**Making Exceptions without Exceptionalism: Ethics and Standards**

**By Jill Ehnenn, Appalachian State University. MLA 2020, Seattle.**

In 2011, I participated in an NEH summer seminar called *Evaluating Digital Humanities Scholarship*. At the time, I didn’t actually do digital humanities work myself, and although I’m currently involved in an international, multi-collaborative project transcribing and making public the thirty years of diaries authored by the two late-Victorian women who, together, wrote poetry and drama under the pseudonym of Michael Field, I’m not involved in the coding aspect of the project. I don’t even know how to code. Learning to do so wasn’t the point of the NEH seminar.

You see, at the time I was Faculty Senate Chair at my university and my role in participating in the seminar was as a university leader. My role was to learn enough about DH projects to be able to help create guidelines for peer reviewing them *and*, importantly, strategies, for lobbying that such projects should “count” for promotion and tenure. The *strategies* aspect of the discussion turned out to be extremely important. As I listened to fellow participants from varied institutions across the US and UK (most of whom *did* design DH projects themselves) it became clear to me that an enormous hurdle at their institutions was convincing their colleagues, deans and provosts that DH work was in any way equivalent to publishing a book or monograph.

As I talked, and learned, and strategized with my fellow participants, many of whom hailed from public and private R1s and elite liberal arts colleges, it dawned on me that I was at an institution that, for once, possessed an advantage over my more privileged peers. I work at a public, master’s comprehensive university of just under 20,000 students that began as a regional teacher’s college and is still responsible for producing most of the teachers in the state of North Carolina. The faculty are referred to as “teacher-scholars” rather than “scholar-teachers” (although many, perhaps including myself, identify more with the latter term). My College of Arts and Sciences does not require a book for tenure (although some, like myself, choose to produce one). My department--which has 44 tenure-line faculty who do very diverse work including producing movies and CDs--has an expansive P&T document, and although it is quite far from perfect, it honors a wide variety of peer-reviewed and juried projects in order to accommodate the diverse interests of the faculty. I could not imagine anyone at my institution raising even an eyebrow of suspicion at the inherent value of a digital humanities project (although many might lack confidence about how to evaluate a specific DH project).

The inherent value of particular genres of research, with some presumed to possess superior inherent value and thus more validity and clout than other genres, to the point of excluding other genres, seemed and seems to be the crux of the matter. It’s the ethics surrounding such presumptions I want to think about with you, here. An institution might say X numbers of Y research products are required for tenure, or promotion, or hire, especially a senior hire. There might be logical, historical, and/or discipline-based reasons why a department or college have required, as a general rule, X numbers of Y research products. DH projects, or translations, or edited volumes, or public humanities projects, or collaboratively-written work, or some form of research or creative product not yet conceived of are generally considered lesser products—and exceptions to a higher norm. Often they are exceptions a department or college absolutely is not willing to make on principle. This is a problem.

Here I want to advocate, in the spirit of ethics, diversity, and the sustainability of our profession that we, as a discipline, become genuinely more open to the practice of thinking more capaciously about what constitutes “real,” valid, “valuable” research. Perhaps we could conceive of this in a Darwinan spirit of evolution—like biodiversity, research diversity can be a strength. It seems that institutions like mine, with less rigid attitudes regarding what “counts as real scholarship” (and what does not) are uniquely positioned to be at the forefront of such evolving conversations.

Before I make some suggestions about what such conversations might look like at institutions like mine and others, let me immediately point out one potential pitfall of, perhaps, all institutions, but especially institutions like mine: making exceptions in an unhelpful spirit of exceptionalism. “We’re different.” “We just don’t do things like this.” “That would never fly here.” Followed by all kinds of arcane and entrenched excuses. I’m sure you can hear some of your colleagues or administrators making such statements. My institution, in its geographical isolation, extremely low faculty turnover, and without the strident research demands that make mandatory for survival regular attendance and networking at national conferences, has some (ahem) admittedly odd policies and procedures regarding promotion and tenure (and other things as well). For instance, not all departments require external letters (mine does), and we don’t have a college or university wide promotion and tenure committee, although some departments want one, some do not, and some, like mine, are divided on the issue. Given the stereotypes (in this case true) of a long-standing regional ethos that is deeply suspicious of outsiders, I have longer referred to my institution’s admittedly weird practices as “Appalachian exceptionalism.” Over the years, they have caused me much consternation. Along with some of my colleagues, we’re working to change the fruits of long standing exceptionalist impulses. So I want to be clear that I’m not advocating such modes of thinking here. I am advocating openness to exception, not exceptionalism.

