital Theory** continues to meet both online and in person to discuss works-in-progress, also convening monthly international meetings on Zoom. During the spring semester, the lab team heard



presentations from David Bates (Berkeley), Galit Wellner (Tel Aviv University), and others. The lab also undertook a rigorous study of the work of Alan Turing, generally considered the pioneering founder of digital computing, reading and discussing nearly all of Turing's work on computable numbers and artificial intelligence.

The **War** lab met regularly as a group and in subgroups to discuss research for individual and shared publications. All three of the main graduate students on the lab team carried out war-and-knowledge-related research. Alexander Langstaff is researching the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia and specifically is studying opinion polls (!) that the Nazis used in their attempt to understand the population and its political intentions. His project on wartime and post-war demography links to the work he has been doing with team members Stefanos Geroulanos and Anne Schult on war's effect on the social sciences. Schult, for her part, is studying the social sciences that contributed to the making of the modern refugee: demography, social hygiene, and statistics. Her research this past semester concerns refugee movements "caused" or forced by World War I and the Russian Revolution, especially in Germany and the new post-Habsburg states of Eastern Europe (including Czechoslovakia). Jonas Knatz (who is working on automation in post-war Germany) researched the reconstruction of the German economy destroyed in WWII. New member Emily Stewart Long also works on Germany and has been able to pursue further research on soldiers' intertwined attitudes to war and poetry in the early stages of World War I. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite has focused on the question of "non-war" war (organized military action that looks like war but is not labeled as such under international law). The question becomes how to conceptualize and historicize new terminology that has emerged in the past 20 years: most notably the notion of "war between wars" (or WBW). WBW has emerged as the convenient mode of operation in the Middle East in particular, but we see it also emerging in China seas and, since 2014, in Ukraine.

The **Asylum** team met regularly throughout the spring semester and has developed a new project description that reflects the findings of the last two years and sketches next steps (see Appendix 1). One result of investigations into the operations of the administrative state was that the issue of asylum (often considered only as driven by Human Rights considerations) cannot be dealt with separately from larger patterns of migration and immigration policies. The lab team has therefore adopted "The Migrant Records Lab" as its new title and has started working with NYU's Office of Sponsored Research to identify new funding sources.

As part of the undergraduate course "Cross-Currents Lab: Ocean as Myth and Method," **Cross/Currents** hosted Andrew Ross (NYU Courant Center for Atmosphere Ocean Science), Vicente Diaz (University of Minnesota), Mariko Whitenack (NYU American Studies), and Amy Besa (chef and owner, Purple Yam). Details on the course are provided below.

Teaching

Cross/Currents offered the undergraduate seminar, "Cross-Currents Lab: Ocean as Myth and Method," which was cross-listed by the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis and the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. Enrollment was very good, with 19 undergraduates registered from across five programs (CAS, Silver Social Work, Steinhardt, Gallatin, and Liberal Studies) and thirteen majors. The course was organized around the three methodological units



that that lab team had first explored in the fall: Visual Arts, Environmental History and Science, and Food and Agricultural Studies. Each unit engaged students in experiential and innovative research while introducing them to discipline-specific tools related to ocean science and humanities. The students concluded each unit by filing a lab report.

The Visual Arts unit began with a field trip to Pen+Brush Gallery to view a retrospective exhibition of the Sint Maartener and Dutch artist Deborah Jack. The artist herself gave the class a guided tour. The class also had a workshop with Puerto Rican artist Sofía Gallisá Muriente and curator Arnaldo Rodríguez Bagué, who spoke about water as medium and their work around different bodies of water in Puerto Rico. Lab graduate students Lee Xie and Dantae Elliot taught a seminar based on their dissertation research on visual arts in the Caribbean and introduced the students to important methodological concepts and vocabularies. The undergraduates produced exciting group projects inspired by the unit, including a video essay and a digital art exhibit.

The second unit on Environmental History and Science focused on digital representations and infrastructures in relation to ocean dynamics. Andrew Ross (NYU Courant Center for Atmosphere Ocean Science) gave an engaging talk about his research on ocean and climate models with interpretable machine learning techniques. He emphasized his own experience of trying to bridge the sciences with questions from the humanities with respect to climate change. Vicente Diaz (University of Minnesota) visited to discuss The Native Canoe Project, which builds outrigger canoes across Oceania, the Native Great Lakes, and the Mississippi River to advance community-engaged research, teaching, and service; he also spoke on his research to do with advanced visualization technologies of Virtual and Augmented Realities, which are meant to digitally preserve indigenous watercraft technologies and water-based ecological knowledge. Team member Mariko Whitenack taught a seminar on environmental history and Kanaka environmental epistemologies.

