Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at the graduate center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

This week's guest is Dr. Jesse Merandy, who is director of the digital media lab at the Bard Graduate Center. He recently completed the Graduate Center's first all digital dissertation, Vanishing Leaves, a study of Walt Whitman through location based mobile technologies. He is the vice president of the Walt Whitman Initiative and member of the New York City digital humanities steering committee. Welcome to the Thought Project, Jesse Merandy.

Jesse Merandy: Thank you.

Tanya Domi: Congratulations on your defense of the first all digital dissertation Vanishing Leaves, a digital homage to Walt Whitman who's 200th birthday will be celebrated in Brooklyn on May 31st here in New York City. Welcome, welcome, welcome.

Jesse Merandy: Thank you so much. I'm really happy to be here.

Tanya Domi: So how did you come up with this idea of an all digital dissertation on Walt Whitman who truly is the quintessential American poet of the 19th century?

Jesse Merandy: I started my academic career at, my master's degree at Rutgers in Camden and that is the last place Walt Whitman lived, actually, there's a house there, a historic site. So my mentor Tyler Hoffman at Rutgers in Camden kind of took me in and we worked on a project together called the Mickle Street review, which was an online Whitman scholarly journal. So I started getting involved with the Whitman community and reading and dialoguing with Whitman scholars and visiting the house. I was kind of being in that place and walking through the halls of where he used to live. I kind of developed this connection and this kind of intimate relationship with a person I didn't know, but of course, you know, by being in his space and thinking about him and working and talking with other Whitman scholars, I slowly kind of became what they call a Whitmaniac.

Tanya Domi: I want to ask you about the Whitmaniac nomenclature here. It seems like there's a group of people that are really into Whitman, so this is a self-identification, I take it?

Jesse Merandy: It is, yeah. A good friend of mine, Karen Karbiener who works at NYU, somebody I have known for a while and met when I was at Rutgers in Camden. She runs a Song of Myself marathon, which happens every year on Whitman's birthday and where they read the his epic poem Song of Myself. Everybody takes different sections of the poem and reads it over the course of several hours and it's a great event. But there's kind of this, there's an enthusiasm and an excitement...
about Whitman that those who find that connection just find each other. And so it is kind of like a self-identification, but it's really a kind of celebration of all the ideals that Whitman supported, these ideas of kind of radically redefining yourself, being out in the world, walking and talking with other people. The spirit of democracy, the spirit of the kind of free verse. Yeah. There's a lot of different aspects that everybody, different people identify with different aspects of that, his many different aspects of his own character, although you know there's, there's a-

Tanya Domi: He was a, I think he was a very simple man in some ways and yet he was really a person of the world, wherever if it was his neighborhood, his country. The Civil War actually I think was, I think one of the greatest, I get the, I seem to get the greatest feel for him given that I served in the military myself and that was such a terrible war. It was like 1/10 of the US population was killed. He had great compassion, was a nurse. Those kinds of things. He's really a man of the body and man of the neighborhood, man of the world. He seemed like a really gregarious, great guy to want to hang out with.

Jesse Merandy: Yeah. I think a lot of people get that feeling. He wrote in his poetry often reaching out to his audience and speaking directly to those who would be reading his poetry in a very straight forward manner, that was kind of as if he was with you in the room as you were reading his poetry. He was there with you in spirit and to some degree.

Tanya Domi: So I get the identification, and I'm sort of maybe a amateurish Whitmaniac, but your project Vanishing Leaves is a location based mobile experience, which takes players to Brooklyn Heights to learn about Walt Whitman in the neighborhood where he wrote and published the first edition of Leaves of Grass his greatest, perhaps the greatest poem, Song of Myself of course, is the epic homer American experience of poetry. And in this game, the person who's participating plays Agent Singer an undercover operative working for the Great Companions, this underground network of citizen, hackers, and educators who work behind the scenes to protect writers and works of literature from forces determined to censor and suppress them. Wow. Where did you pull this from? That's quite a scenario for a game.

