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Wendy Hui Kyong Chun in Conversation with Adeline Koh

June 13, 2012

Adeline Koh: Hi, Wendy. Thanks so much for chatting with me today. You finished your BA in both engineering and English literature—a very interesting combination. I think the readers of the *Journal of e-Media Studies* would be interested in how this combination of study influenced your research trajectory. Could you tell us more about this?

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun: I graduated with a double major in systems design engineering and English literature. I'm very happy that I studied both of these fields at the undergraduate level—it's given me a lot more insight into both fields than I would have had otherwise. I actually started with engineering—I thought it'd be easier for me to take English courses while in engineering than vice versa.

I didn't actually start my English literature courses until the [Montreal Massacre](#)—where a young man came into the École Polytechnique in Montreal, separated the male and female students, and shot all the female students. I started my English literature classes after the massacre.

Koh: Why did the Montreal Massacre prompt you to start taking English literature classes?

Chun: Before that event, I had totally drunk the engineering Kool-Aid—I viewed it as a profession outside of politics: a true meritocracy. The Montreal Massacre made me grapple with its troubling gender politics. The humanities offered me the tools to do so.

Koh: There's been recently a lot of talk about how higher education may need to replicate the path you took as an undergraduate—[Cathy Davidson, for example, has argued for the need to introduce the fourth “r,” or “rhythms” \(algorithms\)](#) along with the traditional three “r”s. [Peter Kerry Powers](#) has also shared that fusing the humanities with the sciences was a key element of the [Rethinking Success conference at Wake Forest University](#). Do you think that the humanities needs to seriously rethink its commitment to interdisciplinarity, particularly in relation to computer science?

Chun: While I think that interdisciplinarity is a good thing, I'm not sure whether I would urge all humanists to learn to code. Coding can also give you a false sense of mastery—and what counts as coding has itself changed over the years (what is now programming was once considered scripting). Just because one understands how to code does not mean that one fully understands technology. There are many different ways of approaching technology and fostering cross-disciplinary skills—coding is just one of them.

I think the most important thing is to develop theories and practices that can engage many

disciplines, and for conversations to take place between disciplines. In fact, I realized something while being immersed in both the sciences and the humanities—that both fields can be simultaneously creative and useless, but in different ways.

Koh: How would you design a curriculum that encourages your understanding of interdisciplinarity, then?

Chun: I'd design a curriculum where students need to be willing to fail. I tell my undergraduates that they should take one course every semester that scares them. For the physics major this might be Shakespeare; for the English major this might be a course on statistics. This willingness to take on risk—to be challenged to the point of not succeeding—is important because it is through undertaking such risks that students learn the most.

Koh: This sounds like something that many students would balk at, though.

Chun: That's true. In some ways, the kind of culture that I went through as an undergraduate was more helpful in encouraging tolerance of failure. I went to school in the “old school” days of engineering, where we were told on the first day of classes—look to the right and look to the left; only one of you will graduate on time. It was taken for granted that you would fail some courses; almost *everyone* failed some courses. But so long as you passed most of your classes, you had survived the program.

I look at my premed students today, and they're desperate to be perfect in every single way. I think this attitude needs to change. There are several ways to encourage this change—for example, in my classes, my students write blogs which are not graded, but use these posts to write a longer paper later in the summer. Students should also think about taking classes pass/fail, which faculty could encourage. We could also take the engineering model, where survival is more important than grades ;-)

Koh: How do you think the two fields that you're immersed in—English literature and engineering—have changed since you've started your career?

Chun: I'd say that I'm no longer fully immersed in English literature and engineering. My work is now at the intersections of these fields, in new media studies.

How have things changed? Well, for one, digital humanities is received vastly differently from “humanities computing.” When I was starting out, SGML and other markup languages within were seen as unglamorous. But the inception of new media studies has changed things—especially with the inclusion of the technological object as a theoretical tool.

This has changed even more with the digital humanities, which is now being sold as the “savior” of the humanities. I think this is problematic. The humanities should not try to use technology to save itself, but through its own special practices, such as critical thinking.

Koh: The issue of critical thinking is interesting. I often discuss this with my husband, who is an engineer, and who has learned a different type of critical thinking in his training. Would you say that engineering teaches a different type of critical thinking than the humanities?

Chun: Yes. There are definitely different types of critical thinking involved in both fields. In the humanities, practical applicability is often deferred. This deferral is very useful, because it allows for a deeper engagement with problems than if we were going to immediately extract solutions. This does not mean that humanists never act—reading itself is a response. This does mean that we're willing to read—to give ourselves over to a text at first—and then make decisions. This means that we don't simply “apply theory” to our readings, but that our readings generate theory.

