

11/17/2002

Dear Sir or Madam:

Where does the bastard child of a forbidden tryst between computer science/mathematics/technology and sociology/women's studies/philosophy turn when s/he begins to realize that s/he is being asked to choose between one house or the other? Does s/he turn to one, attempting to push the voices from the other house to the back of their mind, while s/he begins to realize that the questions they ask are no longer appreciated? Does s/he instead attempt to find a group of individuals asking those same questions, despite the difficult path?

That is exactly how I have felt for the last year, having first begun graduate study in Computer Science at the University of Virginia in the fall of 2001, only to find that I was too far removed from the sort of computer science student that they were presumably looking for. Instead of plodding through my graduate work, and working with a topic that I did not have a passion for, I chose to defer my enrollment, and later made the decision, based on reflection regarding my interests and goals, not to re-enroll. Shortly thereafter, I began my search for a new graduate program.

That search took me back to my senior year of undergraduate study, which was spent engrossed in my senior capstone project. I was involved in the production of an artificial life simulation, fueled in part by my readings of Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles regarding simulation and embodiment. Further still, I was asking questions inspired by readings of science studies by Bruno Latour and Patricia Clough. During this time however, I managed to convince myself that whatever computer science program I chose, they would be perfectly comfortable with one of their own hoping to examine these topic areas and writers as well. I think I was quite wrong about that. While recently reading Sherry Turkle's book, Life on the Screen, I encountered a quote taken from a computer science major that seems to exemplify the (limiting) viewpoint at the root of the frustrations I had while in Virginia: "Please excuse my grammar [sic] as I am a Computer Science Major, not an English Major..." (Page 253) I would like the opportunity give something else back to the academic community, other than simply placing myself into a "typical" computer science program. I would instead like to build on the highly varied undergraduate experiences I enjoyed so much, and thus choose to combine my interests, and not to limit myself.

The STS/HSSST group at MIT seems to be exactly what I've been looking for: a program looking at the very structure of scientific and technological knowledge production, and how science and technology affect the whole of society. The STS/HSSST group houses many of the researchers "who" I believe are currently investigating these matters. Sherry Turkle's work on the changing nature of self-definition is of particular interest to me. Her research regarding the mutability and multiplicity of identity through people's virtual interfaces is quite intriguing. Some of my own undergraduate research focused on similar notions of the changing state of self-definition (see included writing sample and abstracts detailing connected topic areas). The new connections being forged between human and non human agents is beginning to have greater effect on our culture, and will continue to increase as technology becomes more integrated into our lives and bodies. Evelyn Fox Keller's inquiries into the relationship between body and biology are also of great interest to me. My senior capstone research focused on many of these links between body and intelligence, as well as many of my other writings. John Dower's investigations into the differences between "Western" and "Eastern" notions of self are intricately related to my own interest in "network" cultures, and exploring these disparities to better understand how our culture and sense of selves are changing. It seems important and timely to examine these areas, and I hope to be a part of that inquiry. I believe that my own perspective, that of a computer scientist with the tempered by a sociology and women's studies background, can offer new insights to these areas.

My own particular area of interest is the role of non-human entities in our "newly emerging network culture." I want to examine the role of non-human actants in our culture, and their involvement in

scientific production. The web created by allowing non-human actants into our cultural network begs for it's own examination. How does this interconnectivity between both human and non-human begin to affect a culture rooted in a western humanist perspective? How are your connections to other actants weighed? What links are "more important" than any other connection? Who has a stake in the construction of these "weighting" factors? How does this affect the unary notion of the western self? What role does embodiment play in the world of these postmodern subjects? How does this change our notions and methods of scientific production? Many links exist between these topics and other disciplines (i.e. network theory, complexity theory, artificial life simulations, among others). This is what most interests me, namely the opportunity to work at the intersection of these varying topic areas. Even now as I read through the works of Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, and Sherry Turkle, I find myself struggling with tension between these different areas, and hope to spend time reading and writing about them.

It is difficult to pin down every sphere of interest that one has regarding a topic, however this best summarizes some of the things about which I am most passionate. The enclosed writing samples are one indication of some specific topics that I would like to study further. One is a paper written during a senior seminar, that concisely demonstrates one area of interest, while the abstracts serve as a reference to where I would like to extend the ideas in the original writing. I have also included a listing of other information regarding my undergraduate and professional experience that I think might help you get a sense of me as a potential graduate student in your program.

I would like to find a home in the STS/HSSST graduate program first as a student within HSSST, while at the same time also allowing myself to interact with professors and students in the computer science department. I hope that I can continue to straddle the lines representing my interests, benefiting myself and, I hope, others as well. I enjoy teaching, and would like not only to be an active researcher, but a professor as well. My experiences in pure research positions, at Jet Propulsion Laboratories and Caltech have been interesting and exciting, but seemed to be lacking in that I was not in working contact with students. The dialog between student and professor can be as productive for the professor as it is for the student, when both are exposed to new ideas, perspectives, and backgrounds.

After receiving my PhD, I would hope to find myself in a program like that of the STS group. I would like to continue my studies, expanding into other disciplines. I feel that MIT and the strong connection between STS/HSSST and other programs would help me successfully do that. The connection STS/HSSST has with other departments seems to be one of its greatest assets, and that makes me believe that this cross-pollination between disciplines occurs there. This diverse and special environment is one that I hope to learn from and give back to. My own background and passion for these areas of study is something I believe I could contribute to my fellow students at STS/HSSST.

I hope you, too, believe that I would make a positive addition to the department. If you have need of any more information, feel free to contact me.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Casey O'Donnell

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