Jesse Merandy: Yeah. The original project that I built was a kind of a traditional walking tour. And as I built it, I was thinking how I could expand beyond that kind of the parameters of form that had already been done quite well by others. There's many opportunities for walking tours that you can go on. Even Whitman walking tours in Brooklyn Heights. So I wanted to take it up and into another kind of, I wanted to create a way to draw people in that went beyond that. So a lot of the things I was thinking about were these connections to places and where Whitman was in Brooklyn Heights, where he worked, where he lived. So part of it was getting people out there. I wanted to create connection to those places. Even though much of Brooklyn Heights has been radically redeveloped and
changed since Whitman's time, they're very few mid 19th century buildings and structures left from his time.

So the more I went out there thinking about what I could find of Whitman, the more I started to realize what wasn't there that was connected to Whitman and that kind of sent me on this path of thinking about loss and memory and how these kinds of roots of, of human interaction and events at places get lost and are kind of embedded in those places and how we can bring those out. I wanted to create a way to connect with Whitman that was personal and I think going out and walking around and thinking about him in these places is a great way to start a thought process where people are thinking about those connections but also in a larger sense of their own connections to those places. And maybe not in Brooklyn Heights, but maybe where you live, where you grew up, the places that have influenced you, how you write your discursive practices. So that the playful game element kind of came out of that thinking about ways to structure and experience that were entertaining but also educational. So building in that kind of larger mission objective to save Whitman was thinking about the loss of Whitman in a real sense, but also in a playful way, creating some kind of a way to engage in draw in the person who would be playing.

Tanya Domi: So this game was built using augmented reality interactive storytelling engine. That's quite a mouthful. You had to learn this new technology and you had to hone your own graphic and web design skills in building the game. Can you tell us what that process was like and how long did it take you to build that infrastructure for the game?

Jesse Merandy: The ARIS program was built by some great folks, David Gagnon and some others at University of Madison, University of Wisconsin in Madison. And they built this great platform. And so I often equate it to when you build websites, you use the internet to put them up. So in a way I was using the ARIS platform as my starting point to build this game. So that program that I started developing on, which has a builder, a web-based builder that you can build these experiences. And then also the client, which the user downloads to play the games. So it had these aspects that were open source, freely available to use, which is often the barrier to developing any mobile based projects, having the resources in the back end.

Tanya Domi: So that's a plus.

Jesse Merandy: Yeah, it was really nice and these guys were really helpful and it was, it came out of academia to serve academia too, so there was a kind of spirit of making this project happen on this platform.

So the ARIS took a while to learn. That was something I developed over about a year, the first draft of this project, and then they overhauled the project, the whole platform. So I redeveloped. I had to redevelop the game.
Tanya Domi: Oh wow. That's challenging.

Jesse Merandy: It really was. But at that point that was when I really, the new developments helped facilitate the narrative that I was, this narrative that came out about you being Agent Singer and working with this undercover agents to protect Walt Whitman's legacy came out of the changes they made to the platform, which made it much more friendly to developing, in the back end, laying out scenes and conversations that felt almost like you were storyboarding a movie.

Tanya Domi: Oh, I see.

Jesse Merandy: So it was really a, it was kind of a, it was a fortunate development, but it also set me back some at the time. One of the great things about building a digital project and the hardest things, is for a dissertation, you're doing it all on your own. I'm used to working in collaborative environments and building a digital interactives and digital experiences with other people. So to do this all on my own, all the work of the design, all of the web-based backend-

Tanya Domi: The architecture.

Jesse Merandy: ... all the architecture. I had to do all of those aspects as well. So doing a digital dissertation had certain demands that were definitely beyond a normal paper based.

Tanya Domi: Almost like it's almost like a double dissertation. One of your advisors, Matt Gold, has described your project as being grounded. And not only is it a digital innovation where you use these platforms to develop the game, but that in fact your dissertation is grounded in a number of theoretical and critical bodies of scholarship, Whitman studies, digital humanities, echo composition, location-based mobile theory. That's quite a mouthful. Game theory and digital pedagogy. That's quite admirable. I mean that's complex and it's truly, truly the subject of Whitman is based in longterm American literature. I mean he's one of the great American poets. Truly, he and maybe Emily Dickinson in the 19th century.

