Bios and Abstracts for MLA 2019 Special Session 728: Readership Studies in the Age of Digital Media

1:45 PM–3:00 PM Sunday, Jan 6, 2019

Hyatt Regency – Atlanta

The members of Session 728 are honored to be included among the selected sessions of the Convention’s Presidential Theme, Textual Transactions.

Session Description:

This panel considers the question of how traditional readership studies and reception theory have evolved methodologically, materially, and theoretically in the context of digital reading and online networks. While the panelists find common theoretical ground between studies of pre- and post-internet networks of readers, they also chart substantive differences. Methodologically, these differences include the ability to computationally map networks of knowledge; materially, online networks have both the new anchor of hyper-targeted, algorithmic user manipulation and the freedom of otherwise open and disembodied networks; and theoretically, what traditionally might have been considered marginalia or ephemera has gained new gravity because of instantaneous, interactive, and crowd-ranked comments. In today’s reading networks, the discussion section is often the publicly visible and dynamic core of the text.

Literary scholars must not only reconfigure readership studies within their own discipline, but also enter into dialogue with the overlapping methodologies, terminologies, and research questions of other disciplines, including sociology, media studies, neuroscience, computer science, culturenomics, and political science. Large-scale computational readership network studies include Tadanobu Furukawa et al's 2007 informatical analysis of 50,000 bloggers over two years ("Social Networks and Reading Behavior in the Blogosphere"), which maps large trends and patterns in behavior, such as login frequency, but doesn't delve into questions of psychology or social behavior in the way that Janice Radway's psychological profiles of readers, or more recent but similar reading group studies, such as Kathleen Fitzpatrick's 2012 "Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network" do. By comparison, more nuanced computer science models of social media usage have been able to create broad emotional profiles of user behavior; for example, Lars Backstrom and Jon Kleinberg's 2013 study "Romantic Partnerships and the Dispersion of Social Ties: Network Analysis of Relationship Status on Facebook" was able to determine that the likelihood that a romantic partnership would last was substantially correlated with the quality of the partners' other social ties. A single literary study might now borrow its method from computer science, its terminology from media studies, its line of inquiry from sociology, and its theoretical lens from reception studies. This panel therefore also addresses the difficulty that literary scholars who study online reading networks must face when defining themselves within and against different disciplines.

At a time in which many internet scholars are interrogating the limits and the algorithmic confirmation biases inherent in online networks, this panel serves as a point of reconnaissance
and reconceptualization of reading network and readership studies. As literary scholars, we must navigate and discern the best methodological approach from among the complex fields of classic readership and reception studies, media usage studies that utilize human research, computational studies, and interdisciplinary theories of online networks. Each of these presentations suggests a model whereby one can theorize contemporary networked reading.

Melanie Walsh will begin the session by considering the commonalities between traditional networked reading theory and more recent computational models of reading networks. Early readership and reception theorists, including Stanley Fish, Robert Darnton, and Janice Radway, are surveyed methodologically so as to reveal how their early emphasis on data-driven work and their conceptualization of reading networks are echoed in today’s large-scale computational studies, such as DePaul University’s Reading Chicago Reading project and the presenter’s own model of the reception of James Baldwin’s works on Twitter.

The following presentation, by librarian Kathleen Kasten, takes a similar course in comparing traditional and current scholarly reading and research techniques alongside contemporaneous revolutions in the format, interactivity, and accessibility of scholarly resources. Specifically, Kasten uses early modern research models and affordances, such as commonplaces and glosses, to illuminate similarities and irruptions within contemporary practices. Her theoretical path moves through the works of historians Ann Blair, Adrian Johns, and Roger Chartier and into the interdisciplinary digital humanism of Andrew Piper.

Travis Matteson interrogates Sam Anderson’s suggestion in The New York Times Magazine that readers’ digital commentary may herald a “Gutenberg-style revolution,” a kind of utopian sociology of online reading communities. Matteson’s inquiry, like those of Walsh and Kasten, again considers the theoretical and material differences in the textual commentary of pre-and-post-internet readers. Are we, for example, to consider the sharing of texts on social media as a new golden age of marginalia? Drawing on the ideas of Friedrich Kittler and Jerome McGann, Matteson traces the material and social continuities and discontinuities inherent in different examples of online commentary. In problematizing the idea of online commentary as being without context and incorporeal, Matteson finds examples of online texts and commentaries that attempt to rematerialize and re-embody themselves, such as Benjamin Shaykin’s Google Hands project, which reflects on the human element behind the otherwise disembodied scans of Google Books.

