theories and methodologies

Mid-Range Reading: Not a Manifesto

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It is astonishing what a different result one gets by changing the metaphor!
—George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*

TO JUDGE BY DEBATES OVER DISTANT READING, LITERARY SCHOLARS MIGHT HAVE SOMETHING IN COMMON WITH THE UNADAPTABLE TUTOR in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, the Rev. Mr. Stelling, who applies the same educational method to any boy in his charge: he sees Tom Tulliver's mind as a field to be plowed with the classics, not as a stomach that can't digest them. But if we look more closely at the range of projects in literary studies, from digital humanities to the new formalist poetics, we find few hidebound Stellings. Applying one's favorite method to all sizes and shapes of data is an obvious genre of error, and scholars and critics of all sorts studiously avoid it. In a maxim now popular among practitioners of digital humanities, when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. The humorous warning not to become enamored of shiny tools and ply them regardless of object (a schoolboy, all schoolboys) can come from people who use *MALLET* (*MAchine Learning for LanguagE Toolkit*) or other software to produce statistical analyses of words or of white spaces in nineteenth-century newspapers.[1] As researchers who are primed to question the prescriptive bias of our *doxa*, our samples, our models, and our tools, we nevertheless have incentives to overstate the predictable errors of competing approaches.

Debates about distant reading often mistakenly equate Franco Moretti's shifting practices of "Quantitative Formalism" (*Distant Reading* 65) with computational literary studies and digital humanities as a whole. But contributors to this feature of *PMLA* show that both the distance and the reading are figures of speech. Metaphors of reading generate spatial manifestos.[2] The manifestos are manifest—that is, perceived by the senses, as in the haptic-visual tropes of the Internet, from web to cyberspace, from page to cloud (Dodge; Dzieza). The root *manus* ("hand") might even point up the indexical metaphor of *digital*. We can agree that the spatial metaphor of un-

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seeable quantities of text—the united media of nations—offers a sublime transcendence of subjectivity. Or is this another authoritarian dream of scientific certainty? It seems less useful to issue a manifesto or hostile denunciation than to recognize that our methods infect each other (*festus*). Change up your metaphor apps as needed. But perhaps what most determines difference of scale is collaboration. No digital humanist works in isolation, like a private tutor of one pupil.[3]

Like many, I have been inspired by Moretti's work, beginning with *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900*. Manifestly, "the entire history of literature could be rewritten in a new vein" (*Distant Reading* 64) if most of the world's heritage has been digitized. (How much remains beyond even the periphery?) The call to distant reading, the demand for "macroanalysis" (Jockers), has been accompanied by a manifesto for surface reading, an insistence that we say goodbye to all that symptomatic root-canal work on rotten ideology in the text and that we eschew comparatist master narratives; surface reading's textual description may include book history or distant reading (Best and Marcus 17). A scale of reading is the metaphor for an entire methodology, which in turn presupposes a body of texts and the magnification at which it is examined. But in a recent short history of close reading, Barbara Herrnstein Smith notes that "there is no research imperative built into the size of some potential data set" (67).[4] The advocates of textual big data, like practical critics in the tradition of I. A. Richards, are caricatured for demanding that everyone exclusively hammer with methods initially devised for a certain kind of worker and nail.

Rather than engage a history of methods, I describe what I call mid-range reading in a digital project called *Collective Biographies of Women*, which emerged from my book *How to Make It as a Woman*.[5] The project focuses on the bibliographic data of a relatively small genre, some twelve hundred collections of brief female biographies by men and women, published primarily between 1830 and 1940. After introducing the designs of the project, I attend to the Regency writer Mary Russell Mitford to underline an instance when Moretti's mapping missed its mark. Directing the Scholars' Lab at the University of Virginia, a center of many digital humanities methods, I'm hardly an opponent of textual analysis or mapping.[6] *Collective Biographies of Women* draws on bibliography, feminist historiography, network visualizations, and narrative theory, along with various digital humanities tools and practices; mid-range reading is our unique approach to a morphology of female biography. To study nonfiction narrative form as well as trends in networks of gendered types, we select sample corpora of the books that include a short biography of a certain woman who represents common types—for instance, Frances Trollope, classified by her biographers as a woman writer, a traveler, and the mother of a famous man. In the Trollope corpus, we analyze all the versions of the life of Trollope and those of her siblings, the women collocated in each volume with Trollope, using a stand-aside XML schema, Biographical Elements and Structure Schema (BESS).