Jesse Merandy: Yeah. The part of the grounding and the scholarship of course was important to the project. Not to just, I think some people might look at the project off hand and say, you know, how can a game be a scholarly work? So I was in conversations with Matt, really wanted to make visible the thinking and the critical scholarship that went into that project. I'd been thinking about Whitman and his connection to walking and how that act of walking connected him to Brooklyn Heights, to the people who live there, to the events that were going on to the radical transformations in population at the time. Just a flood of immigrants into Brooklyn Heights that came to work. So, you know, grounding it in Whitman's walking was easy. That was my starting point and everything always goes back to Whitman for me because not only the subject of the kind of experiment, but also the inspiration. I kind of felt like that that would lead the
way which led, which eco composition is just a way of thinking about how writing is based in place and how place influences environments both social and physical and influence are writing what we write, and how we write back to those places.

Tanya Domi: Well, you really get a sense of that. I mean Whitman is truly a walker and I mean all of us as New Yorkers are walkers. If you can't be then you really can't really enjoy the city and I think you feel like you're walking with Whitman in this project in the game and he really does reflect what it's like to be in New York and to see the scenes. For example, you include in one of the mission files, the audio file, the poem Crossing Brooklyn Ferry. I mean you get such a strong sense of his, he's so tactile. I mean Whitman is like there. He's very human, very tactile. You know the opening line of the poem is, Flood tide of the river, flow on. I watch you face to face. It's just so it's so Whitman clouds of the West, sun half an hour high. I see you also face to face. I mean we've all experienced this walking in this incredible city, even in the 21st century.

Jesse Merandy: That was in another thing he did so well with in his writing was creating scenarios and using language that even now that we can find that connection. There's some universal truths like looking at and seeing your reflection in the water, looking up at the sun that you know, many of us, that doesn't change over time. The surroundings of New York City of course have radically changed since his time, but-

Tanya Domi: For sure.

Jesse Merandy: ... he often used these kind of, David Reynolds calls them unifying phenomena, which are simple things like work and cooking and loving and, but also walking, to me, was one of those. Many people can connect and find a path into his work and Crossing Brooklyn Ferry does this good, great job of bringing you with him on this journey. And as you are connected through the simple aspect of walking with him, all of a sudden you're launched into his deep philosophical meanderings into existential thought and the his purpose for being there and his connection to everything around him. And I kind of like that.

Tanya Domi: So that is what we're talking about. That is echo composition, sort of, am I right or wrong about that? I mean.

Jesse Merandy: Yeah. I mean I guess-

Tanya Domi: He's reflecting it, right? In place. Crossing the Brooklyn Ferry.

Jesse Merandy: Yeah. Without, yeah, I think that's interesting. The eco comp kind of like, Whitman illustrates a lot of aspects of eco comp without him. You know eco comp came about in the '80s and '90s so it's not like a-

Tanya Domi: Yeah, it didn't exist at the time he was alive.
Jesse Merandy: But the thinking about how place influences our writing and how we kind of write back to those places, is something Whitman he did kind of instinctually. I think he was a man on the street. He loved to wander up Broadway and take in all the people and all the vehicles and all the innovations that were happening at the time. So there was really a lot of, Whitman was an experiential learner and that's why the game is so important to me because I want to encourage that same experience of learning.

Tanya Domi: That experience of, yes, in your experiencing him. The mission files through the game are just beautifully designed and you're reminded of just how deep your scholarship goes because there's a pull down menu of citations from supporting works, which I enjoyed as a scholar myself and your utilization of photography and drawings of the time period of his life and the places of which you're talking about is just so well done. It's really beautiful.

Jesse Merandy: Thank you so much. The more I went out and researched and went into Brooklyn Heights, the more I became aware of the history there. I really started to dig deeper and it was one of the most enjoyable parts of the process was just the very same things I wanted my players to experience, which were kind of looking deeper below the surface layer of what's around you, to think about those who came before you and those that will come after you. The more I went out and did that for myself, the more I became invested in Whitman in the project and thinking about Brooklyn Heights and its start as a rural farming village many, many years ago to the explosion in the mid 19th century to becoming one of the largest cities in the country. It's such an amazing place. And still today I think you see in the Brooklyn waterfront with the redesign of the-

Tanya Domi: The Promenade.

Jesse Merandy: ... the Promenade.

Tanya Domi: Which is really spectacular.

