2021 Virtual Humanities Research Symposium
Friday, April 16, 10:00am–12:00pm

Presentation Abstracts

Janine Barchas, Professor, Department of English
*The Lost Books of Jane Austen*
Cheap books make authors canonical. In the nineteenth century, inexpensive reprints of Jane Austen's novels targeted to Britain's working classes were newly sold at railway stations, traded for soap wrappers, and awarded as school prizes. At just pennies a copy, these reprints were some of the earliest mass-market paperbacks, with Austen's beloved stories squeezed into tight columns on thin, cheap paper. Few of these early, hardscrabble, bargain books survive, yet they substantially expanded Austen's readership. This project abandons the elite study of fine editions safeguarded by research libraries and instead hunts the scrappy survivors bought and read by ordinary working people. Cheap books live hard lives and survivors are rarely pristine, so be prepared for some shockingly scruffy stuff!

J.K. Barret, Associate Professor, Department of English
*Pandora’s Clock*
If you look at sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, it’s not hard to find evidence that the measurement of time was not very precise. Church bells across cities and towns did not ring in sync, people complained that the sand in hourglasses was subject to factors such as air quality. My book project suggests that writers of imaginative literature in the period saw such imprecision as a resource (rather than a problem). I’m investigating how they used this resource—the happenstance and expanded possibility that goes along with such uncertainty about time—when they thought about the ethical implications of literary texts.

Deborah Beck, Associate Professor, Department of Classics
*Telling a good story in ancient Greek epic poetry*
Storytelling is baked into the human psyche. We remember things better, and we enjoy them more, if they are presented as stories. The tales in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer have inspired artists, thinkers, and critics ranging from the ancient lyric poet Sappho to the 2018 Netflix series “Troy: Fall of a City.” Besides the grand doings of gods and heroes, one of the most memorable features of these poems are similes, miniature inset narratives in the form “A is like B” about something apparently unrelated to the main story. An attacking warrior might be compared to a lion, while a corpse could be likened to a fallen tree or a dead animal. This talk looks at two similes in an emotionally charged conversation in the *Iliad* in order to show how similes make these epic poems fresh and engaging, both for ancient critics and for us today.
Vladislav Beronja, Assistant Professor, Department of Slavic and Eurasian Studies

Archival Margins: How Writers and Artists Remember History in the Former Yugoslavia

This project examines how writers and artists from the former Yugoslavia create unofficial and alternative archives by excavating, collecting and curating the discarded and abandoned remnants of the 20th century socialist past. On the one hand, I use the term "archival margins" to describe the peripheral position of the former Yugoslav region with respect to global centers of power. On the other hand, the term aims to capture the type of objects that have historically been excluded from official archives, but which are placed at the center of the post-Yugoslav literary and artistic works. In this presentation, I will focus on the comics of the Serbian underground cartoonist Aleksandar Zograf (a pseudonym of Saša Rakezić), which tell alternative histories through different media objects found at flea markets, such as discarded personal photographs. These comics constitute an unofficial archive of neglected and devalued objects and stories created from below by largely anonymous individuals and "minor" historical actors.

Courtney Handman, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology

Languages at the Limits of the Human: Colonial and Technological Re-inventions of Speech

In many 20th century theories of social life, language - and the seemingly innate capacity for complex symbolic communication more broadly - was often considered the defining trait of humanity and the basis for people to be able to share their lives together. Yet the GPT-3 language-generating algorithm is currently being used to produce over 4 billion words of speech per day on various apps and platforms, putting into doubt the intimate connection between human-ness and speech. As anthropologists and others turn towards "post-humanism," they also question whether language really plays this definitional role. In this research, I use this moment of revaluation of language to examine a set of marginal contexts in which both the human-ness and the forms of speech of particular groups have been made the subject of scholarly and popular discourses. By focusing on two very different modes and moments of linguistic invention – pidgin languages developed in contexts of colonial labor in the early 20th century Pacific and chat bot programs developed in recent years in Silicon Valley that have supposedly created new languages – I argue that so-called “invented languages” mark moments of social crisis and that the labels “language” and “humanity” are awarded to speech and speakers only as that crisis resolves.

