

CoreDH

Episode 2—Lorena Gauthereau and Jennifer Isasi, ACH

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Guest: Lorena Gauthereau and Jennifer Isasi, representatives of ACH.

Hosts: Hannah L. Jacobs (ADHO's Communications Officer), Erdal Ayan and Anna Sofia Lippolis (ADHO's Communications Fellows)

Hannah: Welcome to CoreDH. A podcast that explores the stories and people behind the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations.

Erdal: Hello everybody, this is Erdal Ayan.

Anna Sofia: Hi, this is Anna Sofia Lippolis from the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, ADHO in short, and welcome to the first episode in our podcast series about the stories of ADHO's core—its constituent organizations.

Erdal: Today, we are hosting two experts from The [Association for Computers and the Humanities \(ACH\)](#): Dr. Jennifer Isasi and Dr. Lorena Gauthereau.

Erdal: Dr. [Jennifer Isasi](#) is a Spanish literary scholar, the Director of the Digital Liberal Arts Research Initiative at the Pennsylvania State University, and an editor on the Programming Historian en español journal. Prior to her position at Pennsylvania State University, she was a Postdoctoral Fellow in Data Curation in Latin American and Latino. She holds a Ph.D. in Hispanic Studies with a specialization in Digital Humanities from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the USA.

Anna Sofia: Dr. [Lorena Gauthereau](#) is the Digital Programs Manager for the US Latino Digital Humanities program at the University of Houston's *Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage*. She teaches interdisciplinary courses through UH's Center for Mexican American Studies and is currently a fellow for the Rare Book School and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship for Diversity, Inclusion & Cultural Heritage. Previously, she served as a CLIR-Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow. Dr. Gauthereau received her PhD in English literature and her MA in Hispanic Studies, both from Rice University. Her research interests include Chicana studies, US Latinx studies, digital humanities, affect theory, and decolonial theory.

Erdal: First of all, Jennifer and Lorena, thank you for accepting our invitation and welcome to our second episode of our podcast project. As we know, you have been members of ACH, for some time. How, and when did you become involved in the association? I mean, actually, what motivated you to get into such a network?

Lorena: Hi, everyone. It's great to be here. I can start and Jennifer, you can just jump in. Both of us started as executive members past year, because we were nominated for the Executive Committee. So I think we had both participated just in conferences beforehand.

Jennifer: That's right. Lorena, I would say the same thing. Thanks for inviting us, first. And I started participating in ACH through conferences and their different opportunities. And then I was nominated to be part of the members of the board.

Erdal: Thank you. You can perhaps give some more details about the activities your organization organizes or supports.

Jennifer: I can jump on that one. So the ACH is a professional society for DH as you know, based in the U.S., though, it has members all over the globe. It supports the dissemination of research. It provides mentoring and training opportunities for its members. For example, we have workshops on digital methodologies at least once a semester now and also different groups to chat about opportunities. It also helps organize the ACH conference in the U.S. or other conferences in conjunction with other associations, such as the one happening in May [DH Unbound](#) together with the Canadian society for Digital Humanities. And then it also supports publications such as the [Digital Humanities Quarterly](#).

Lorena: The ACH has also provided awards in the past and will continue to do that: both Jennifer and I are on the awards committee. And we're working with Zoe LeBlanc to continue to facilitate these awards for digital humanists.

Anna Sofia: Thank you. Let's take a step back and talk a little bit about your personal path. How did you get involved with Digital Humanities and do you think about yourself as a digital humanist?

Lorena: I can start with that one. I didn't start off thinking that I would become a digital humanist. I actually became introduced to the digital Humanities after I completed my master's at Rice University when I was invited to participate in an IMLS Grant. At Rice University there is the [Americas Archive Partnership](#) which was a collaboration between Rice and MIT to create an online digital archive that digitized and transcribed and translated documents from mainly the 19th century but extending back to the 15th century related to the Americas. So this is when I first became aware of Digital Humanities.

