TCAL Presentation Script

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Hello! For those who don’t know me, my name is Christina Taylor Gibson and I’m the Performing Arts Librarian here at Towson University. I’m excited to talk to you today about my micro-edition of selections from Mabel Dodge Luhan’s memoir, “Whirling Around Mexico” that was published in Scholarly Editing last spring. I’ve provided a link to the landing page for the journal on the next slide, and you can navigate from there to my project. For the remainder of this paper, I’ll be using still shots or screencasts, since this is an asynchronous presentation.

Since the TCAL conference is a gathering of librarians for librarians, my goal today is to spark your imagination for ways you might use digital humanities, teach digital humanities, and connect people to digital humanities. You might be thinking to yourselves, “But what ARE digital humanities? And why should I bother with them?” There are a lot of thought pieces on defining digital humanities. It’s such a thing that somebody made a website just to display all the different definitions of DH. I’ve provided some links on the slide. I’m not going to explore all of them here, but I will provide you with my working definition.: “a community of people using digital tools to tell stories about the human experience.”

Although we are gathered here as librarians, I would be willing to bet most of us are already digital humanists in one way or another because we use digital tools to connect people to information so that they can tell stories about the human experience. What adopting the label of “digital humanist” does for us is that it opens access to a critical framework to understanding what this work accomplishes and acquaints us with emergent tools to do our work better. I have arrived at this librarian-inclusive definition of digital humanities in part through my work on the “Whirling around Mexico” micro-edition, and that’s why I hope my description of my process will help you see yourselves in this community as well.

I’ve divided the rest of my presentation into three parts. In the first part I’ll walk you through the justification for the project and give you a sense for my engagement with this memoir over the past several years. For the second part I’ll describe the processes used to put together the micro-edition, with a special emphasis on the library skills needed to do this work. The last section really happens after the paper is over, as we use the comment section to contemplate the many ways librarians can and should engage with digital humanities.

This is a photograph of Mabel Dodge Luhan (1879-1962) by Carl Van Vechten. Mabel Dodge was the daughter of a wealthy banker in Buffalo, New York, and she grew up with the expectation that she would embody the Victorian values of that time and place. Her assigned role was to marry well, raise a family, and direct the social life of her community. By the time she was a teenager, it was clear that she had no intention of doing that. She led a life of Bohemian privilege filled with parties, travel, art patronage, and so many romances/ romantic drama one has trouble keeping track.

“Whirling around Mexico” was written in the mid-1940s and describes a trip to Mexico taken in 1930/ 1931. The period described in the memoir was a more settled period for Mabel Dodge. By this time, she was on her fourth and final marriage to Tony Luhan, a member of the Pueblo Nation in Taos, New Mexico. Together they established an artist retreat where they hosted people like Georgia O’Keeffe, John Marin, Paul Strand, Martha Graham, Leopold Stokowski, D.H. Lawrence, Paul Strand. It is not an exaggeration to say that our imaginary of the Southwest in Modern Art originates with Mabel Dodge and her home in Taos. [Slides with photographs of people and photographs of art]

Although Mabel Dodge published endlessly about her life, including a four-volume memoir about her early life and many essays for magazines and newspapers, “Whirling around Mexico” was never published. There are good reasons. The Mabel Dodge Luhan papers are held in the Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale University. Within that collection, there are three typescripts of this memoir. None of them tell a complete story, and the story as it exists is less compelling than that found in her earlier memoirs. Yet some portions have valuable historical information, especially a chapter describing a party she hosted in the San Angel Inn outside Mexico City, and the subsequent chapter describing a concert featuring the composer Carlos Chávez conducting his own music.

You might have noticed that many of the names I listed as connected to Mabel Dodge were visual artists who lived and worked in New York City. That is usually considered the key piece of her legacy—her ability to bring visual artists West and Western imagery East. But one of the reasons these few chapters of “Whirling” are of interest is that they show a more expansive circle of influence, placing Mabel Dodge with Mexican artists and intellectuals, including musicians. The 1930s were a pivotal period in music history in Mexico. During that decade, the country developed a new nationalist aesthetic in music and an accompanying discourse. Chávez was not just interested in this movement, but was a leader of it through his role as the conductor of the Mexican national orchestra, a composer of nationalist compositions, and an eloquent writer with frequent columns in the Mexico City papers.

Mexican musical nationalism was a reaction to political events in the country. After the Mexican Revolution, a long complicated civil war dating from approximately 1910 to 1920, the government there was remade alongside the concept of nation. The resulting constitution stipulated land redistribution, centralized public schooling, separation of church and state, and other radical reforms. One of the ways the government reasserted control was through cultural production and messaging. Most famously, the Department of Education hired painters to make giant murals on public buildings telling the history of Mexico—a history that naturally ended with Revolutionary triumph. [Rivera Mural Image] With music the formal patronage link to the Mexican government is not as strong, but the philosophical impulse was similar. You may be sure that Chávez, a canny self-promoter, was noticing how his friends Diego Rivera and Miguel Covarrubias were benefiting from their tie to the Mexican State’s agenda.

In fact the piece Chávez premiered in 1932, *Horsepower* or *H.P.* was a collaboration with Diego Rivera, and clearly built off some of the underlying themes in his mural work. The ballet dramatizes transnational cultural exchange, with what critics agreed was middling success. H.P. is not the topic of this paper, but if you are unfamiliar with the production, you do need these images and sounds in your life, so permit a two-second digression.

