Arizona State University Libraries
Faculty Profile Interview Series

Transcript of the interview with Assistant Professor Edward Finn, recorded on September 7, 2012.

Moderator: Fred Mcllvain (ASU Libraries)
Librarian: Joseph Buenker (ASU Libraries)

Link to audio file: http://hdl.handle.net/2286/R.I.15458

Fred Mcllvain: Hello. This is Fred Mcllvain for the ASU Digital Repository and the Arizona State University Libraries. Welcome to the ASU Faculty Profile Series, an audio archive where we interview faculty members about their research specialties. Today I'm joined by ASU librarian Joe Buenker. Hi Joe.

Joe Buenker: Hi.

FM: Our faculty guest is Ed Finn, assistant professor with a joint appointment between the School of Arts, Media and Engineering and the Department of English. Hi Ed.

Edward Finn: Hi Fred.

FM: Joe, why don't you start.

JB: Sure. Professor Finn I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about your graduate work. How did you get involved in your research specialty and what took you to ASU?

EF: My graduate work focused on what I call "The Social Lives of Books." I got into this area of research because I started asking myself why some authors got to have their cake and eat it too; why some writers got to be critically acclaimed and also commercially successful. A lot of writers get to do one or the other. They can have their books on every airport newsstand or they can be treated very respectfully and get critical texts written about them in special editions and be lionized in the literary press, but usually you don't get to do both of those things. There are a few writers who do get to break the rules in that way. Toni Morrison is one great example, maybe the greatest living American writer, certainly one of the most acclaimed, winner of the Noble Prize, but also somebody whose books sell very well and who is very open and welcoming to a broad mass audience, especially through her collaboration with Oprah Winfrey and Oprah's Book Club.

So that's how I first came to this question, and I started to wonder how literary fame worked, and particularly how literary fame works now. I realized that as we do more and more of our talking and thinking about books online we're starting to leave traces about our choices, our cultural choices, as consumers, that used to be invisible. When you went

into a bookstore and you bought a book, that was just between you and your bookseller. But now all of these computational systems are tracking and aggregating our choices, and websites like Amazon, LibraryThing, and Goodreads use that information to construct vey sophisticated models about how people are reading, or at least how people are buying and talking about books. So I realized that there is all this new data out there. These new ecologies of information, cultural information, information about taste and acts of distinction. When you choose to buy one book instead of another book you are making a particular kind of distinction, or when you list books together and you say "these are my top ten books of 2011," you're making another kind of distinction.

So what I realized was, first of all, that there's all this new data out there; and that's a really exciting prospect. We can start to make bigger claims than we used to. Traditional literary analysis is about one person, or a handful of people, and their encounters with a particular text. Now we can expand the circle a little bit and talk about how a whole community of readers talks about a whole cluster of texts. Book reviews are really about establishing a context for a book. Like music reviews, or anything else, you have this new thing, and you have to describe it to people who haven't experienced it for themselves. So you have to use familiar waypoints, familiar constellations. So you take this new star and you tell people where in the sky it fits, what constellation of other books and writers it connects to. So, those are all ways that we as human beings read beyond an individual text, and we have this whole set of other books and ideas, characters and conversations in mind as we read. So I found it really exciting that I could start to look at that through the methodology of Network Analysis.

JB: So I would just like to ask you a question. In your dissertation one of the authors you studied was Toni Morrison. I did a little research on you, and you have a chapter in a new book coming out on Morrison's digital networks, "Mapping the Digital Networks of Toni Morrison." Could you tell us a little bit about that research?

EF: Absolutely. As I said earlier, I think Morrison is one of the best examples of a writer who crosses over between critical acclaim and commercial success. So when I talk about networks in my research, I mean networks of people, and networks of books, primarily. On the most basic level what I did was, I looked at book reviews and I looked at what are called recommendation networks. For book reviews, I created a little dictionary of keywords that included authors names, the titles of other books that were mentioned in reviews, and I looked at how people mentioned those keywords together in their reviews of books on a paragraph level. So I would look at a New York Times review of Beloved, for example, and I would see that people mentioned Toni Morrison and Beloved in the same paragraph, no surprise there, but maybe they would mention William Faulkner, and that would be interesting, or they might mention another author; they might mention Toni Cade Bambara.

And, what you begin to see as you do this, and what I did was, I assembled a whole archive of reviews. I looked at a set of four or five major national newspapers and four or five major national magazines that all reviewed books consistently; and they were some of the premier book review organs in the public sphere, in the U.S. So, if you got a

book review in one of these places that was pretty good; if you got a book review in several of them you knew you were really making it.