The unit on Food and Agricultural Studies paid particular attention to Asian American histories. Graduate student members Michael Salgarolo and Emile Tumale introduced the cluster with their research projects and interests. Chef and restaurant owner Amy Besa (Purple Yam) visited to talk about the colonial, imperial, and indigenous stories behind the transoceanic circulation of ingredients, the importance of heirloom varieties, and about cooking as a specific research methodology. Based on these discussions, one student group produced an edited video titled "Migratory Meal" documenting the process of cooking their traditional dishes (Korean, Nigerian, Filipino, Chinese, and Jewish) together and the conversations they shared while eating. Connecting discussion on environmental and ocean sciences with the unit on food studies, the class took a field trip to the Billion Oyster Project on Governor Island. The Project is a New York City-based nonprofit organization that seeks to restore one billion live oysters to New York Harbor. Because oysters are filter feeders, they serve as a natural water filter, with a number of beneficial effects for the ecosystem. The class also had an in-person theater workshop with Claro de los Reyes, which directed a reenactment of the Filipino American War to facilitate reflection on inclusive pedagogies and experiential learning.

The experimental and collective nature of the course represented a truly innovative pedagogical experience for the professors and the students alike. Faculty involved intend to



offer a Cross/Currents class regularly as a special topic or freshman seminar. The combination of faculty, guest lecturers, and students from across disciplines created an exciting opportunity to think through ideas resulting in creative project-based group and final projects. Students were able to bring together high-level scholarship with their own individual understanding around the question of the ocean as metaphor and method.

Although not strictly speaking part of the H-Lab program, an undergraduate seminar on the topic of im/migration and asylum taught by Sibylle Fischer of the **Asylum** lab brought several H-Lab participants into the college classroom for guest lectures on the archival and digital aspects of the project. The students were absolutely fascinated by this window onto socially engaged, open-ended research on a topic that, for most of them, has huge personal meaning.

Events

In March, the **Asylum** team presented the lab's findings to colleagues in a History Department Faculty Seminar, under the title "Writing the History of Migration: Archives, Advocacy, and Disappearing Records." One of the goals of the presentation was to introduce colleagues to a project that is framed in humanistic ways but can only be done by making creative use of digital technologies, and where the final product would be a digital archive rather than a scholarly book. The presentation was very positively received and has opened venues for future collaborations with immigration historians on the NYU faculty.

The Center for the Humanities organized an event on collaborative research, held April 20, featuring Benjamin Schmidt, Bryan Zengut-Willits and Bitá Mousavi from the **Asylum** lab, and Leif Weatherby and Ryan Healey from **Digital Theory**. That same week, the **Asylum** team presented work to undergraduate students in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese as part of the "Friday on the Patio" series. Faculty and students from **Cross/Currents** also spoke of their lab experience.

In the final week of the spring semester, **Digital Theory** hosted a symposium called "What Is Digital Theory?," with visitors from the international group discussing how to proceed with critical digital studies in the present time.

Publications

Although the **War** lab had primarily focused on the twentieth century and contemporary contexts, critical feedback, workshopping, and conversations enabled Liz Ellis to revise and complete both a book and an article. Her article "The Natchez War Revisited: Indigenous Diplomacy, Multi-Directional Slave Trades, and Violence in the Lower Mississippi Valley" was published in the *William and Mary Quarterly*—the preeminent journal in early American history—in 2020. Since then, the article has received three prizes: Louisiana Historical Association Glenn R. Conrad Prize for best article on a Louisiana history topic published in any source during 2020; the *William and Mary Quarterly* honorable mention for the Lester J. Cappon prize, awarded annually to the best article published in the journal during the previous year (awarded 2021); and the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies honorable mention for the James L. Clifford Prize article prize for an outstanding study of eighteenth-century culture, 2022.