The reading we do with BESS certainly could be called slow. Members of the editorial team select from controlled vocabularies for types of elements, keyed to the numbered paragraphs. The separate file of analysis produces a kind of abstract, or outline, comparable to every other BESS analysis, rather than a close, comma-word-sentence markup in the text file, hence "mid-range." Our team also works at a distant scale, treating thousands of persons, texts, and events as data in relational networks and typologies. Unlike the growing scholarship on Trollope's life and works, my foray into this writer as she appears in *Collective Biographies of Women* does not include the close study of her oeuvre ("Frances Trollope" and Supplementary materials). The approach of *Collective Biographies of Women*

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resembles archival editing with XML in a database of persons and artifacts, forms of humanities computing that might strike distant readers as out-of-date. Manifestos often graph a unidirectional history of progress, but persistent questions and tested tools, even the humble technology of a Web site, are valuable, especially for adding to the objects of study beyond, say, the Euro-American novel or what Google has digitized.[7]

In approaching Mitford, Moretti and I have evaded a scholar's custodial care. *The Mitford Digital Archive* is a thriving project to make accessible Mitford's entire written production, including poetry, drama, and letters (Beshero-Bondar). For Moretti and largely for me, Mitford is primarily the writer of *Our Village*, a series of sketches set in and around the hamlet of Three Mile Cross. Metaphors of scale, in ethics and aesthetics, preoccupy Eliot, as I suggested at the outset; emulating Mitford in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Eliot has her narrators ask us to see big trends in small data: to give world-historical weight to a middling, provincial sample. Mitford and her favorite writer, Jane Austen, focused on three or four families in a country village, and Mitford extended her interest in *Our Village* well below the gentry, establishing the genre-painting taste that also made a classic of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*. Mitford's opening piece, "Our Village," claims to adhere to neoclassical "unities" of time, place, and action in realist scenes from "a little world of our own, close-packed and insulated like . . . bees in a hive . . . or nuns in a convent, or sailors in a ship. . . . Nothing is so delightful as to sit down in a country village in one of Miss Austen's delicious novels" (21). She is alert to scale and figures of speech for gender-segregated social levels. The apparent nostalgia of her setting masks her innovative form, and indeed she leans toward diffusion rather than hive-like limits. In a letter, she wrote that she would like to see a novel without a plot; a writer could

> begin with a certain set of characters—one family, for instance—without any preconceived design farther than one or two incidents or dialogues, . . . throwing in incidents and characters profusely, but avoiding all stage tricks and strong situations, till some death or marriage should afford a natural conclusion to the book. (qtd. in Whitmore 191)

Mitford's description calls for Virginia Woolf's *The Years*, published a century later. Mitford challenges our literary histories: for a time she was on the beaten path of literary pilgrimage, but now she defies our generic expectations and looks out of place in a lineup of women writers (Booth, *Homes* 104–35). *Our Village* features in one of the thought-provoking chapters in Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees*. I imagine Moretti read the five-volume collection published by Whitaker, used the find feature, cut and pasted passages, and penciled events on a map (dating to 1820?) of the region near Reading, England, to reveal concentric circles of episodic walks, which he calls the "chronotope" of "*all* village stories," instead of the linear "direction of history" (38–39). Moretti's circular diagram of *Our Village*, volume 1 (1824), shows that "personal relationships" occur nearer home, "natural spectacles" and "collective events" within "a couple of miles" (36–37). Note that he has developed a vocabulary for event types. The pattern breaks open in volume 3 (1828) and by volume 5 (1832) includes remote locations and events in the past (58–59). These changes he attributes to an external "force," specifically the "rick-burning" by "the armed peasantry of the 1830 uprisings" (60). Pause here, dear reader. If your hammer is Marxist, you make the excellent point that literature reflects (constructs? obfuscates?) economic conditions. Moretti devises a symptomatic reading based on a revealing, unprecedented mapping of narrative patterns. At the same time, like Mitford's nineteenth-century critics, he relies on the general persona of a country-lady writer.