And it started to interest me, especially because it allowed things to become more accessible to people. Researchers are able to do work, not just in the library, but also be

able to access archives that they might not have the funds to go visit. And I really like the idea of being able to access and interact with data in a variety of ways besides just reading. So after I completed my work there at Rice, I actually decided to get my PhD in English literature with a focus on Mexican American literature. And the entire time I did a lot of archival work based on the archives here at the recovering the U.S. Hispanic literary heritage. That has always excited me just because it is community work. It is the documentation of my own community and the history that has been really left out of the curriculum, especially here in Texas.

And so I wanted an opportunity to make that more available, which is what I'm able to do here at *Recovering* once I started working here after my PhD and it was all about: how do we get this information to people of different levels? Not just Academia but outside of that how do we get it to the community? How do we make this available to K-12, students as well? So that's how I got involved in Digital Humanities and my interests really were focused on the community aspect of this history.

Jennifer: Well my involvement with DH started also after my Master's Degree. I consider myself a digital humanist now but I was not entering grad school thinking about DH when I was finishing my M.A. in Hispanic studies which involved a very general overview of the literary history of the Spanish-speaking countries, I learned about distant reading and because I am very interested in the long history of literature, I like knowing a little bit of everything instead of focusing on only one period of literature. I thought it was a very good idea to explore literature on a big scale, through timelines and maps. And networks on the long history. So I stayed in Nebraska to pursue the certificate in DH. And I started to take classes on literary analysis through computers or computational literary analysis. And I started to work on that right away in my first semester and in 2013, I believe.

After learning a few of the literary analysis methods with computers, I focused on network analyses in particular, because I saw their usefulness of aid to study literary characters in the novels, but also the networks of authors. For example, networks of society where the authors were embedded, etc. And at the same time, I learned about digital archives and how they help bring to life all those documents at the archives having boxes that very few people have access to. So I became very interested in the digitization process, metadata curation and then making these archives, like Lorena said, available to more people through different ways. Not only publishing the digital format online, but also creating contextual guidelines for them, creating pedagogical material to take the archives into the classes, etc.

Anna Sofia: I see, that's very interesting. I think it's very common to start being a digital humanist without knowing it, it's kind of my experience too. And I've heard of many people doing the same as well, so this is funny. You alluded to it a little bit but what kinds of DH theories and methods are you most engaged with? This is also connected to community outreach. I was wondering because Digital Humanities has been here for a long time, but it's actually being more widespread now. What are the theories you are most engaged with?

Lorena: I think to start with, I would say right off the bat, one of my goals is to always use decolonial methods, both in my research and then I also do that with my team here at Recovering at the U.S. Latino Digital Humanities center.

We are really concerned with, how can we push back against the euro-centric/anglo-centric models that have been very dominant in the past, not just in Digital Humanities, but in academia as a whole and so for example, we consider the ways in which metadata can be used it to hide certain stories. And so we want to challenge the typical or traditional ways that metadata is created in order to resist those colonial structures. Now we want to think about for example, how do we describe things in a way that makes sense for our community? What can we do to make these stories more visible? We also use feminist methodologies, specifically, women of color methodologies, we work a lot with Latina and Chicana methods, that really consider the way in which we have to work with community. We have to consider post custodial methods for archives and that's rather than looking at archives as a way of ownership, we want to think about them as a resource for the community, by the community: how can we involve the community in these, in the archiving process and the preservation? And then also in the way in which we share this.

So those are like the main things tool-wise, it really just depends on the data that we're working with. I've done mapping digital archives and digital timelines just because those seem to be the most accessible not just for us but also for teaching students and teaching community how to create and how to engage with them. And also bringing those into the classroom. So creating digital timelines on [Timeline JS](#), for example, has been really useful to me in the classroom so that students can really see how they can contribute to the creation of knowledge and share these stories that they're researching, and that they didn't know about, that people don't know about. They aren't, like I said, before, necessarily part of the K-12 curriculum. And so they are able to create something that they can share with other people and help educate about the Latinx community as well.

