CAT Summer Pedagogy Grant | Summer 2014

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I used CAT’s generous funding to partially cover the expenses associated with attending the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) at the University of Victoria, for a week in June, 2014. (The remaining expenses were paid out-of-pocket). DHSI combines a week of intensive coursework with seminars, invited lectures, poster presentations, and informal roundtables discussing a wide range of digital humanities topics, from the theoretical to the practical, from research to teaching. It is one of the most respected gatherings in the digital humanities. My goal was to gain a better understanding of the intellectual labor and interpretive work that goes into creating, working with, and displaying digitized texts and archival material, without necessarily trying to become a programmer myself. I wanted to be able to lead my students in inquiries of both ethical and epistemological concerns surrounding digitized materials.

In addition to the full-day course times, I participated in several roundtables focusing on pedagogy, undergraduate research in the digital humanities, multilingual DH (like all the humanidades digitales initiatives), and post-colonial critiques of DH. I also attended the various invited lectures.

I initially enrolled in a course on TEI (Text Encoding Initiative), which teaches both the technical and interpretive aspects of text encoding, a technique used to digitize texts in such a way that they are searchable for scholars and students. I wanted to understand better the editorial work and the interpretive filters intrinsic to digitized, marked-up texts. This behind-the-scenes understand will better enable me to teach my students how to critically evaluate and how to work with texts prepared digitally for study. Many students assume things accessed online are somehow both immediate and transparent—literal, nothing hidden, no history—when in reality they have undergone numerous steps in order to “appear” there on the screen in a given way. The first couple of days of courses provided me with that information and sets of resources.

I was then able to transfer to a different course, this one on “Cultural Codes and Protocols for Indigenous Digital Heritage Management.” We examined not only the technical and workflow aspects of creating, maintaining and using digital indigenous heritage collections, including the use of existing, open-source platforms, but also the ethical and epistemological concerns surrounding any such project. For example, the idea of public domain and of individual ownership of knowledge are culturally specific and, if assumed at the outset, may violate the understandings of
traditional knowledge of the community whose heritage collections are being curated.

This study is relevant both to my research and, crucially, to two courses that I regularly teach: Span 345 (taught this past fall) and Span 215 (taught every spring).

This past fall, in Spanish 345, “Agency, Citizenship and Identity in Latin America,” I designed a series of short assignments and discussions on museum collections, digital archives, digital presentations of indigenous cultural artefacts, and indigenous cultural journalism about those institutions and exhibits. The main goal for this section of the class was for students to approach collections, exhibits, and articles about them with a critical eye, formulating important questions about the underlying assumptions and the implications of the choices made. These concrete, visible examples served as an effective entry point for students to discuss questions of different cultural assumptions about knowledge, different cultural codes of ‘ownership’, the coloniality of power and of knowledge in the Americas, and the ways in which various science and social science disciplines were implicated in the justification of racism and genocide against the First Peoples in Argentina and Chile.