But to return to my claim: institutions more or less like mine, that, for whatever reasons and histories are more flexible about what counts as a tenurable or promotable or hirable research product may be uniquely positioned to create new models for research diversity and ethical review. We may already have them in place—or may be closer to having them in place than our more elite peers. Just yesterday morning I attended a training to become an external reviewer for the ADE. One point that emerged is that although there may be good reasons to select at least one external reviewer from one’s own peer or aspirational peer group, there is also wisdom in selecting an external reviewer from an institution that is dissimilar from one’s own. R1 departments may very well be able to learn from insights offered by reviewers and models from liberal arts colleges or masters comprehensive universities and vice versa. Institutions who have very traditional and unyielding requirements about which research products are valid and count for tenure, promotion, senior hires, etc. may open new and more sustainable doors to scholarship if they are willing to be open to learning, in this particular instance, from policies developed by institutions unlike their own. We should shape the future of the field together.

The key here is informed conversation, which brings me back to the point of this panel. Creating ADE or MLA guidelines about X numbers of Y products, or mandates to add Z but not Q to the list of acceptable kinds of research products, are not my aim. I don’t think we should be asking down-in-the-weeds questions like: should DH or editing or translation or public humanities or co-authored work, or some future form of work to be determined, count? Instead no matter how rarified the air we breathe, and whether we are reviewers who recommend, referee, hire, tenure and/or promote, we instead should be asking a set of broader questions that I really do think we should be able to agree on. Questions like:

* Do experts who are at arms’ length from the scholar under review state that the work makes a contribution to the field? How original is that contribution?
* Do experts who are at arms’ length from the scholar determine that the scholarship is in conversation with other experts and that it appropriately cites that existing conversation?
* Do experts who also produce scholarship in that genre agree that the scholar under review adheres to established or emerging professional standards of form for that genre of scholarship?
* Is the scholarship under consideration taught? Is it cited? Has the scholar under review shaped, or do they have the potential to shape the field?

Of course, what these questions refer to are sound principles of peer review. I think of these as transferable skills. They can and I believe, should, be applied to research products beyond the article or monograph. When a format for scholarship such as Digital Humanities is new, it may be challenging to find reviewers who can answer all of these questions; more reviewers may have to be sought—some to focus on some questions rather than others. But let’s get real, in the case of DH work, 8 years have passed since that NEH seminar, and there *are* peer reviewing bodies for such work. The MLA has published guidelines for evaluating work in digital humanities and digital media; the journal *Reviews in Digital Humanities* can now serve as a broad point of departure for such projects; and in my own field, nineteenth-century studies, there are specialized groups—and here I am specifically thinking of NINES—that provide peer review services for the field. I am sure that other subdisciplines have entities similar to NINES for their digital practitioners. If they don’t, the folks who do such work can create them. I am not suggesting by any means that we abandon the monograph, I am merely suggesting that more departments create policies and foster intellectual cultures that recognize and fully legitimate that really good scholarship can occur in diverse forms.

The point that I am making is that there *are already* experts in the field who are producing scholarship in newly emerging modes: whether DH, public humanities, you name it. And if institutions make it a priority to look hard enough, they can find experts to evaluate such scholarship—scholarship that is not a monograph. As each new genre of scholarship evolves, reviewers should be guided by the basic questions I’ve stated above. I didn’t invent these guidelines, they are pretty much tried and true—but in some contexts there’s been an unfortunate tendency to forget that these basic questions can be applied to marvelously diverse research products. We should help each other do better to remember that applying these questions mindfully, and to diverse modes of scholarship, provides opportunities for opening, rather than closing, doors. Of course each of these questions have their complications as well—especially regarding citational politics, and I hope my roundtable colleagues will address some of these complications and/or that we can think them through together during the Q&A. Thank you.