The War lab's discussions and theoretical examinations of war and conflict, especially as it relates to environments and sovereignty in the contemporary moment, also helped Ellis figure out the framing for the introduction to her historical monograph, *The Great Power of Small Nations* (University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming). In the introduction, she examines the long and ongoing conflict over resources, bodies of knowledge, and law that shape the contemporary lives of Louisiana's Indigenous peoples. The intellectual space and the support provided by the War Lab were instrumental in helping her complete this manuscript project.

Future Plans

Members of the **War** lab will conduct further research this summer. Ellis will be in New Orleans researching war, conflict, and Indigenous slavery in Louisiana. She will also present findings at the conference "Warfare, Environment, Social Inequality, and Pro-Sociability" at the University of Seville, Spain. Geroulanos is spending late June and July in Paris to carry out research in the Military archives in Vincennes on the relationship between the Napoleonic code and the French army's occupation of German lands from 1805 to 1812. This was not originally part of the lab's work, but it has become a key point of relevance in Geroulanos's work on the War and Knowledge theme, as it concerns the place of law and occupation (and therefore doubles back, at least in part, on the work he is pursuing with Schult and Langstaff).

The **Asylum Migrant Records** team will continue to meet and explore major funding opportunities for building out the pilots developed between 2020 and 2022 (see for example Keeping Records and the Golden Gate and Esferas vol. 12). An NEH Digital Humanities Advancement grant application is in preparation; thanks to the two years of exploratory research funded by the Bennett-Polonsky Foundation, the lab is now in a position to apply at Level 2, for a \$150,000 grant. The proposal will focus on the conceptual and technical work necessary to create a beta digital repository of historical immigration files to make this invaluable historical source accessible, for the first time to anyone (immigration historians, im/migrant families, and migrant advocates) who seeks to understand the history of im/migration and the often-fraught encounters between individuals and the administrative state. For more on the lab's plans, see Appendix 1.

Although the lab is essentially concluded, the **Knowledge Alphabets** team is planning a final capstone event and publication for Fall 2022.

The **Cross/Currents** lab continues to discuss with different organizations the possibility of collaborating on a community-based project in the city, more specifically, a community mural in an unoccupied area adjacent to the María Solá Green Space in the South Bronx. The mural will help expand and support the mission of the Maria Sola Green Space, which is part of a general resurgence of community gardens that seeks to promote environmental justice in the South Bronx and is stewarded by the Mott/Haven Port Morris Community Lands Stewards, a community land trust. Muralism is ideal for this project because it instantiates a collaborative artistic methodology and represents a storytelling device with strong ties to Latin American, Latinx, and indigenous visual and artistic traditions. The proposed artist for the project, Virginia Ayress, is a well-known Chilean artist and activist in the South Bronx where she has lived for twenty years. Her murals are conceived as a community-building practice, and different groups



are mobilized through open invitations to paint. The idea is to invite students to participate in painting and in documenting the process. The NYU Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics will be partners in the project.

The **Cross/Currents** lab team is planning to submit student and faculty work from the project for publication in a special dossier in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese undergraduate journal *Esferas*. The Asylum H-Lab undertook a similar collaboration with *Esferas* and it is a model that brings together students and faculty with contributors from outside the university to build a dialogue about a specific theme or idea. Based on the submissions received from students this past semester, the team believes this would be a great outlet for work that was both creative and scholarly. Because *Esferas* accepts contributions from both NYU and non-NYU authors and artists, the team would invite submissions from the fall and spring's guest lecturers, creating both a record of the work done as well as an invitation to continue building conversations around the theme of Cross/Currents beyond the lab's first year.

Moreover, in the fall, **Cross/Currents** plans to organize an event on artistic currents in contemporary Caribbean art with artists Sheena Rose (Barbados), Sofia Gallisá Muriente (Puerto Rico) and La Vaughn Belle (U.S. Virgin Islands) and respondents from the Cross/Currents team Laura Torres-Rodríguez, Lee Xie, and Dantaé Garee Elliott. The panel discussion will allow the lab to share with the broader NYU community learnings from the Visual Arts cluster of the undergraduate course, of which Sofia and Dantaé were guest speakers, as well as bring into dialogue two other artists (Sheena and La Vaughn) who in their work challenge colonial hierarchies and invisibility in the Caribbean from environmental and gendered perspectives. The event will focus on the diverse mediums that these artists employ (film, video, painting, drawing, mixed media, and public art) to question how multidisciplinary artistic methodologies and aesthetic practices can dispel stereotypes about the Caribbean, build counter archives, and bring together de/anti-colonial thought and practice.