The final presentation by Leisha Jones uses the theoretical underpinnings of classic scholarship on reception theory and identity formation, including Rita Felski’s post-critical reading, Karen Barad’s diffractive reading, Heather Love’s descriptive reading, and Eve Sedgwick’s reparative reading, in order to characterize the social, self-actualizing, and prosumer reading habits of girls online from a developmental perspective. Jones defines girl literature as being characterized by girl-centered narratives and their reception. Works analyzed include multimedia narratives created by girls on Goodreads, YouTube, Instagram, and fan fiction sites.

Each presentation will be allotted fifteen minutes, with the remaining time for questions and discussion.
Panel Organizer: Sarah Ruth Jacobs, CUNY Graduate Center

Bio: Sarah Ruth Jacobs is an adjunct lecturer in the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Department at the Center for Worker Education at City College, where she teaches a course entitled Digital Media and Society, which considers the effects of internet use and policy on society. She is ABD at the CUNY Graduate Center, where she is completing her dissertation, American Literature in the Age of New Media: Crises in Readership and Form, which examines shifts in the racial and economic demographics of American literary readers over the 20th century, and how those shifts were reflected by technological and productive changes in the publishing industry. She is a current and founding editor of The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy and an alumna of the first MLA Connected Academics cohort. Her writing has appeared in The Chronicle of Higher Education, The New York Times, and Inside Higher Education (under a pseudonym). She has received fellowships from Poets House and Poets & Writers.

1: Between Readers: A Short Methodological History of Networked Reading

Melanie Walsh, Washington U in St. Louis

Abstract: This paper theorizes “networked reading” as a range of practices in which a person engages with a literary text in order to meaningfully connect it to another person and argues for networked reading as a distinct mode of 21st-century reception, uniquely facilitated by digital networks such as social media sites and wikis. Digitally networked reading offers new possibilities for the study of readership and reception, including computationally tractable evidence that digital tools can archive and analyze at scales both large and small. Networked reading practices are, however, not limited to the digital world nor to the 21st century—nor, for that matter, are the methodologies that have been used to study networked reading practices.

In recent years, scholars such as Ted Underwood have called contemporary practitioners of “distant reading” to recognize the field’s pre-digital, even non-digital origins in the quantitative-minded, ethnographic work of Janice Radway, among others. In this paper, I focus on the subjects of Radway’s work—readers and reading communities—and attempt to draw out an even narrower genealogy: the distant reading of reading itself. In Radway’s work as well as other pre-digital readership and reception studies, I locate nascent investments in data-driven methodologies and network concepts, and I connect them to recent large-scale, computational reception projects, such as DePaul’s Reading Chicago Reading and my own Tweets of a Native Son. By insisting upon a longer lineage of networked reading methodologies, I hope to point to ways that digital tools might extend and fulfill the methodologies of the past as well as preserve and account for these earlier approaches.

2: Ephemeral Reality: Situating the Digital in Readership Studies

Kathleen Kasten, Stony Brook U Libraries

Abstract: The relationship between Research libraries and reading as a mode of humanistic enquiry has survived revolutions in the format, content, and accessibility of library resources. Changes in a reader’s physical relationship to the text, realized through access, practice, and format, have had important implications for both humanistic research and academic librarianship. Modern research libraries exist in a polyvalent environment of diverse information, formats, and reading habits. Electronic resources are disruptions which simultaneously exist, in many ways, as extensions of older reading paradigms in humanities disciplines. Humanities enquiry is often marked by independent reading, active engagement with the text through underlining or note-taking, and a perspective that views the scholarly monograph as a principal tool in the conveyance of both knowledge and prestige. The impetus to study reading and research practices sheds crucial light on the ways in which scholars and students engage with the resources provided by the library, with implications for future practice.

Taking as a case study the seemingly disparate practices of online research and early modern approaches to digesting information—commonplaces, glosses, etc.—and drawing on the work of Ann Blair, Adrian Johns, Roger Chartier, Andrew Piper, and others, this paper seeks to contextualize digital reading and research behavior by analyzing it as an element of a larger, older scholarly tradition.