Jennifer: For me, when I'm doing or working on digital archives, I also use decolonization theories or methods which I won't get into because Lorena explained it very well already. And I followed, then Latina DH or U.S. Latin DH methodologies that Lorena got involved in on archiving. Now, when I do computational literary analysis, I switch gears towards computational linguistics methods such as applying natural language processing to literature. I also do data analysis with different types of mathematics I guess. And when I get to the analysis of the literature together with these I'm still very much on structuralist theories, mainly because I still need to extract and analyze the data from the novels so I cannot apply many of the other theories yet. But I'm getting there little by little, it's taking me longer than I expected to close the bridge from data extraction to applying theory to that data.

Anna Sofia: I mean, this is very complex. Also being a digital humanist means connecting different fields of study. I'm sure that your research will turn out to be very

interesting and impactful! You mentioned some tools and examples people can use to contribute to the creation of knowledge, for example students but also other people, this is very common in DH. What are your favorite tools for research in DH and do you think they influence workflows, processes and methodologies?

Jennifer: I didn't mention any tool but I could say that I mostly use R, R studio and different packages when I'm doing computational literary analysis and also data analysis more generally when I'm using metadata when I curate different literary questions that I have. I also use Python sometimes, mostly with notebooks that other people have written because I cannot use Python myself, I don't read it and I don't write it. Then I also use Gephi for network analysis mostly, because it is a very powerful tool and it has a big learning curve for the user. The analysis that they can provide it's very useful, and I mostly rely on that for my network analyses. And more recently I learned more about [CollectionBuilder](#), the Github version, and I'm using it recently for digital archives I'm planning on, but I haven't published anything yet. Those are the main tools, but I have used a lot of other ones and through my participation in Programming Historian en español and in English I learned about several other methods of analysis and tools that I usually don't use because they are kinda outside the scope of my discipline e.g. those you use to create maps: I don't use them because my method doesn't need mapping.

Lorena: I would say for me everything starts with a spreadsheet, there is so much data that needs to be compiled so most of the projects that I work on or oversee start with that data sheet so some people got scared of numbers or Google spreadsheet. But I think that's great to kinda jump in, it's a great starting point if you don't know how to code if you start with a spreadsheet, it's great for creating metadata for organizing data and doing data and doing data wrangling and cleaning it and making sure that everything is standard in your data. And then from there you can sort things, you can post off out, to create a project, there are many tools up there that run on a spreadsheet so as I mentioned earlier Timeline JS is a great tool, wonderful to use in a classroom to create these interactive timelines and it runs on a Google sheet so it's very easy to use and play with and experiment. And you can use mapping such as story maps. There are two versions, there's a free story map version and it's really easy to use and click tight and there's also a Storymaps JS which is created by Knight Lab which also created Timeline JS. There are different digital archives tools that I use for work such as Omeka and CollectionBuilder as Jennifer has mentioned earlier and those also work on spreadsheet you use to create metadata and be able to upload so I think for people that are starting one of the big things is don't be afraid you have to learn how to code, there's many opportunities to learn to code, if you want to to expand, but there are entry-level tools for experimenting, playing with the type of data you have, starting from a spreadsheet to figure out what you have and how you want to visualize it or make it accessible, make it visible, or help you determine what kind of project or tool you need.

Erdal: Lorena and Jennifer, you have touched some challenges that you have experienced. I think humans can't survive without challenges, but can you go deeper into

how you managed to overcome these challenges in your own DH work? What have you learned from those experiences?

Lorena: Twitter. Twitter has helped me keep so many challenges from developing. Twitter network but also meeting people through conferences and organizations has really helped me because I think digital humanists in particular are really willing to help each other and so taking the time to ask for help or work collaboratively is really beneficial with getting through those challenges. There's so many online tutorials that you can find on Youtube for example, now Jennifer can talk a little bit more about the programming historian, but I think one of the main things is just googling it. I think most of the people in this field are researchers so you are already trained on how to find sources or how to come up with the questions to figure out how to get over that challenge. It's okay not to know how to do stuff, you have to sometimes "break it", break your project in order to figure out how to fix it and experimenting and not being afraid I think it's really important and taking opportunities to take tutorials, to read tutorials, to learn from other people, I think it's been really beneficial to me and I just think that the field in general is very welcoming to experimentation and learning.