Cross/Currents will also plan a symposium and an exhibition around the 125th Anniversary of the Wars of 1898, to be held Spring 2023. This will be in collaboration with The Center for Puerto Rican Studies: CentroPR (Hunter) and other campus units, like Sulo, and the international network of Philippine Studies programs that Sulo has been spearheading (including SOAS in London, and programs in Hamburg and Madrid), along with coordination with including NYU's Latinx Project and Hemispheric Institute. Both of these initiatives focus on public-facing projects and events that will bring the research conducted over the past year into dialogue with an even greater number of scholars and artists, and in dialogue with the public. The Cross/Currents team seeks a no-cost extension to bring these events to fruition.

Conclusion

The seven H-Labs active to-date have addressed an extraordinary range of interests and methods of investigation, and all—even in the face of novel challenges posed by the global pandemic—have broken new ground in knowledge production and pedagogy in the humanities. The impact of the labs' teaching, research and public engagement is beginning to be felt beyond the NYU community, and this is something we will actively document and promote in the coming year.



APPENDIX THEME / MISSION AND MEMBERSHIP OF ALL H-LABS

Fall 2018 Launch

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.

Lab Team

David Bering-Porter, Assistant Professor of Culture and Media, The New School

Zach Coble, Head, Digital Scholarship Services, NYU Libraries

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

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

Ryan Healy, Doctoral Student, English, Arts and Science

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

Joseph Lemelin, Research Fellow, NYU Center for Data Science

Benjamin Schluter, Doctoral Student, German, Arts and Science

Cliff Siskin, Professor, English, Arts and Science

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

Leif Weatherby, Associate Professor, German, Arts and Science



Fall 2019 Launch

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.

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, Professor, 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, Graduate Student, Experimental Humanities
Nick Silcox, Doctoral Student, English, Arts and Science
Robert Slifkin, Professor of Fine Arts, Institute of Fine Arts, Arts and Science
Marina Zurkow, Artist; Instructor, Interactive Telecommunications Program, Tisch

The War Lab

The War 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.

Lab Team

Madison Bastress, Doctoral Student, History, Arts and Science

Stefanos Geroulanos, Professor, History, Arts and Science

Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Associate Professor, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Arts and Science

Elizabeth Ellis, Assistant Professor, History, Arts and Science

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

Jonas Knatz, Doctoral Student, History, Arts and Science

Alexander Langstaff, Doctoral Student, History, Arts and Science

Emily Stewart Long, Adjunct Instructor, History, Arts and Science

Matyas Mervey, Doctoral Student, History, Arts and Science

Marcela Prieto Rudolphy, Doctoral Student, NYU School of Law

Anne Schult, Doctoral Student, History, Arts and Science

Jennifer Trowbridge, Doctoral Student, Anthropology, Arts and Science

Spring 2020 Launch

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).

Lab Team

Maria Paz Almanera, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication, Steinhardt
Tega Brain, Industry Assistant Professor, Technology, Culture and Society, Tandon
Elaine Gan, Visiting Assistant Professor, XE: Experimental Humanities and Social Engagement, Graduate School of Arts and Science
Nabil Hassenin, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication, Steinhardt
Elizabeth Henaff, Assistant Professor, Technology, Culture and Society, Tandon
Karen Holmberg, Research Scientist and Co-Director of the WetLab, Gallatin
Meg Weissner, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication, Steinhardt
Diana Zhu, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication, Steinhardt

Fall 2020 Launch

~~Asylum Lab~~ The Migrant Records 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.

The Asylum team has refashioned itself as The Migrant Records Lab and developed a new project description to reflect its findings of the last two years:

