What I’m Reading This Summer: Spencer Keralis

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Note: As the dh+lib Review editors work behind the scenes this summer, we have invited a few members of our community to step in as guest editors and share with us what they are reading and why the dh+lib audience might want to read it too. This week, we hear from Spencer Keralis, Research Associate Professor and Head of the Digital Humanities and Collaborative Programs Unit with the Public Services Division of the University of North Texas Libraries.

My research bridges my interests in media history, in particular history of the book, with my duties helping catalyze conversations around digital humanities, diversity, and social justice in an academic library at a large public university. This summer’s reading has gelled around a couple of slowly converging topics – information literacy and minimal computing in DH pedagogy, and representations of AIDS in late 80s-early 90s countercultures. I’m interested in theorizing DH praxis, as well as understanding how technology implicates its users in systems of power.

Technological Reproducibility


In October, I’ll be presenting in intimidatingly good company at the LAUC-B Conference in Berkeley. For this talk, I set myself the daunting task of proposing a “picture theory” for digital humanities, offering a way to think with and about images in the digital environment. To begin approaching the topic, I’m returning to this foundational text of media theory to engage with the idea of what digital reproduction does to images - and not just the works of fine art that Benjamin was most concerned with (though that’s a factor). Starting with theory prompts more questions than answers. How does digital reproduction compromise the “aura” of the original, as Benjamin worried almost a century ago? Does the widespread (if not viral) dissemination of images, including memes, in the digital environment amplify the implication of media in the totalitarian impulses of the culture? By extension, are libraries complicit in propagating and validating these impulses? Benjamin’s work seems even more prescient now than it did when I first encountered it more than a decade ago, so it’s both a pleasure and a bit of a shock to revisit this text.
No Metadata, No Future

http://www.worldcat.org/title/metadata/oclc/934864946

If someone had told me six years ago that I’d be really into metadata, I’d have laughed in their face. But working in a library has opened my eyes to metadata as a discipline, and working in DH has made me realize that we can’t do a goddamned thing without good metadata. I have developed infinite respect for cataloguers, and I’m fascinated with home-grown, community serving metadata standards like xZINECOREx, developed by the Zine Libraries Interest Group. As a metadata n00b, I looked for non-specialist primers to help me understand how metadata works. Pomerantz’s *Metadata* is part of the MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series which, along with the Oxford Very Short Introduction series, is my go to for solid intros to complex issues and ideas. Pomerantz provides brief, readable chapters on topics from descriptive metadata to the semantic web, which have served well to provide me with a solid foundation for further inquiry. This would be a great text for a DH 101 class, if you were really committed to offering your students a conceptual foundation in understanding what makes the toys and widgets work. (h/t the inimitable Scott Carlson. Check out his metadata nerd tumblr for awesome metadata stuff.)

Minimal Computing

Gil, Alex. (2015, May 21). “The User, the Learner and the Machines We Make.” *Minimal Computing: a working group of GO::DH.*
http://go-dh.github.io/mincomp/thoughts/2015/05/21/user-vs-learner/

A few months ago, Alex Gil gave me a shout out on a Facebook thread for being an advocate for the principles of minimal computing, which surprised me since I don’t consider myself to be much of anything in relation to computing at all. So I looked up minimal computing and found Alex’s indispensible piece on GO::DH, and sure enough, I am an advocate for minimal computing! Who knew? Since this discovery, I’ve worked to become more intentional in my application of these principles, particularly in my teaching. Following Alex’s example, I start building assignments with the question “what do we need?” and work back from that point to the least tech-intensive option available. This has shaped my thinking about using Timeline JS in my survey courses, but it also affects how I think of programmatic responses to the digital humanities needs of faculty: Faculty want to make online exhibits. Should we build an in-house system to support this, or should we host Omeka? Thinking from the point of need, inspired by Alex’s creative deployment of the concept of “architectures of necessity,” the answer becomes fairly simple. Minimal computing is becoming my version of Zen in DH praxis, and I’m grateful to Alex for helping me make these discoveries.

Ephemera I

*Life and Death* is the third installment of Tim Lawrence’s epic exploration of the New York dance scene. Previous volumes traced the influence of Arthur Russell on the Downtown music scene in the early 1970s, and the explosion of disco in that decade. Moving into the 80s in the current volume, Lawrence tackles the complexity of a scene that evolved from night to night, from DJ to DJ, club to club. While the deeply personal profiles of legendary DJs like David Mancuso and Anita Sarko, along with Downtown luminaries Lydia Lunch, Ann Magnuson and so many others, are compelling, what Lawrence does with probing the political, social, and economic structures that frame the parties rounds out the argument, making this more than a work of nostalgia. The deaths of Anita Sarko in 2015 and David Mancuso in 2016 haunt any reader, but these are not the only ghosts in the text. The chapter “Shrouded Abatements and Mysterious Deaths” seamlessly blends an incisive critique of the impact of Reaganomics and Ed Koch’s austerity measures on the city of New York, with the revelation of the emergence of HIV/AIDS on the New York party scene. Lawrence’s management of the sheer volume of material he draws from is as impressive as the vast archive he deploys, including the legendary Downtown Collection at NYU’s Fales Library. His inclusion of playlists curated by the DJs - capturing and concretizing that most ephemeral of nightlife experiences - lends an immediacy and poignancy to a big, important book about an overlooked moment in our shared history. If I weren’t reading this for research, I’d read it for pleasure.

**Ephemera II**


I’m ending with another theory-intensive work, not because I think that both DH and librarianship are under-theorized (though I do think that), but because theory is an aspirational mode of writing for me. And of the recent generation of cultural studies scholars, José Esteban Muñoz is an inspiration. This book explores the possibility of a queer future. While the work is necessarily in dialogue with antifuturist Lee Edelman, Muñoz’s critique of presentism - what he sees as a stagnancy in queer discourse - is crucial to considering the “what next?” of queer culture, queer ideas. I see some archivists of queer materials as guilty of this sort of presentism - focusing on collections that will pay off in the here and now (collections tied to white, wealthy donors, for example), which create gaps in the record that erase and silence the marginalized. Muñoz engages with the ephemeral in a different way than Lawrence, with his carefully curated playlists. A performance studies scholar who first introduced the notion of ephemera as evidence in the late 90s, Muñoz focuses instead on the fleeting, gestural quality of movement in which the “theoretical work is anchored to … a living body” (65). As with Lawrence’s work, there are ghosts here. Muñoz died in 2013, and many of the artists whose work he engages in the
text are among those lost to AIDS. As my own work on the early years of the AIDS epidemic evolves, Muñoz’s legacy provides an example for how to think with the ephemeral and to find in the queer past a way toward a queer future.