March 15, 2016

Dear Professor Bellos:

It is with great pleasure that I write to report that Natalie Berkman’s project, “Digital Oulipo” passed its design review from the Center for Digital Humanities and was formally approved on January 19, 2016. As one of only two graduate students whose research projects were chosen as inaugural projects last year, Natalie’s proposal passed through the same peer-review as all faculty projects that were competitively selected by our inter-disciplinary executive committee. Natalie’s design review was held on December 10th, 2015 and her reviewers were myself, Dr. Jean Bauer (Associate Director of CDH), Dr. Natasha Ermolaev (Project Manager at CDH), Dr. Claude Willan, (Perkins Post-Doctoral Fellow in the CDH), and Dr. Joseph Yannielli (Perkins Post-Doctoral Fellow for the Princeton Slavery Project and CDH). After adding a dissertation completion timeline, which we require, her design document was formally submitted and approved on January 19th, 2016 to the Center for Digital Humanities. Please find the complete document attached.

The purpose of the design review is to establish the parameters of each researcher’s project within the scope of a one-year term with the Center for Digital Humanities. For graduate students, projects must scaffold or provide crucial research for one or more aspects of the dissertation, as well as fit into a viable dissertation completion timeline. As Natalie writes in the document (attached), “My dissertation explores the addition of mathematics as a tool for literary production, which has fascinating effects on the reception of the texts themselves, as evidenced by the heightened role of the reader, who is a more active participant in the creation of the text (s)he reads, cultivating mathematical thought.” Each of her five chapters is accompanied by an annex that complements the critical analysis in her chapters; a truly original contribution, these electronic versions of Oulipian texts are entirely innovative. As she says “[t]hrough the act of designing these electronic editions myself, I am gaining a better understanding of these texts and how they operate, as well as a practical introduction to digital humanities and computer programming.” Though her design review meeting errored a bit on the side of explaining her fascination with the broader themes of Oulipo, once we could finally steer her to discussing how the annexes complemented her dissertation chapters we were stunned by the sheer amount of additional labor she has taken on this year in order to enrich the experience of reading her dissertation. Natalie’s is one of the most impressive and innovative graduate student projects in the center. Though she is modest about her achievements with the annexes and at times frustrated by the technologies required to
build them to her liking, her model of integrating the annexes with the chapters is one that future graduate students would do well to emulate.

Our committee was entirely convinced not only of the viability of Natalie’s project within the proposed timeline (though we were concerned by its ambition) and we were impressed by its potential scholarly impact beyond the dissertation. We held a long discussion about ways to make parts of the project available beyond the dissertation phase.

We have been consistently impressed by Natalie’s work on Digital Oulipo. Because the Center for Digital Humanities is new, we are committed to providing each of our researchers with a great deal of guidance about how to manage digital humanities projects alongside more traditional writing, as well as how to craft these design documents in a way that foregrounds how that technology is necessary to expand or explore a central research question. In light of this we understand that there was some confusion initially about what was required of Natalie as an official center project, and we have corrected the channels of communication so that future graduate student project managers will have better guidance through the process. If you have any questions about this process or about Natalie’s project, please don’t hesitate to contact us. We strongly endorse Natalie’s intellectual work in the Center this year, and are delighted to support “Digital Oulipo” as one of our inaugural projects of the 2015-2016 academic year.

Sincerely,

Meredith Martin
Director, Center for Digital Humanities
Associate Professor, Department of English