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My hammer, I confess, is comparative feminist biographical history; I scant the textual history of *Our Village*. But reception history requires that we come down from the aerial view to the particulars of biography. So in examining Mitford's sketches, Moretti and I skim across a series of installments for different symptomatic readings of gender, class, or national political economy. In my published dissent from Moretti's interpretation (*Homes and Haunts*, 108–13), I offer a different explanation for the expanding concentric pattern, which I summarize here: a professional writer such as Mitford avoids repetition in later installments; with increasing literary earnings, she purchased a pony chaise that took her farther than a walk; above all, in the years when *Our Village* was published, while Mitford's father pursued his reckless entertainments, Mary was "a prisoner at the cottage," where she cared for her increasingly demented mother, who died in 1830 (Watson 177–79). Moretti insists that *Our Village* is "a space of *leisure* rather than work" (*Graphs* 39), a retreat from threatening revolution or industrialization (51–52, 60–64). Perhaps, but the sketches in the context of Mitford's life are the paid antidote to the unpaid housekeeping and caregiving that often made Mitford ill.

My approach to Mitford thus far has not been particularly oriented to digital humanities. With a modicum of close reading, I focused on a different spatial dimension: literary tourism to Three Mile Cross and the texts written about Mitford's homes and haunts. The research on Mitford in *Homes and Haunts* was aided by circulating library books, microfilm, and, indispensably, the Internet, from the library catalog *WorldCat* to digitized editions. What would a mid-range reading of Mitford entail? I merely point in directions we could go. Essays that detail the process of research are deadly to read, unless, like the pamphlets of Moretti and the Stanford Literary Lab (e.g., Algee-Hewitt et al.), they tell compelling stories about "dead alleys" (English); as James F. English observes, "Like any good picaresque hero, Moretti takes his setbacks in stride, and never gives up on the idea of progress." So far *Collective Biographies of Women* has some data, some options, but no foiled adventure with Mitford.

In *Collective Biographies of Women*, Mitford is a subject in fifteen collective biographies published between 1848 and 1922, a respectable rate of appearance that she shares with ten persons, including Mary Washington, Marie Curie, and the Countess of Blessington (there are nearly seven thousand persons with only one chapter-length biography in this database). To do a mid-range reading, we would need to prepare digitized texts in our repository, create BESS analyses of all fifteen versions of Mitford, and analyze all the other short biographies compiled in those fifteen books, the lives of 285 siblings in one degree of separation.[8] For example, Clara Whitmore's *Woman's Work in English Fiction from the Restoration to the Mid-Victorian Period* (1910) is one of two books in the project's bibliography in which Mitford and Trollope appear together. Whitmore assesses a total of thirty-seven women writers in sixteen chapters. Some have solo chapters; others are tripled up. The numbers I offer here show the quantitative approach of *Collective Biographies of Women* to documentary social networks—that is, the interconnections formed by the books rather than by personal interactions. A biography always recruits its subject for typological service, all the more so in a collection that selects comparative sets of subjects. Mitford's biography is narratable in books that select the type woman writer. She has 4,210 biographical cousins of many types, in two degrees of separation—in other words, not in a collection together but with siblings in common.

