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**Kracking Kafu: Digitally Retelling Nagai Kafu’s American Years, and What I’m Learning from Doing It**

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For today’s presentation, I was asked to talk about the current project of my own, which is a beginner level digital scholarship project that involves Nagai Kafu’s work, and more specifically, his *Amerika Monogatari*, a collection of short stories he wrote based on his life in the United States. (The title of the presentation is inspired by Hacking Haiku, the title of the presentation Cheryl Crowley at Emory University and Brian Croxall at Brown University gave on their digital project at the NCC’s Advancing Digital Humanities workshop last fall). Nagai Kafu, who I believe most of you here today know who he is, was in the U.S. from 1903 to 1907. And those pins you see in the background (of the title slide) are the places he lived in or stopped by while he was here, starting with Seattle.

Before going into the details of my own project, let me start with a little bigger picture, and some definitions, to put my project in a context.

As you heard in presentations yesterday (CEAL plenary panels) and today, there has been quite a few research and writing, and presentations, done on the relationship between digital humanities and libraries recently. And when you read those works, you’ll notice some recurring themes. To name a few of those: 1) the DH as a field as well as DH in libraries are still evolving, and there are quite a bit of uncertainty and anxiety. 2) Many of those works tell us that librarians are already, and if not, can be, effective service providers, partners and/or collaborators for digital research. And 3), many works advocate that librarians and libraries build on the current strengths we have, but also advocate for more training and re-skilling.

Reading those works is sometimes frustrating. Collaborations are sometimes indispensable, and in many cases, training and retooling are essential, too. But these research and writing tell us that the field is still evolving, then tell us that we need to learn. What skills are we supposed to be developing, exactly, then? And although through using words like partnership and collaboration they try to advocate librarians as equal contributors to digital projects, many times what is presupposed is that libraries and librarians are supporters. Researchers, in most case faculty, are the ones who bring in research questions, theoretical perspectives, interesting datasets, and potential “significant contributions” to the field. And libraries and librarians are supposed be there to provide help.

Surely, there are scholars and librarians who talk about power imbalance in the academia, like Trevor Muñoz, and those like Vandegrift and Varner, who argue that librarians should identify themselves as digital humanists. So in that vein, I came up with an idea to work on my own digital project, however small scale and however experimental it may be.

What I am showing today is the very first step of my project, which I had an opportunity to present at the Midwestern Conference on Asian Affairs (MCAA), an AAS regional conference, when it came to St. Louis last fall. Here are some more definitions before we go into further details: digital humanities vs digital scholarship. Those definitions are from Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Abby Smith Rumsey. Those are working definitions that Alix Keener, University of Michigan Libraries, uses for her research, but I like the slight contrast between DH and digital scholarship here. I tend to present my work as digital scholarship rather than a DH project, because DH sometimes implies the use of codes and computational power. My project at this stage does not quite tap into these. As you see now, my project at this stage is mostly about the use and reuse of digital objects and digital presentation, which fits nicely with Rumsey’s definition of digital scholarship.

Here’s the digital paper/presentation I presented at MCAA. First, about the platform: I created this presentation on a platform called Scalar, which is a digital publishing platform developed at the University of Southern California. One of the reasons I chose this platform over others is it has powerful features that allows you to embed digital objects from different sources. Scalar is partnered with the Internet Archive and other repositories, so you can fairly easily embed any resources available on those repositories and import metadata along with them. I actually ended up using images from other sources, like the Library of Congress, Missouri Historical Museum and the State Historical Society of Missouri, among other places, but I found it easier to use than other platforms such as Omeka when it comes to reusing objects that have already been digitized and put online by other institutions.

Now, what I actually do in this paper/digital presentation: What I do here is a digitally assisted close, or “closer,” reading of a short story *Suibijin*, which is part of the *Amerika Monogatari* collection. Initially - and this still is the ultimate goal of my project - I wanted to test the claim that we can re-read and re-imagine Nagai Kafu as an early Japanese-American author, or a diasporic Japanese author, rather than the canonical figure in the “Japanese” literature, which is a claim Japanese scholar Hibi Yoshitaka makes in his book *Japanizu Amerika* and elsewhere. But doing that likely takes at least a few years of research. *Suibijin* is a short story based on what Kafu saw when he visited the 1904 World’s Fair, which took place in St. Louis. The conference I was going to present in was in St. Louis, and I live in St. Louis, so I thought why not start from there. That was a big mistake. For those of you who have not read the story, without going into details, the story is hard to read, hard to read as a 21st century person-of-color reader. Hard to read as a 21st century feminist reader. Sexism, Orientalism, social Darwinism - all of these are there and in Kafu’s writing. Worse still, Kafu does not seem to try to refute any of these and sometimes sounds like in agreement. It is hard to connect this story to the idea that Kafu could be re-imagined as an Japanese-American author, an author of color.

What I tried to do was that, since the story does include an extensive eyewitness account of the World’s Fair, I thought I could recreate the scene Kafu may have seen. The 1904 World’s Fair was a very well photographed event, so I was able to find many digitized photos, from the Library of Congress, Missouri History Museum, and elsewhere. So embedding some of those photos, I tried to recreate the scene Kafu saw and describe in the story, as well as what he may have seen, but does not write about in the story. And what I ended up being able to show, was that orientalism, social Darwinism etc. was also rampant in the World’s Fair itself. Not surprising given it was 1904, but it was apparent in the ways the Ainu people were put on display, people from the Philippines were exhibited, and the list goes on and on. So using those images, I presented, in this Scalar piece, that *Suibijin* in fact is Kafu’s reaction, as a person-of-color author, to the World’s Fair and to the U.S. society in general, but was a very immature one at that, and that at the point he wrote *Suibijin*, young Kafu was not only developing his literary style, but also his position and positionality within the U.S. society.

To recap, let me pause here and pose a question. What do you think of the following statement?

A librarian’s engagement with digital humanities/scholarship is driven by…  
  
1. A technological question (What is the best platform for “remixing” openly available resources?)  
2. A reference question (What are best sources of historical materials for digital projects?)  
3. A scholarly question (Can we reimagine Nagai Kafu as a “Japanese-American” author?)  
4. A professional question (How do we develop DH capabilities?)  
5. All of the above

My answer to the question is “all of the above.” I was motivated to work on this project by a technological question (what is the best platform?), a reference question (what are best sources?), a scholarly question (is Kafu an early “Japanese-American” author?) and a professional question (how do we as librarians develop DH capabilities?). And working on the project, I was able to find answers to all of the questions. (Or, for the scholarly question, I at least was able to engage in a scholarly conversation with Japanese researchers of Kafu). Coming back to the professional question of how we build digital humanities knowledge and skills, my experience shows that (along with requisite training and service), we can develop our strengths by working on one’s own project as well.

Examples: Robots Reading Vogue is a good example of a librarian deeply involved in a digital project (and receiving a due credit and recognition for the work). The Morningside Heights Digital History project at Columbia University Libraries is an example of a digital project lead by librarians for the purpose of developing their digital skills.