I started to look at the networks of topics and people that were mentioned in these reviews and then I did the same thing with reviews on Amazon. So there people are also reviewing books and also mentioning other authors saying "this book reminds me of a book by this other person," or "this book is nothing like the book by this other person." And I used those connections as well to create these maps, these network diagrams, of how these different entities are connected together. So I used the idea of network analysis which emerged, which is used quite frequently in Sociology to explore relationships between people or other cultural entities.

So in my world, the network analysis I'm doing is looking at connections between books. So the entities that I'm networking are the books and the authors, and then the links between them are these references where they shared connections through a paragraph in a book review. There might be a really strong connection between Toni Morrison and Beloved because people mention that book a lot. There might be a weak connection between Toni Morrison and some other new author, or fringe author. And by looking at these in aggregate you begin to develop a perspective on a whole literary ecosystem of authors and texts and how they connect together.

JB: Did you see any differences? You mentioned some of the traditional book review sources, like maybe the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, some major American newspapers, and then the online analysts, if you will, like the Amazon reviewers. Were there any noticeable differences between what was being referenced in those reviews, in terms of the networks you were describing?

EF: Absolutely. This is where I think my research became really interesting for me, is that, we're at this point where the traditional gatekeepers of culture are shifting. In the old days it really mattered whether you got your book reviewed in the New York Times or not because that's how most people heard about new books. Now through websites like Amazon and LibraryThing, there are many other ways that you can hear about a book, and there are many other cultural arbiters, critics, who can shift your opinion, who can write a review that you might read. When you go on Amazon you'll see reviews from everyday people positioned almost as prominently as the professional reviews of the book. And those everyday reviewers have a huge influence on whether a book sells or not.

So the kinds of discourse that the professional reviewers and everyday or consumer reviewers on websites like Amazon have are quite different. With Morrison there are a couple of really striking differences. First was Oprah's Book Club. Many people who read Morrison come to Morrison through Oprah's Book Club, and Morrison is really committed to creating new communities of readers through the Book Club, through the Oprah television show, getting people to read, who might not otherwise read. She recorded an audio book version of one of her novels and she even trimmed her own novel for the audio book to make it shorter, so it would be easier for busy mothers and

commuters to read. And, of course, the demographics of the Oprah Winfrey Show are quite interesting: predominantly women, a predominantly mainstream white audience. So, it's very interesting to think about Toni Morrison appealing to this mainstream American audience, and her literature of course is deeply involved in questions of race, and questions of gender, and ethnicity, and minority positions in society. And there she is making this really sincere effort to communicate with these people, and you'll see a middle aged white mom on Oprah saying "I really identified with your characters," "I really identified with your book" and it's a very interesting moment in cultural politics in the U.S. to see that happen.

JB: Did you get a sense that the film versions of any of Morrison's writing like <u>Beloved</u> in particular, is that mentioned in any of the book reviews? Did that draw new readers?

EF: I think that was a much smaller influence than the Book Club itself, but then the other major influence is actually teaching. One of the strongest words or clusters of words in Morrison's reviews on Amazon were things like English, A.P. lit., American literature, teacher, all of these words that indicated that people were reading these books for some kind of class. And I think that's a really interesting moment where we see how these networks that I'm looking at also connect to the idea of the American Literary Canon.

So the network is basically just a list that's in two dimensions. You have a list of things that connect to other things. And a list is the foundation, is the core, of how we decide what's in the Canon and what's not. What's on the list and what's not on the list. What's on the syllabus and what's not on the syllabus. And so what's very interesting about Morrison as a writer is that her incredible success has catapulted her right to the heart of the American Literary Canon. She's on hundreds, if not thousands, of high school syllabi and college syllabi, and that's part of why she's discussed in the context of writers like Faulkner and Hemingway, all of these dead white males, who Morrison now is right up in their company in terms of prestige. And you see that reflected through the pathways that everyday readers are taking to get to her work, they're taking them through school.

JB: You mentioned that your dissertation focuses on digital aspects of American literature and author reception and that's a part of what is called <u>Digital Humanities</u>, and you are involved in <u>digital humanities for the University</u>. I'm just curious if you can tell us a little bit more of what digital humanities means to you? Whether you consider yourself a digital humanist, and if you're integrating some of this into your teaching, besides your research?

