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New Storytellers, New Stories: The Research Development Institute in Digital Ethnic Studies

The promise

Our summer research development institute in Digital Ethnic Studies, “New Storytellers, New Stories,” will empower professors, graduate students, and undergraduate students of color (and those who've demonstrated a serious prior commitment to diversity) with digital-technology approaches, concepts, methods, and skills so they can design and build their own digital projects focused on race, ethnicity, social justice, and diverse cultural heritages. Our inaugural seminar will run in the summer of 2019.

The problem

While Digital Humanities—including the production of digital archives, animation, dynamic maps, visualizations, and more—has revolutionized the way scholars reimagine our cultural history and present, the field remains predominantly non-Hispanic white. This means that 1) faculty and students of color are missing out on valuable skills and ways of thinking and communicating, and 2) the world is missing out on the ways that scholars of color could reshape our common cultural understanding of history, literature, and the arts. Important stories are being left untold and rich heritages ignored.

Our solution

To encourage more scholars of color into Digital Humanities, we will offer “New Storytellers, New Stories,” a three-week summer seminar in digital-technology concepts, methods, and skills, hosted on the University of Nebraska campus in Lincoln and taught by award-winning faculty members from the University of Nebraska’s Institute for Ethnic Studies and our Center for Digital Research in the Humanities.

Professors from minority-serving institutions will be invited to attend the seminar, each with three of their most promising undergraduates. Professors and students will gain knowledge and expertise in Digital Humanities which they can then take back and share on their home campuses. Moreover, graduate students of color from across the country (and those who've demonstrated a serious prior commitment to diversity) will be invited to attend so that they can develop the expertise and contacts to pursue Digital Humanities throughout their careers.

Working, living, learning, and recreating intensively together for three weeks in our immersion program will enable scholars of color (and seriously committed others) at these

three levels to build lasting professional and intellectual connections, both with each other and with faculty and graduate students in Ethnic Studies and Digital Humanities at the University of Nebraska.

Institute structure

In the mornings, award-winning UNL faculty members will guide group discussions of theoretical and methodological issues. After lunch, professional staff members from the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities will offer individual or small-group hands-on instruction in the methods, technologies, and approaches of participants' choice. Evenings will be devoted to recreation, cultural activities, and presentations by guest scholars of their digital projects.

“Week 1: Being Human in the Digital Age” engages issues of privacy, rights, distraction, surveillance, new literacies, and identity.

“Week 2: Reckoning with Records” explores the marvels, gaps, and distortions of archives, which are never free of power relations. Who records the past? To what purpose? How can archives be more inclusively designed? Participants will imagine and design archives of their own.

“Week 3: New Stories” considers how we turn data into narratives, combining web delivery, images, tools, graphics, and more. Drawing on their archives, participants will design podcasts, blogs, animation, or other modes to tell the story of a community, a family, a journey, an ordeal, or a triumph.

Our planning process

We plan to host the first seminar in the summer of 2019. In preparation, during the 2017-18 academic year, co-PIs Ken Price, Jeannette Jones, Will Thomas, and Joy Castro, together with other faculty members (including Margaret Huettl), are traveling to multiple minority-serving institutions (HBCUs, HSIs, and NSIs) to build connections with humanities faculty and students there and listen to their needs, hopes, and preferences, so that we can collaboratively shape our seminar to be most useful to the students and faculty of color it's designed to serve.

These listening trips are funded by a grant from the University of Nebraska's Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, who supports our exploration of the feasibility of this project.