Jesse Merandy: Yeah. The granite prospect and the whole, from Fulton Ferry Landing over is just as a green space, is so incredible to me. I think, you know, throughout Whitman's life it was a commercial center and a shipping center. So to see it [crosstalk 00:20:31].

Tanya Domi: Right. It was really a bustling area. So really this is also, not only is it English and it's digital scholarship, but it's a historical tour grounded in New York City, in Brooklyn, Brooklyn Heights. And you know, I make a joke because, you know, I have friends that live in Brooklyn. I go, yeah, that's another country, you know, go to Brooklyn. I mean, I live in the Bronx, I live in Riverdale next to the Hudson River. It would take me two and a half hours by mass transit to get to Brooklyn. Just maybe on the edge almost. But truly Brooklyn is like a different world and you really lay it out in terms of the history. You know, you should get double
credit because it's almost like a history dissertation as well of a view of an insight into Brooklyn Heights during the 19th century.

Jesse Merandy: Yeah. It's a place that has a really rich history through the Revolutionary War, through the Civil War. And Whitman's time was only a blip on that larger scale, you know? So I think there's still a lot of change going on. As you know, in the city, it's just constant flux, change, chaos, kinetic energy. That's part of the New York experience. Brooklyn has its, of course its own identity and its own history there. So it's, I think it's a great way to kind of double dip. And David Reynolds also, once again, his Whitman's cultural history book was incredibly influential. He was a master at mixing the history and the scholarly readings of Whitman a just incredible book. So David was one of my earlier influences. I met him and really saw how much he loved the details of Whitman and I think in a two hour game you can only cover so much, which is hard to choose what to include.

Tanya Domi: And what not to leave it out. That must have been very hard.

Jesse Merandy: Some of the greatest hits.

Tanya Domi: Sure. I think David Reynolds and we're going to have him in to talk about Whitman as well by his 200th birthday. He is remarkable in his grasp of, as you've suggested of the details of Whitman and how he interacted during the period. I think a significant period of course was the Civil War because it really affected his life. You actually lay out in the game in terms of the history of Walt Whitman and Brooklyn, you talk about when he leaves Brooklyn to go find his brother and never really returned, does return for some business reasons, but never lives again in the city. So let's talk about that for a minute. Because I did not realize because one only have so much time that he lived in Camden. Is that where he died?

Jesse Merandy: Yeah. Camden is where he spent the last years of his life. He had a very simple house. It's a New Jersey state park, I believe, which you can visit. They have some of his artifacts there, still, a cane and some galoshes and his bed and some other things that are, it's really, it's an outstanding kind of period presentation inside of the building of some furniture and stuff from his time period. But Camden is an incredible place. For anyone who's never been there, it's a place that was, you know, bustling in, in some of the same ways that Brooklyn was.

Tanya Domi: Brooklyn Heights, right.

Jesse Merandy: On the water. But now is, there's large swaths of Camden that are abandoned, burnt out buildings, empty lots.

Tanya Domi: Urban blight, urban blight.

Jesse Merandy: Yeah. And it's like right across from his house is a prison which kind of is facing it directly and often in the median of the highway in between people will go and
stand and look up and communicate with the people they know who are in the prison. It's kind of this very, you know, it's a very modern, it kind of surrounding with this old building where Whitman lived, but kind of is like a time capsule almost. It often looks like one tooth left in the mouth of the street because there's so few other buildings there. So it was interesting. Once I stopped, started getting interested in Whitman there I was accepted to the graduate center and came back to New York City and I realized what a rich connection he had to New York City and to Long Island and that's when I started investigating and I was really interested in the pre Civil War period because that's when I felt like he had this unbridled enthusiasm about the possibilities of our country, about the integration of all these cultures and all these ideas and all of these advancements happening at the same time. Not too dissimilar from today.

I think there was a lot of tension but a lot of excitement and there was something, for Whitman as a young man living in this time, I think was absorbing all of this and kind of kicking it back to the world in his poetry in a way processing the unprocessable and just so much vibrance and so much activity. I think his deep thinking about that helps us think about that time period, but also today is really useful in dealing with the turbulent times we live through and a lot of the changes.

Tanya Domi: So what do think Whitman would say about today?