Jonathan Kaplan, Associate Professor, Department of Middle Eastern Studies

The Biblical Jubilee and Ancient Utopian Visions of Liberty in Early Judaism and Christianity

The legislation for the jubilee found in the biblical book of Leviticus influenced a wide range of religious, economic, and social ideas and movements throughout history. My current monograph project, The Biblical Jubilee and Ancient Utopian Visions of Liberty, tells the early period of this history of reception and analyzes how ancient Jewish and Christian writers employed the jubilee in shaping their utopian visions. In this presentation, I focus on one example from this literature and discuss how the writer of the second century BCE work, the Book of Jubilees, transformed the jubilee and adapted this cycle to structure time and reflect on the progress of history. I argue that they employed this structure as an epochal mode of chronicling history in imitation of the Seleucid Era, the original epochal mode of chronicling history innovated in the Seleucid Empire, one of the successor kingdoms following Alexander the Great.
Julia Mickenberg, Professor, Department of American Studies and Center for Women’s and Gender Studies

**Significant Evidence and Evidence of Significance in Eve Merriam’s Archive**

My book project, “The Way We Were: Eve Merriam and the Hidden History of American Feminism,” is a biographically-based intellectual history that links the Old Left, feminism, and children’s liberation. With my book project taking its title from the fact that Merriam was a model for Barbra Streisand’s character in *The Way We Were*, this talk focuses not on the *Way We Were* connection but, instead, on a few pieces of significant archival evidence to ask what counts as evidence of significance for a once “famous” woman who is now less well remembered than a character whose achievements Merriam dwarfed in her actual life and career.

Joan H. Neuberger, Professor, Departments of History and Slavic and Eurasian Studies

**Montage at a New Stage: Eisenstein’s Immersion in Nature, Art, and the World**

Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), has always been recognized as a pioneering filmmaker and theorist, but we are only beginning to appreciate his broader contributions to cultural politics and critical theory. Eisenstein’s early work on dialectical montage editing is so well-known that it overshadows his innovative films and wide-ranging writing of the 1930s-40s. The concept of immersion played a significant role in his major later works, *Method, Nonindifferent Nature*, and *Notes for a General History of Cinema* -- all posthumously published -- and his last film *Ivan the Terrible*, but its significance has been overlooked. In these works, Eisenstein drew on an international history of the arts to show our ability to immerse ourselves in nature as the model for his film theory, his art history, and his politics. Already in the 1940s, Eisenstein was writing about topics that are of considerable interest today: the crisis in our natural world, the resurgence of socialism, the de-centering of the human in the face of the hyper-individualism of contemporary globalization. Eisenstein anticipated some of this work and its prominence gives new relevance to his understanding of our relationships with nature and with others, and to the centrality of art in connecting us.

Cory A. Reed, Associate Professor, Department of Spanish & Portuguese

**Empathy and the Indigenous Other in Early Modern Spanish Performance**

In my presentation, I apply new ideas from the field of cognitive studies to help understand how audiences process empathy during a live performance and whether this can lead to sympathy for communities other than their own. As a case study, I use *Numancia*, a historical drama about the Roman conquest of Spain written by Cervantes (author of *Don Quixote*). Modern productions reinterpret this play as a commentary on Spain’s colonization and inhumane treatment of indigenous Americans. Could Cervantes’s audience, watching this play during the time of Spain’s conquest of America, have understood it this way? A cognitive analysis reveals performance strategies that could generate empathy for indigenous Americans even though the play is set in another time and place. I hope to show that audience identification with the suffering of the indigenous other is not just a modern interpretation, but is woven into the performative fabric of this play.
Sônia Roncador, Associate Professor, Department of Spanish & Portuguese

*The Color of Servitude: White Criadas and the Servant Crisis in Brazil*

This presentation interrogates the problematic relation of whiteness and servitude in mid to late nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, when a fast-growing number of Portuguese female migrants, mostly from the Azorean islands, sought employment in households where domestic service had been hitherto associated with black slavery. As I argue, the accounts of elite domestic lives in popular print cultures at the time reveal a nascent narrative of “servant crisis”—e.g., the conviction that reliable servants were disappearing in Brazil—in reaction to the alternative work arrangements and new types of servants, which began defining domestic service over the decades leading toward the abolition of chattel slavery (1888). In fact, the vicissitudes of labor during these pre-emancipation decades contextualize the earliest version of the “servant crisis” trope that has continued defining the national elites’ domesticity up to this day.