Jennifer: I agree with what Lorena said right now and I will say that one of the biggest challenges for me at the beginning was that I was thinking too big. So I learned with time to think in smaller pieces for each particular project I think about, re-scope the ideas and what I can do myself, what I need help with, what is out of bounds within the timeframe that we have for any project. That was the biggest challenge for myself. Thinking big and then realizing that I can't do all that I wanted to do by myself, that would be another challenge in particular for my computational analysis part of work that I do because we don't have a big community in Spanish working on literary analysis on distant reading or computational analysis, there's few of us but in different institutions and countries which makes it very difficult to collaborate and also each of us is interested in different questions, different timeframes, different sets of novels for examples, so it's very difficult to move forward on different projects within literature because of these challenges. And something that has helped me maybe besides thinking in smaller pieces was joining different communities during this type of work on DH such as the Programming Historian en español, but also they are doing it in English, French and Portuguese, has helped me a lot in figuring out what methods to use, how to approach computational problems and then working with collaborators and people that Lorena mentioned already, creating different communities of work to move forward on projects and collaborating because we are all in different institutions, there is like one of us in each institution almost, and one has to figure out where to find help on Twitter for example, for finding it online. I mean if there's no guide for something I like creating it so others can use the knowledge that I gained for my challenges and they don't have to go through all the rabbit holes finding the information themselves.

Erdal: It seems that we cannot do without projects or future plannings. Last but not least, I was just wondering if you have some future projects that you are planning to conduct in DH work?

Jennifer: I don't have any particular project in mind that I have not started already, I'm going to continue working with Programming Historian en español. Even if that is a journal I consider it a project that I'm part of because we are constantly doing new things, getting to new communities, seeking help from institutions to enhance it and create different guidelines, add new languages for example, improve our website for visibility for different communities etc., so that is part of my future projects, continuing to work on Programming Historian en español. Then I'm going to continue to try to analyze literature in Spanish with computational methods and part of my work is helping to build up projects and so right now I have to help build tools or history projects about Latinx in Pennsylvania and one on the civil rights movement here on the mid-atlantic region of the U.S. or the north-east region for those who wouldn't know the specific terminology that we use here in the region. So these are my three main projects. And I won't be starting anything new for a little bit of time so that I can focus on what I already have going.

Lorena: So we have several projects going on here U.S. Latina DH I work with my colleagues and we oversee the creation of these projects. They are rooted in archives here, here in recovery we have documented the literary legacy of Latinos in U.S. in colonial time until 1980, so we have several digital archival collections that we're working on right now, one of them for example that will be on CollectionBuilder that I mentioned earlier will be on hispanic theater. It is built on the private collection of Nicolás Kanellos, who was the director of Recovering and the director and founder of the Arte Público Press here at UH. We're also working on digitizing scrapbooks of community members that have been creating Houston and Texas history and changing to better the Latino community here. And then we also have digitized books as well so we're digitizing an early 20th century book written by Mexican immigrant called *La patria perdida* and so that will be available on our site called [appdigital](#), it will be an interactive ebook so it has links and people can annotate it and it will be on a Manifold scholarship platform. These are a couple of the ones we're working on now that I'm helping to oversee. we're continuing to building it and we have a couple of undergraduates who are helping us as well, one of them is creating a collection based on the newspaper she's pulled out articles that talk about the 1918 influenza epidemic and so being able to make that available is really important to the conversations that we're having today with regards to Covid as well. These are a couple of different things, shifting demographics here by looking at records and mapping that, but in general we keep adding to these ongoing projects in order to help make those community records available to the community that they actually represent.

Anna Sofia: Well, definitely keep us updated! So we've come to the end of our podcast. Thank you so much for your availability and your participation!

Erdal: Thank you Anna. Thank you Jennifer and Lorena for your participation. You have provided us a lot of information about your community ACH work, as well as your own work.

Lorena: Thank you so much it was a pleasure to be here!

Jennifer: Thank you for having us!

Hannah: This podcast was a production from ADHO: ADHO promotes digital research and teaching across arts and humanities disciplines. We act as a community based advisory force and support excellence and research, publication, collaboration and training. Learn more by visiting adho.org.

RESOURCES

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