Jesse Merandy: I think he would find a lot of similarities. I mean the tensions that led to the Civil War were, are, I mean we still have racial tensions, but there, there’s some, there's so many people at odds with each other about different philosophical stances on many different topics now that, I think he would see a lot of similarities and I think he would be, he would try to be a unifier, just as he was at the time trying to create a language and a way to encapsulate the differences, as opposed to using them as a wedge to divide.

And I think we rely on social media and we have many ways of accessing information. For him as a newspaper editor and thinking about the power of rhetoric, just how he communicated with his audience and the story he was telling. I think he brought that into his poetry and I think he knew he was connecting with people and his hope was to, I do believe what's to be a unifying force and a force that-

Tanya Domi: A force for good.

Jesse Merandy: I think so. I think he saw the tensions of slavery and he saw the, that kind of mounting turbulence that was building towards this. Maybe he didn't think it was inevitable, but this-

Tanya Domi: The terrible war.
Jesse Merandy: This coming war and his writing during this time when he's a younger, a poet and just fresh off of his editorial career is so powerful and exciting. And I think once he goes down south and serves as a nurse and his whole language changes. His, the energy of his work changes. Of course. He writes a lot of short prose about his experiences walking by the hospital camps and they're just gruesome details-

Tanya Domi: The wounded, the wounded, yeah.

Jesse Merandy: ... that you could not, you couldn't forget those things. I think for him, a lot of that hope and exuberance and excitement is just naturally dampened by those experiences.

Tanya Domi: Was there anything you learned about Whitman that surprised you in the course of this project? Is there anything that surprised you about him?

Jesse Merandy: That's a good question. Something that surprised me.

Tanya Domi: Every time we get into, you know, these projects, you know, sometimes you can be surprised, you know, like wow, I didn't know that about him or he surprised me. He was way out there on talking about sexuality in the 19th century, which was really a pretty conservative, you just didn't talk about sexuality the way he wrote about it.

Jesse Merandy: Yeah. You know, I don't particularly get into that in the game, aspects of his sexuality.

Tanya Domi: Okay.

Jesse Merandy: But it's become a lasting conversation about his impact at the time and it's lasting impact today. I think a lot of people identify with him as a gay man. I think that's become more of an accepted stance about him, in his life. Although he was never explicitly talking about his sexuality and of course our views on sexuality have changed dramatically even in the time he was alive. I don't think he felt very comfortable talking about that openly, but-

Tanya Domi: But he did write about it.

Jesse Merandy: He did and his connection to the body made a lot of people uncomfortable. Ralph Waldo Emerson who praised him often in his later works, urged him to scale back that-

Tanya Domi: That aspect.

Jesse Merandy: ... that aspect because he felt uncomfortable with that. A lot of people did. I mean talking openly about our bodies, about how we smell and how our bodies...
feel and a lot of his writing was very sexual and very provocative to the kind of morals and ideals of the time, I think was shocking.

Tanya Domi: America was quite puritanical. There's a couple of stanzas here in Crossing Brooklyn Ferry-

Jesse Merandy: One of my favorite poems.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. Closer yet I approach you. What thought you have of me. I had as much of you, I laid in my stores in advance. I considered long and seriously of you before you were born. Who was to know what should come home to me? Who knows, but I am enjoying this. Who knows? But I am as good as looking at you now for all you cannot see me.

Wow. That is so sensuous. That's really sensuous.

Jesse Merandy: To be honest, that's one of the kind of one of the sections of that poem that just drew me into Whitman. It's just.

Tanya Domi: I didn't know that.

Jesse Merandy: That's him basically thinking about you and reaching out to you and I think that's why, that effort he made to break down the fourth wall or I mean if you're an actor, you know, speaking right to the audience in a poetic sense, he's breaking down through the page to kind of to be with you.

Tanya Domi: Well, he's fantasizing.

Jesse Merandy: Yeah, it's remarkable.

Tanya Domi: It's a remarkable set of verses. I love Walt Whitman and I love the fact that he's a New Yorker. That I'm a New Yorker. That he's a great American poet. Truly one of the greatest. Jesse Merandy, congratulations.

Jesse Merandy: Thank you so much.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to today's guest, Dr. Jesse Merandy. Of the Graduate Center, CUNY.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.