- Over ninety million migrant records are in the hands of the US immigration bureaucracy. Migrants, their families, and their advocates have to file a Freedom of Information Act request in order to retrieve the records. Some records—including those of deportees—are methodically destroyed according to record schedules; others are saved but their content is unclear. The transition to digital records has unsettled norms about what kinds of records are saved, and where.
- Migrant records are, like all government files, highly formulaic. They reproduce government criteria of admission and exclusion as well as questionable categories of (racial, ethnic, sexual, gender) identification. Yet, they are also exceptionally valuable. Immigration records are essential for any claims of relief. They contain—however much abbreviated—life stories, narratives of migration, and other materials that may be invaluable to families trying to piece together their transnational histories. They also open a rare window onto the operations of the administrative state. In fact, migrant records are the most detailed ground-level record of the story of migration in the US. Yet, to this date, immigration history is largely written without them.
- The Migrant Records Lab is an interdisciplinary digital public humanities project at NYU devoted to finding ways to give migrants, their transnational families, immigrants and their advocates, and scholars across the humanities more power over information exclusively under the control of the state.
- Depending on the age and location of files, restrictions, accessibility, and needs for privacy protection vary. While, in the long term, we envision an integrated digital community archive that comprises recent files as well as historical files (with varying restrictions as to public access), the road map below sketches two related crowd-sourced pilot projects. They would model new methods of access to large, digitized collections including full-text optical character recognition, data visualization, and searching based on document images. This would make the files discoverable by social, political, geographical criteria or other terms that would make it possible for immigrant families, historians (including of countries outside the U.S.), and advocates to tell the full range of migrant stories.
- 1. Community Archive pilot: we'd develop a webpage that would guide im/migrants and their families through the FOIA request process. At the same time, we would be building a community FOIA library (on the model of Muckrock); individuals and families could, if they so desired and on an entirely voluntary basis, safely store the files they receive, and thus preserve them for future generations. A central aspect of this work will involve determining how to create safeguards for the ethical and safe stewardship of these records.
- 2. Historical files pilot: The immigration files of any individual born more than a 100 years ago are deposited at the National Archives; files for deceased persons are available through FOIA or in person at the NARA branch in Kansas City. These files are currently not reliably searchable except by individual names; digitized versions of the files, we have discovered, have not been deposited. Creating a digital repository of these files would make this invaluable historical source accessible, for the first time, to anyone (immigration historians, im/migrant families, and migrant advocates) who seeks to understand the history of im/migration and the often-fraught encounters between individuals and the administrative state.



Lab Team

Jason Ahlenius, Doctoral Student, Spanish and Portuguese, Arts and Science

Benjamin Berman-Gladstone, Doctoral Student, Hebrew and Judaic Studies, and History, Arts and Science

Bárbara Pérez Curiel, Doctoral Student, Spanish and Portuguese, Arts and Science

Sibylle Fischer, Associate Professor, Spanish, History, CLACS, Arts and Science

Bitá Mousavi, Doctoral Student, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Arts and Science

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

Alexia Orengo-Green, History, Arts and Science

Laura Rojas, Doctoral Student, Spanish and Portuguese, Arts and Science

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

Sarah Sklaw, Doctoral Student, History, Arts and Science

Bryan Zehngut-Willits, Doctoral Student, History, Arts and Science

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.

Lab Team

Emily Apter, Professor, French and Comparative Literature, and Chair, Comparative Literature

Aaron Doughty, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication, Steinhardt

Jeanne Etelain, Doctoral Student, French, Arts and Science

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

Nicole Grimaldi, Doctoral Student, Comparative Literature, Arts and Science

Nabil Hassenin, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication, Steinhardt

Ivan Hofman, Doctoral Student, Comparative Literature, Arts and Science

David Kanbergs, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Arts and Science

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

Alexander Miller, Doctoral Student, Comparative Literature, Arts and Science

Amanda Parmer, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication, Steinhardt

Caleb Salgado, Doctoral Student, French, Arts and Science

Pierre Schwarzer, Doctoral Student, French, Arts and Science



Meg Wiessner, Doctoral Student, Media, Culture and Communication, Steinhardt
Yuanjun Song, Doctoral Student, Comparative Literature, Arts and Science

Fall 2021 Launch

Cross/Currents Lab

The Cross/Currents H-Lab takes the word currents as its inspiration, as both a metaphor and a tool, enveloping not only its main definition in relation to water or its movements, but also its broader reverberations. By connecting the words cross and currents, our main goal is to bring into dialogue environmental humanities and migration studies (with an emphasis on race, diaspora, and indigeneity). In our work together we hope to rehearse ways of bringing literary and artistic analyses to bear on issues of the environment and migration, and vice-versa. We have outlined three main trajectories around the notion of Cross/Currents: mobility, transmission, and flow. Firstly, mobility considers how water has been a conduit for migration—the movement of people and non-human elements—with its historic and contemporary iterations defined by violence and trauma. Secondly, transmission engages recent scholarship in media studies, the history of science, and the history of technology. It pushes us to think about the material aspects of technologies, and to consider newer models of communication like undersea cable systems or transoceanic internet traffic. Finally, we use the flow of water and air as points of reference from which to build new critical vocabularies and frameworks for knowledge production beyond traditional conceptualizations of human agency. Our ultimate purpose is to decenter an anthropocentric and imperialistic understanding of global interconnection and exchange.

