Q: Can you introduce yourself and your work?
“I teach design history and design practice at the University of Florida. My most recent published project is a book called Type Specimens, which looks at the history of the typographic specimen. We’re looking at them [specimens] to see what they tell us about designers, how designers construct identity, and how we think of ourselves as designers and others that we may or may not include in that definition.”

Q: What introduced you to this body of work?
“My very first introduction to the idea of a type specimen was when I was a Typography 1 student. Almost every typography student does some kind of type specimen project. It’s a very traditional, systematic, visual, and functional way to introduce designers to thinking about type faces. So, I was introduced to the type specimen in Typography I, and we looked at famous examples from wealthy white men. And they’re beautiful and they deserve to be well known, as they are, but there are also many other facets of the story of typography. I was interested as a teacher of typographic history in complicating that narrative and thinking about how the famous examples show us one thing and one way of seeing typographic practice. But what if there are other ways of seeing?”

Q: For our readers unfamiliar with design practice, could you define some of these terms: typography, type setting, visual narratives, and narrative media?
“Typography: The study and practice of letter forms and the way we use them, saying something about who we are and where we come from. Type setting: The act of taking one typographic sort (e.g. the letter ‘T’) and controlling how it behaves and looks on a page. Visual narratives: The stories about who we are and where we’re coming from told by the things that we’re looking at. Narrative media: Any kind of media (e.g., television, social media ads, radio, etc.) that’s telling us a story.”

Q: Can you speak more on recuperative narratives and the power of intentional design in the pursuit of social change?
“A recuperative narrative looks back and tries to recover stories that have been edited out. Scholars argue about the value of this, whether it’s worthwhile to spend time looking back and finding narratives that have been cut away. Some people say no, and that we should only look towards the future, and that this is a waste of our time and energy. And I can see where they’re coming from, but I don’t agree with them. I always return to this moment in Typography I when I was introduced to Beatrice Warde as a budding female designer in my undergraduate career. I had this moment of identification with her, and that was powerful for me. I so strongly believe every student deserves to have that moment. Without the work of historians doing the work of tracking down those narratives and making sure we see and share them, it’s not going to happen.”

Q: How do you think consulting with native speakers of a language that typographers don’t speak is different now than it has been in the past?
“Some typographic efforts to be more globally inclusive were more successful than others. Some of the early errors were fundamental, in terms of the shapes of the letters themselves. Diacritical marks (accents of any kind) were problematic for early type designers because they didn’t physically fit into the system they were putting together, so a lot of times they would just leave them off. This can change not just the shape of the letter, but the meaning of the word. Readability and legibility automatically improve when you’re working with someone who speaks the language because they can tell you when you’re making mistakes. In terms of cultural identity, just being able to say that someone who knows about this language and contributed to the development of this type face changes the cultural meaning of that type face. Folks who have a genuine problem with their community have contributed to solving that problem and contributed to that narrative as well.”

Q: Have you had any negative or positive experiences as a researcher in a culture that prioritizes STEM programs over other types of research?
“I’ve had lots of interesting conversations about typography through the lens of digital fonts. As it turns out, a lot of computer scientists and programmers and communications scientists are interested in fonts and font design from a very technological standpoint. They’re interested in questions of legibility, accessibility, Unicodes, programming, and how that is impacted by an eternally growing set of characters. So, I’ve had a lot of really interesting conversations with STEM folks and discovered a lot of unexpected overlaps. I’m very much at home with the humanities and arts and the ethnographic research methods in the social sciences. But code and math have historically scared me, so it’s fun to talk with folks who have made that their life’s work and to discover that we have things in common, things we can talk about. Sometimes I’m envious of their funding opportunities, but at the same time I don’t think I would change what I do for something else.”

Q: How do you balance the demands and detached nature of academia with your pursuit of real-world change and accessible community resources?
“I think there’s a myth about academia that we’re interested in things that are so obscure that they can’t possibly impact how we’re practicing design now. I’ve never met any other teachers who are up to that. Anybody I’ve ever met or worked with is really passionate about figuring out how we solve problems, how we bring others with us as we solve those problems, how we provide access, [and] how we make sure that resources are available in a really equitable way.”