Proposal for MLA Special Session

Seeing with Numbers: Sociological and Macroanalytic Approaches to Literary Exclusion

<u>Panel Chair</u>: Richard So, Assistant Professor of English, University of Chicago

<u>Presenters</u>: Richard So
Andrew Goldstone, Assistant Professor of English, Rutgers University

<u>Respondents</u>: Amy Hungerford, Professor of English, Yale University
Matthew Jockers, Assistant Professor of English, University of Nebraska

<u>Panel Description</u>:

Recent years have seen a rising interest in applying quantitative and computational methods to the study of literary history and the evolution of literary form. Much of this work has been motivated by increased access to vast amounts of digital data, allowing researchers to enact "distant readings" at scales never before possible. Yet even as some celebrate the interpretive advantages that "big data" can offer humanistic inquiry, just as many warn of its interpretative blindspots and ethical pitfalls. Johanna Drucker, for instance, has raised important questions about the interpretive assumptions built into the datasets we construct and work on--datasets which inevitably have to reduce complex cultural phenomena to simpler abstractions. More recently, Lisa Gitelman and Virgina Jackson have encouraged us to look *under* data to consider its root assumptions and its rhetorical claims to objectivity.

If data-driven methods can obscure as much as they reveal, however, this is not a reason to reject them out of hand. It should simply make us more attentive to the ways they obscure differently than the closer, qualitative methods to which literary scholars have grown accustomed. This special session is organized on the premise that the dialogue between quantitative and qualitative approaches need not be an adversarial one, and that each is productively informed by the other. We demonstrate this by using large-scale text-mining and social network analysis to uncover and interrogate precisely the kinds of phenomena that tend to be excluded by the selectivity of more conventional forms of reading. The panel reflects upon the potential uses of larger data sets and computation in literary study by exploring how such techniques open up new interpretive possibilities for the excluded and the marginal.

Our proposed panel adopts a distinctive format designed to facilitate a fuller discussion of these basic methodological questions by the participants and the audience. We will have two presentations and two respondents. The two presentations address the issue of literary exclusion through a shared focus on literary modernism and a parallel engagement with sociological approaches to literature. Richard So's paper, "Finding Thomas Curtis Clark: Topic-Modeling the Rules of Exclusion in American Modernist Poetry," uses the religious poet Thomas Clark (1877-1953) as a case study to show how quantitative techniques can help identify marginal literary figures and the social and discursive patterns structuring their exclusion. Using social network analysis to map patterns of publication in the US poetry field circa 1915 to 1930, So identifies Clark as one of the most active poets of the time, but also one of its most excluded. These years

saw *Poetry Magazine* emerge as a centralizing force in a growing network of media venues for publishing modernist poetry. Despite his prolific activity, however, and despite living in Chicago and having frequent correspondence with the magazine's editors, Clark never managed to break through *Poetry*'s editorial "open door." To understand why this was, So uses topic-modeling and corpus analysis to identify the poetic themes and styles that *did* appear in *Poetry* and charts their evolution over time. He compares the themes discovered across the magazine's entire prewar corpus (roughly 9,000 poems) with the themes found in the hundreds of poems written by Clark. To what extent do the genetic markers found in his work also show up in *Poetry*? If these markers overlap (e.g., if religious themes show up in both), then what does this tell us about the bases of exclusion in modernist poetry circles? It is by exploring patterns of literary inclusion and exclusion at scale that we seek to articulate new ways of interpreting the mechanisms of exclusion *up close*.

In his paper, "Modernism's Limits: Patterns of Exclusion in Scholarly Reading," Andrew Goldstone presents a quantitative analysis of scholarship on modernism to show how scholarly reading practices have been shaped by canon-formation and national culture. Drawing on concepts from Bourdieu's sociology of culture and John Thompson's theory of the media, Goldstone show that modernism, an apparently transnational and ever-expanding literary concept, nonetheless remains governed, in academic reading, by the continuing *appreciation* of the symbolic capital of high modernist figures in a polarized field. Goldstone examines trends over time in metadata supplied by the *MLA International Bibliography*, including titles and subject headings, to show the modes of dominance exerted by British and American high modernists in the thousands of articles, books, and dissertations on "modernism" catalogued since the 1970s. The global ambitions of "modernism" remain unfulfilled by scholarly effort in the aggregate. Using a topic model of a subset of these scholarly works available on *JSTOR* between 1970 and 2000, Goldstone argues that the diversity of thematic and theoretical approaches scholarship has adopted does not correspond to the more limited diversity of cultural production studied by scholarship on "modernism." The social patterns of scholarly reading *of* "modernism" reproduce the hierarchizing dimensions of the modernist period itself.

These two papers offer complementary sociologies of "modernism" both within the modernist period and in its afterlife as an object of reading and evaluation. They are united by their analysis of the peripheries of modernism, using literary data in the aggregate to reveal otherwise obscure social processes. Our desire to pursue modes of critique that work productively across the quantitative/qualitative divide is likewise reflected in the structure of our proposed session. The two presentations will be followed by responses from two scholars whose research exemplifies the quantitative and qualitative approaches we are seeking to meld. Matthew Jockers is one of the foremost experts on text-mining techniques as applied to literary texts, and is perhaps best known for the ground-breaking work he did with Franco Moretti at the Stanford Literary Lab. He has recently completed a book detailing the applications of these techniques to the study of 19th-century literature. Amy Hungerford is distinguished as one of the most astute close readers of post-1945 American literature; she is now developing a combination of sociological and traditional literary-critical methods in her study of the social networks and institutions of contemporary U.S. literature.