EF: Absolutely. I do consider myself a digital humanist and what that means to me is that I use new computational methodologies, and even methodologies from other disciplines like social network analysis, which you could do with a pencil and paper, and I'm adapting them to literary questions. There are a lot of different ways to do that and people have different schools of thought. My approach is really to focus on the middle ground, so think about how new technologies are changing our literary experiences, our cultural experiences. My <u>dissertation</u> fundamentally looks at how people are reading

differently and talking about books differently. And to me that's one of the best things that digital humanities can do, to not just explore new tools, but to think about how our tools, our thinking, are shaping our cultural analysis, are shaping the kinds of conversations we can have about the Humanities.

So on a fundamental level I think we need to recognize that what the Humanities means is also changing because the ways that we engage with one another. You know literature is the fundamental, the only real way we have to step inside somebody else's head. Now we have all of these new forms, and new media that we're using to do that. And I think that's a really important question for the Humanities in general.

JB: One of the things I just wanted to ask you a little bit more, that was interesting. You mentioned kind of the form, there was a transactional approach when you would buy a text. You bought the text. You took the text home. You read or you didn't read it, and maybe you talked to a friend or family member but it didn't make it online or anything like that. Nowadays, when you buy a book, even a used book from Amazon, they follow it up and ask you to write a review for it. Which is pretty interesting because obviously the model is kind of changing.

EF: Absolutely. I think we are just at the beginning of a whole new mode of reading, a kind of collective reading. Because increasingly we are going to be using these digital devices, not just to buy stuff but to read it. And they are going to be able to track how far along we've read, how quickly we've read things. There are already start up companies who are exploring this as a kind of research and market analysis for publishers. In my own teaching I'm really excited to explore new kinds of reading, new forms of reading that we can do by having all of our students read something online.

Imagine reading an article for class and seeing the notes that everybody else made on the same article, or collaborating in teams to annotate something. Annotation and marginalia are really important ways in which we talk back to books, and we write into books. "The Talking Book" is actually an African American literature, that I think Morrison is very familiar with, and that is something that we are going to do more and more of with our new digital tools.

JB: A couple of interesting things came up. You mentioned that authors are getting reviewed in more places perhaps, but that leads me to questions about all of that exchange between the author and the reviewers, the readers, things like that. I don't have a lot of experience personally with tweeting, but I'm wondering if things like that, um, I know Sherman Alexie, for example, has his own website. He tweets. I wonder how authors are responding to getting criticism, positive or negative, real time from people about newly released books. Do you know a little bit about that or have anything on that to share?

EF: Yeah, absolutely. I think another effect of our increasingly digital literary landscape is that the rules of authorship are changing too. One of the other authors that I talk about in my [dissertation](#) is Thomas Pynchon, who might be the last anonymous American

novelist. He hasn't had any public pictures taken of him since the 1950s. He lives in New York and he gets to be a famous literary person but still maintain his anonymity. And that's not possible anymore. To be a writer now you have to deeply entwine your biography and your literary style. Two of the younger writers that I look at, David Foster Wallace and Junot Díaz, both did that in very interesting ways. I think that's increasingly a requirement for people who are engaging with texts, because they want to know where their books came from, and increasingly they expect to be able to reach their authors via twitter or social media and it's creating whole new spaces for fandom but also dialogue.

JB: Finally, I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about your planned research agenda for the next four or five years perhaps?

EF: There are so many things I would like to do. I think what I'm most excited about is figuring out how to take the research that I've done to the next level. I feel like in a lot of ways the digital humanities research that I did for my dissertation was very primitive, and I thought about it as one core sample in a very broad space of new kinds of digital conversation. So I would like to develop more sophisticated tools and I would like to develop tools with more scope to look at broader kinds of conversations.

I would like to remain true to the idea that I need to look at digital media and literary experiences from a human perspective, and think about how we as readers are changing our practices and changing the ways that we engage with text. So I think those ideas of collective reading and collective narrative are really interesting. Wikipedia is this amazing example of a work that thousands and thousands of people contributed to. I wonder what the future of collective writing might be? If we are going to develop better methodologies? If we are going to develop new masterpieces of fiction that were written by many people instead of a few? I think twitter is actually a really interesting example of that. A space where people can play and collectively author narratives in a really exciting, ad hoc way.

FM: Thank you, Ed. Thank you, Joe. You've been listening to an ASU faculty profile audio interview with Ed Finn. You can download this audio file or read a transcript of the interview by visiting the ASU Digital Repository at http://repository.asu.edu.

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