Lab Team

Dantaé Elliot, Doctoral Student, Spanish and Portuguese, Arts and Science
Fan Fan, Doctoral Student, Lab coordinator, Spanish and Portuguese, Arts and Science
Luis Francia, Adjunct Professor, Social and Cultural Analysis, Arts and Science
Linda Luu, Doctoral Student, Social and Cultural Analysis, Arts and Science
Jordana Mendelson, Associate Professor, Spanish and Portuguese; Director, King Juan Carlos I of Spain Center
Michael Salgarolo, Doctoral Student, History, Arts and Science
Laura Torres-Rodríguez, Associate Professor, Spanish and Portuguese, Arts and Science
Emilie Tumale, Doctoral Student, Sociology of Education, Steinhardt
Mariko Chin Whitenack, Doctoral Student, Social and Cultural Analysis, Arts and Science
Lee Xie, Doctoral Student, Spanish and Portuguese, Arts and Science

FORTHCOMING

Fall 2022 Launch

Consent Lab

The Consent H-Lab brings together arts practitioners and scholars from across disciplines and media at NYU (musicology, performance, visual arts, choreography, literature) to 1) take stock of the various grammars of consent operating on campus today, and 2) develop, test, and share



experiential designs for social interaction within the university community. The work of the lab involves first orientating ourselves within NYU's multiple (cultural, legal, discursive) frameworks of consent and then putting our methodologies together to devise new structures for engagement, integration, and play. Through year-long discussion, workshops, and project-based collaboration among faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates, we assess and reimagine the current state of campus and, especially, of classroom dynamics.

Lab Team

Brigid Cohen, Associate Professor, Department of Music, Arts and Science

Nina Katchadourian, Clinical Professor, Gallatin

Wendy Anne Lee, Associate Professor, English, Arts and Science

Rosemary Quinn, Arts Professor, Drama, Tisch

Yue Yin, Assistant Arts Professor, Tisch ITP

Spring 2023 Launch

Books to Blockchain Lab

The Books to Blockchain H-Lab investigates connections between early practices of organizing knowledge and newly invented ones, seeking a continuum from archives and catalogs to open data and digital ledgers, like blockchain. Our inquiry centers on enumeration and commensuration: ways of knowing by tabulation and comparison. We build on these connections to reimagine digital knowledge infrastructures centering art and humanities for interdisciplinary problem solving. Our collaboration navigates political and civic inclusion alongside economic property rights, and the resilience of humanistic and artistic value within these larger systems.

Lab Team

R. Luke DuBois, Associate Professor and Director, Integrated Design and Media, Tandon
Peri Shamsai, Adjunct Associate Professor, Entertainment, Media and Technology, Stern
School of Business

Anne L. Washington, Assistant Professor, Applied Statistics, Social Science and Humanities,
Steinhardt

Amy Whitaker, Assistant Professor, Visual Arts Administration, Steinhardt

Abolition Humanities Lab

The main goal of the Abolition Humanities Lab is to explore how the humanities can advance liberation and emancipation. Our H-Lab seeks to create alternative ways for academic and non-academic communities to co-produce research questions and collective forms of transformational change. One of the more challenging and exciting aspects of this H-Lab involves the development of a Humanities-based pedagogy centered on struggles against state violence. Our focus is not on stable textual production, but on lived experience and its accumulation in spaces, objects, images, and architectures that enmesh New York University with histories of legal and state violence. This material-orientation means centering questions of



the observational and experiential in both the past and the present, the human and the nonhuman.

Lab Team

Michelle Castañeda, Assistant Professor, Performance Studies, Tisch

Lenora Hanson, Assistant Professor, English, Faculty of Arts and Science

Prita Meier, Associate Professor, Art History and The Institute of Fine Arts, Faculty of Arts and Science