As well, there's a lot of propaganda disseminated about what the “sciences” and the “humanities” are about, something that I think we need to interrogate more carefully. One of these is the humanities-science dichotomy, which presents the sciences as somehow automatically more “practical” and “useful” than the humanities. This opposition doesn't really make much sense. Take theoretical physics, for example. String theory is hardly more “practical” and “useful” than philosophy. Of course, some disciplines like engineering are application-based, but not all of them are (engineering, after all, is a professional school and its relation to science has always be complicated). Yet, no one seems to think that the sciences are as “useless” as the humanities.

Koh: You mentioned earlier that the digital humanities is being touted as the “savior” of the humanities. Could you speak more about this?

Chun: I don’t know whether the digital humanities can “save” the humanities. It’s not as though knowledge of a certain tool or technology can assure someone of a job. For example, there are plenty of unemployed machine/assembly language programmers in Silicon Valley right now.

It’s more important for humanists to learn about the fundamental ways that technology operates. I’m interested in unpacking what is seemingly “transparent,” by revealing how opaque it actually is—something which I do in my analysis of software in [*Programmed Visions*](#).

Koh: So, what skills should humanists learn?

Chun: They should learn statistics. I think part of the reason why the sciences are seen as more “useful” lies in the methodologies they use. Being able to engage with “big data” is generally viewed as important. If more humanists could use statistical methods, they would be better able to enter into conversations with other disciplines—and get jobs in a variety of fields (indeed, many scientists get jobs because of their facility with statistics, not theories of evolution). And statistics can also be useful for the humanities—it can be used for deep textual analysis.

If we implement this into PhD curricula, we should encourage PhD students, like my undergraduates, to take classes that scare them. I often encourage my students who are interested in the social impact of genetics to take classes on genetics. I'd also encourage my humanities students to take statistics! Learning statistics will give them a new way of understanding the manipulation of data. Data and stories are not unrelated—we need to uncover the narratives embedded in data collection and vice versa.

Koh: You often draw sociopolitical conclusions from analysis of technology, something common within humanities fields. How have people from the sciences or engineering responded to your work?

Chun: This depends on which field they come from. It's quite easy for me to speak to other engineers with my engineering training. For hardware engineers, what I'm saying is obvious—of course software is not everything! People on the software side get a little surprised by my argument that software isn't everything.

I think the goal of cross-disciplinary work is neither congeniality nor sameness. We need to start conversations across fields. Often, the best way to do this is by engaging larger topics that we're all interested in, such as “events,” rather than focus on analyzing each other's objects of study—this is a surefire way to get people's back up. My partner is a theoretical ecologist, and what I love about our conversations is that we question (respectfully) each others' first principles. We're also fascinated by the theoretical

resonances across our disciplines.

Koh: Scholars like [Alan Liu](#) have argued that the digital humanities has avoided dealing with theory. What do you think of this?

Chun: I think that Tara McPherson and others are right to question the genesis of the digital humanities and to enquire to what extent this field emerged as a way to avoid theory, postcolonial studies, et cetera. This is not to condemn this field—I am, of course, in it—but rather to argue that we need to question its limits and to expand its avenues of inquiry. Part of this means realizing that critical thinking/theory produces more objects to study, more productive ways into new media. For instance, critical thinking questions the obvious and the transparent—I think one of Gayatri Spivak’s best mottos is “even simple language lies.” At the level of digital humanities, this means examining what needs to be in place of our interfaces to be WYSIWYG and our networks to operate. Our computers are engaged in a constant promiscuous exchange of information—they are hardly a faithful personal machine. Thinking through the difference between [how] our technologies operate and our conceptions of them is key. We also need to realize that practice and theory are embedded in each other: they form a conversation.

Koh: That’s a great metaphor. Thanks so much for speaking with us today, Wendy!

Chun: Thank you!

About the Authors

Wendy Chun is professor of modern culture and media at Brown University. She has studied both systems design engineering and English literature, which she combines and mutates in her current work on digital media. She is author of *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (MIT Press 2006) and *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (MIT Press 2011); she is coeditor (with Lynne Joyrich) of a special issue of *Camera Obscura* titled “Race and/as Technology” and coeditor (with Thomas Keenan) of *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader* (Routledge 2005). She is currently working on a monograph titled “Imagined Networks.”

Adeline Koh is a visiting faculty fellow under the Duke University Humanities Writing Large program and assistant professor of literature at Richard Stockton College. Her work spans the intersections between postcolonial studies and the digital humanities; 19th- and 20th-century British and Anglophone literature and Southeast Asian and African studies; and games in higher education. Koh directs *Digitizing “Chinese Englishmen,”* a digital archival project on 19th-century “Asian Victorians” in Southeast Asia; the Stockton Postcolonial Studies Project; and Trading Races, an elaborate historical role-playing game designed to teach race consciousness in the undergraduate classroom. She also writes for *ProfHacker*.

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