Theories and Practices of the Literary Lab

This roundtable will explore the theoretical, practical, and political implications of the rise of the literary lab within the field of digital humanities.

As part of the ongoing debate about the impact and efficacy of the digital humanities, this roundtable will explore the theoretical, practical, and political implications of the rise of the literary lab. How will changes in the materiality and spatiality of our research and writing change the nature of that research? How will the literary lab impact the way we work?

As a means of addressing these questions, this session will feature a robust line-up of speakers from all career levels who bring a broad range of perspectives to the question of the humanities laboratory, including leaders of already established laboratories (Fraistat, Jockers, Mandell, Schnapp), scholars in the process of creating labs (Piper, Algee-Hewitt), colleagues contending with the resource-scarcity of public institutions (Underwood), and finally, the student perspective (Eckert) of what it means to undertake research as a graduate student within this changing scholarly environment.

The roundtable will try to address the question of the literary lab at four unique levels:

First, what are the new types of literary historical projects that digital labs make possible? What kinds of new knowledge do they/will they produce? But what are also the theoretical biases encoded in such spaces? Are we finding an over- or underemphasis on particular periods, genres, languages, or topics? What types of literary history are labs uniquely suited to address and what are they not good at analyzing and how might we address this?

Second, what are the new types of communication that labs enable? How does a lab's integration within the spectrum of new communication tools impact research, in particular the time of research, beyond the traditional scholarly media of the monograph and the journal article? How do these new communication tools change the publicness of literary scholarship and what are the implications of those changes?

Third, how do labs impact teaching and training students? Is there an attempt to move away from the simulational model of student work – the quasi-object of the seminar paper or even dissertation chapter – to more integrated and modular notions of writing/design that fit within a larger research agenda? What is the role of non-written work within literary critical research and how should we be thinking about assessing and facilitating this kind of work? Does the laboratory structure empower students to be more active agents in the research process? Or does it run the risk of subordinating their work to the aims of a lab or limit their options to the more instrumental needs of a lab's goals? In terms of hierarchy between students and teachers, are labs more vertically or horizontally structured than current models of student training?

Finally, we are also interested in situating this debate within the larger context of the status and value of the university as a place of knowledge generation. Does the literary lab mark a larger trend towards the scientization of knowledge and thus a loss of distinct kinds of humanistic knowledge? Or does it mark a revitalization of the humanities either by intensifying our traditional attention to language and textuality or through the ability to build bridges between disciplines and even faculties? Does the lab allow us to identify some core values of academic inquiry that transcend discipline? And lastly, how should we address issues of the resource intensity of laboratory environments amidst a larger funding landscape of resource scarcity in the humanities? What are the kinds of practices that we should be putting in place to facilitate the all-important question of "access"?

List of Participants

Mark Algee-Hewitt is currently the director of the Stanford Literary Lab. His work focuses on bringing quantitative analyses of digital texts to bear on eighteenth-century and Romantic period aesthetic theory and poetics. His current book project, "The Afterlife of the Sublime" uses these methods to trace the evolution and disappearance of the concept of the sublime in the writing of the long eighteenth-century. His articles have appeared in the European Romantic Review, Romanticism, and Victorianism on the Net. Mark is also currently involved in developing two new digital tools for literary analysis: the Werther Topologies, a visualization technique that maps relationships between texts within virtual geographic spaces (with Andrew Piper) and the Book History BiblioGraph, a new quantitative approach to research in Book History (with Tom Mole).

Lindsey Eckert is a PhD Candidate in English and Book History at the University of Toronto, where she is completing her dissertation, "Romantic Authorship and the Failure of Familiarity, 1784-1837." She is a course instructor in the University's undergraduate program in Book and Media Studies and a Teaching Fellow at the Massey College Print Shop. She serves as Co-Chair of the Graduate Student Caucus of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism and is a member of Digital Scholarship (DiSc), a grassroots online forum for Digital Humanities in the Greater Toronto Area. She has been involved with the Text Encoding Initiative Council to make TEI Guidelines more useful for material bibliography.

Neil Fraistat is Professor of English and Director of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH) at the University of Maryland. He is a founder and general editor of the Romantic Circles Website, the Co-Chair of centerNet (an international network of digital humanities centers), and he has published widely on the subjects of Romanticism, Textual Studies, and Digital Humanities in various articles and in the eight books he has authored or edited. Fraistat has engaged in projects involving the preservation of virtual worlds and born digital creative works; the development of the Open Annotation Collaboration framework for sharing annotations of digital content across the World Wide Web; and the building of international cyberinfrastructure. He has been awarded the Society for Textual Scholarship's biennial Fredson Bowers Memorial Prize, the Keats-Shelley Association Prize, honorable mention for the Modern Language

Association's biennial Distinguished Scholarly Edition Prize, and the Keats-Shelly Association's Distinguished Scholar Award.

Matthew L. Jockers is Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities and English at the University of Nebraska. His research involves computational approaches to the study of large collections of literature. His book on the subject, Macroanalysis: Digital Methods for Literary History, is forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press (2013). Other published work includes essays on computational approaches to authorship attribution, as well as papers on Irish and Irish-American literature in the American West. Jockers is the Co-Founder (with Franco Moretti) of the Stanford Literary Lab (http://litlab.stanford.edu/).

Laura Mandell, Professor of English Literature and Director of the Initiative for Digital Humanities, Media, and Culture at Texas A&M University, has published Misogynous Economies: The Business of Literature in Eighteenth-Century Britain (1999), a Longman Cultural Edition of The Castle of Otranto and Man of Feeling, and numerous articles primarily about eighteenth-century women writers. Her recent article in New Literary History, "What Is the Matter? What Literary History Neither Hears Nor Sees," describes how digital work can be used to conduct research into conceptions informing the writing and printing of eighteenth-century poetry. She is Editor of the Poetess Archive, an online scholarly edition and database of women poets, 1750-1900 (http://www.poetessarchive.org); Associate Director of NINES (http://www.nines.org); and Director of 18thConnect (http://www.18thConnect.org). Her current research involves developing new methods for visualizing poetry, developing software that will allow all scholars to deep-code documents for datamining, and improving OCR software for early modern and 18th-c. texts via high performance and cluster computing.'

Andrew Piper is Associate Professor in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at McGill University and associate member in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies. His work work focuses on the long history of the materialities of reading. He is the co-founder of CITELAB, a new digital humanities initiative to explore the visualization of literary critical analysis, as well as the author of Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age (Chicago), which was awarded the MLA Prize for a first book in 2009. His new book, Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times, is now out with Chicago.

Jeffrey Schnapp is Professor of Romance Languages at Harvard University and is the director of the arts and humanities METAlab, based in the Berkman Center for Internet and Society. He is the co-author of Digital Humanities 2.0 (with Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld and Todd Presner) and editor of a number of volumes that bear on contemporary digital culture such as Crowds, SPEED Limits, and tunnel RE vision. He has also authored a range of articles that address the history of Italian literature from Dante to Futurism.

Associate Professor Ted Underwood of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign is collaborating with scholars at three universities on a multi-year grant funded by the

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. As part of that project, he corrected the Google ngrams dataset so that it can be used in the eighteenth century, and collaborated with programmers at the Illinois Informatics Institute to make the service available online. He will speak to the challenges that arise as an individual scholar, without a dedicated digital humanities center on campus, tries to build and analyze textual corpora on a scale that strains the computational and institutional resources usually available to humanists. Underwood has published extensively on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature, in journals that include Representations, MLQ, and PMLA.