[music and images]

As you might be gathering, *H.P.* tries to dramatize transnational cultural exchange as it depicts boat travel through the Americas both musically and visually. Indeed, it emerged out of a transnational collaboration, with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra and Opera performing the premiere as a follow-up to Stokowski’s trip to Mexico. That Mexican research trip is at the center of Mabel Dodge’s narrative in the two excerpted chapters.

No one needs to read “Whirling” to understand that both the music and the visual art of the period was a transnational experiment, with partners from the U.S. very much involved in patronizing, creating, sharing in this cultural moment. There is a lot of scholarship documenting this exchange, and a lot of scholarship about Mabel Dodge’s patronage, but both have been really hard to explain in terms that make sense in our object-centered concept of cultural production. For example, I can point to this piece of music, and say “Chávez wrote this,” and everyone understands that, but what takes a moment is the bit where I say “Chávez thought these sounds and ideas were interesting because of the conversations he was having with this collection of people, and those people should get credit for this work too”

What Mabel Dodge does brilliantly in the chapters excerpted in the digital micro-edition is to describe and quantify the work of connecting people and ideas through her endless name-dropping and stream-of-consciousness writing. To a specialist like me, these chapters read like a who’s-who of the Mexico City scene and are extremely informative because they depict social dynamics and knowledge flows that are not precisely documented elsewhere. The problem is that most people are not specialists, and they have no idea who most of these people are, and therefore don’t understand the web of influence Mabel Dodge is describing. In order to reach non-specialists, I needed a tool like the one I made with Scholarly Editing.

As I slide into the part of the talk where I describe the edition and the technical work that I contributed to it, I want to pause to give credit. While I am listed as the editor of the edition, and I did all of the intellectual work and some of the encoding work, the programming was done in collaboration with Scholarly Editing’s technical editor Raff Viglianti. He did all the hard stuff from a technical point of view, including the visualization that comprises the most experimental part of the project.

The micro-edition has four pieces all working together to make Mabel Dodge’s writing transparent. The first piece is the introduction, which offers the rationale and the background. Every edition has those, even the old-fashioned paper kind, but the other three pieces were only possible in this format. The core of the micro-edition is the transcription. This may look like a standard thing, but it is done entirely using the Text-encoding Initiative’s programming tools, which allowed us to link it to a database and make this pop-up windows. I’ll show you the public-facing version first.

[photograph, biography, bibliography, etc.]

And here is the database the website is pulling from to make this thing. I used all my library tools to make this, including deriving and integrating a taxonomy, coming up with a metadata schema, researching the individuals involved, and, of course, populating the database with all of that knowledge. You can also see some experimentation here, as we tried out some approaches that we did not end up using, like mapping the people in the memoir by geography.

[Pause]

In addition to the people windows, the edition page has digital surrogates of the typescript. We were able to do this through collaboration from Beinecke. Mabel Dodge’s materials are freely available through her archive at Yale, and she gave them the rights to everything she donated, which is a gift that keeps on giving. In a paper edition you would usually have a section with a full scan of the original document followed by a section with a transcription. Here you can have them right next to each other, or you can ignore the scans altogether. But the scans are important because they keep me honest. Let’s say that you think there might be a mistake in my transcription, or you are wondering if Mabel Dodge really spelled a particular word the way I have it. With the scans available and divided through the edition by correlating transcription text, you can easily check my work or collect information I have not provided elsewhere.

The last feature is the visualization, and here’s where we experimented most with digital capabilities. Remember how I told you the motivation for the project was to make Mabel Dodge’s network visible? One way we tried to do that was to give readers data on the names in the manuscript. But what that doesn’t show is the ways in which the people in the manuscript are connected to one-another. The visualization attempts that work. Here you can see how folks link to Mabel Dodge and to each-other. The graph also makes transparent the transnational qualities of this network, because people are grouped by their primary geographic affiliation at the time of the memoir. It turned out making choices about geographic affiliation could be a little tricky (explain). My aim was to give a general idea of the mix, rather than making the formula so exact that it obscured large trends. Each name in the visualization links back to those same pop-up windows that populated the edition text, so you can place the people in a variety of contexts, depending what works for your purposes.

The micro-edition is a small project meant, in part, to indicate the possibilities these tools provide. Among those, I hope, is the possibility to imagine librarianship and digital humanities as overlapping communities of practice with great collaborative potential. I work in liaison librarianship, and I know that in my current position, digital humanities have become a mechanism for explaining what I do and what I could do to students and faculty. They have also provided me with an expanded set of tools to spark conversation across silos. For example, I’m not a numbers person, so folks do not usually approach me about data analytics tools, but the other day the assessment librarian scheduled a meeting with me to check out AirTable, the tool I used to create the database behind “Whirling.” Similarly, I’m on a multidisciplinary team developing a cataloging project. When we went to apply for grants, I understood how our project could be framed as a digital humanities project, and that has opened up all kinds of possibilities.

What I’m most interested in doing is in understanding how and where you have seen digital humanities work overlap with library work. How might you understand the work you do in this context? How might you reach out to others using a shared vocabulary about digital humanities? Or if you are not ready to do either of those things, what would you need to learn or practice to make such connections possible?

The rest of the “paper” is up to you. Please use the comment feature to respond to my questions or to pose questions of your own. I will be monitoring it over the next few days and responding to as many posts as possible. Feel free to respond to each other too. The best part of presenting is the dialogue afterward. I look forward to reading what you have to say!!