Bio: Kathleen Kasten is Head of Humanities and Social Sciences at Stony Brook University Libraries. She holds a PhD in French Studies from the University of Pennsylvania and an MLS from Queens College (CUNY). Her research interests include reading practices, the history of the book, and material culture studies. She has published articles on the cultural significance of paper in early modern France, on academic library programming as a scholarly forum, and on reading, research, and instructional practices in academic libraries in Dalhousie French Studies, Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Equality and Diversity, Library Resources and Technical Services, and The New Review of Academic Librarianship.

3: Embodying Marginalia

Travis Matteson, Alfred State C

Abstract: What does the margin mean in a time when the printed page is no longer the dominant medium of cultural exchange? Today, handwritten marginalia is twice removed from our medialogical contexts: digital media extends print media, print media extends handwriting. Yet, many have suggested that the ubiquity of “sharing” on digital networks actually constitutes a golden age of marginalia. Writing in The New York Times Magazine, Sam Anderson goes so far as to suggest that digital marginalia may herald a “Gutenberg-style revolution,” a kind of utopian sociology of online reading communities.

This essay suggests, however, that a contemporary theory of marginalia must account for the medialogical implications of the difference between handwriting and typing. In fact, I argue that
digital marginalia exhibits historical continuity with print marginalia only in its social, rather than material, contexts. Through the lens of Friedrich Kittler’s account of the shift from handwriting to typing, digital marginalia appears as a historical rupture: an anonymized, disembodied phenomenon. Borrowing Jerome McGann’s terms, a margin is a conceptual border between a text and its context, between the linguistic code and the bibliographic code. A true contemporary marginalia must appear as a transgression of this border. Building on the “Google Hands” project of Benjamin Shaykin, which reprints scanned human hands from Google Books, this essay attempts to develop a theory of marginalia in twenty-first-century media by building on contemporary art and poetry that attempts to remediate, in the digital environment, the embodied materiality of handwritten marginalia.

**Bio:** Travis Matteson is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Humanities at Alfred State College. He received his Ph.D. in English from SUNY University at Buffalo in 2017, where he studied contemporary poetics and media theory.

**4: Reading Girls Reading Online**

Leisha J. Jones, *Penn State U, University Park*

**Abstract:** Most teachers of literature over the past decade or so have noticed that students’ capacities for reading traditionally formatted books have dwindled. The reading of books seems too slow a practice, marking reading as an activity with a lot of labor for a nebulous payoff, and not worth the time drag. One can scorn the digital landscape that comprises the millennial terrain, but it is of vital importance for the Humanities to take the move from book to screen seriously. Reading online involves the consumption of texts but also the production of meaning as real time in kind response, which may include comments, reviews, fan homages and correctives. The digital reading practices of girls, for example, can tell us much not only about their role as social media conduits but it can also shed light upon the status of literature itself in this born-digital milieu. Taking the notion that girls have value beyond their role as cultural consumers as a given, I argue that girls claim their very own literature, literature with a lowercase I but literature nonetheless, that crosses genre and platform and boundaries of authorship. The possibility for girl literature arises from a combination of market-driven imperatives and the flexibility of Web 2.0 authorship. Girl literature, characterized by girl-centered narratives and protagonists in more traditional formats, includes works authored by girls on Goodreads, YouTube, Instagram, and fan fiction sites. As the girl half of the 12-26-aged YA demographic does the majority of the reading both on and off the screen, this presentation seeks to 1) map out the Web 2.0 arenas where girls perform their hybrid or prosumer reading, and 2) offer an analysis of the girls’ digital reading practices in light of contemporary reading theory, such as Sharon Marcus’s surface reading, Rita Felski’s post-critical reading, Heather Love’s descriptive reading, and Eve Sedgwick’s reparative reading.

**Bio:** Leisha Jones is Assistant Professor of English at Penn State University, where she teaches courses on women writers, digital literature and culture, feminist theory, and girl literature. Her published works include articles in *Journal of Narrative Theory, Deleuze Studies, Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts,* and *Visual Culture and Gender*. Her monograph *Reading Girls Reading: The Emergence of 21st Century Girl Literature* is currently under review. Jones is working on two new book projects, *Hysterical Biopolitics: Invisibility, Illness, and the*
Feminine, exploring intersections of gender, disability, medical narrative, and online participatory communities, and Twit Lit, or How To Do Things with Characters, which takes on Twitter literature and digital autobiography.