Our graphs visualize networks of collocation and separation of proper names. A parallel-coordinates visualization of cousins displays the somewhat distant relation

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of Mitford to Sarah Bernhardt, for example ("Two-Degree Connections"). Both European women were associated with theater but had different degrees of renown in different eras. They share an interesting list of thirty-three siblings, though they are only cousins with each other. Most of these siblings are famous nineteenth-century women of letters and the arts, but their relationship to each other can be prompted by variety, not affinity. Chronology matters little: the siblings include the biblical Queen Esther and the nineteenth-century temperance leader Frances E. Willard, the nineteenth-century French painter Rosa Bonheur and the sixteenth-century queen of England Anne Boleyn. We noticed that Trollope is included with Mitford in the table of contents for *Woman's Work*, and Trollope, a contemporary whose writing career overlaps with Mitford's, appears in this visualization as one of Mitford and Bernhardt's go-betweens.

Our spatial conceptualization of these networks remains at the scale of prosopography, not aspiring to the big data of a census or social media. The method *Collective Biographies of Women* uses to interpret narratives is even more pertinent to debates about distant reading. In BESS analysis, a human editor links interpretative terms to paragraphs, generating comparable distributions of biographical elements in versions of Mitford's biography and in those of other women of various types. Mitford appears in chapter 11 of Whitmore's *Woman's Work*, a forty-three-paragraph chapter that also features Miss Ferrier and Anna Maria Hall. Because of space, I abbreviate the text and BESS analysis of paragraph 23, the first of fifteen paragraphs devoted to Mitford. In this chapter, as in literary biographies generally, paragraphs ignore the business of telling a person's life in favor of standard literary criticism: description and quotation of the writer's works or excerpts of previous criticism. Chapter 11 condenses into paragraph 23 most of Mitford's biography, which focuses on her father's misdeeds. I omit the element PersonaDescription and select from the element Events. The chapter shifts from Ferrier to Mitford by comparing the topography of their literary settings and the temperaments of their literary subjects:

> There is as wide a difference between their writings as between the rocky ledges of the Grampian Hills and the soft meadows bathed in the sunshine . . . of Our Village. Miss Mitford's, indeed, was a sunny nature, not to be hardened nor embittered by a lifelong anxiety over poverty and debts. Her father, Dr. Mitford, . . . was addicted to gambling, and soon squandered the fortune which his wife had brought him, besides twenty thousand pounds won in a lottery. . . . The authoress was a little over thirty years of age when the poverty of the family forced them to leave Bertram House, their home for many years, and remove to a little labourer's cottage . . . on the principal street of a little village near Reading, known as Three Mile Cross. Here the support of the family devolved upon the daughter, a burden made harder by the continual extravagance of the father, whom she devotedly loved. . . . It is with the greatest weariness that she writes to her friend Miss Barrett, afterwards Mrs. Browning, of the struggles that have been hers the greater part of her life, the ten or twelve hours of literary drudgery each day, often in spite of ill health, and her hope that she may always provide for her father his accustomed comforts. Not only was she enabled to do this, but, through the help of friends, to pay, after his death, the one thousand pounds indebtedness, his only legacy to her. (189–90)

This paragraph also includes narration of Mitford's parents' marriage, so three types of the element StageofLife: *before*, *middle*, and *culmination* (words in italics are controlled values for element types). This chapter never gives any indication of Mitford's birth or death, customary essentials in biography. The sentence that begins "The authoress was a little over thirty" leads me to identify an Event element for paragraph 23 with these event types: *move to new city, town, or village*; *move*

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to new house. Child elements in this Event element are AgentType: *father*; LocationStructure: *home, family, or childhood*; *house of the poor*; and LocationSetting: *village*. Further events in this paragraph elicit these types: *working as paid occupation*; *care for parents other than nursing*; *illness, persona's*; *writing letter*. Topos is our vocabulary for scenarios or structures of feeling common to these biographies of women, and paragraph 23 contains these topoi: *debt*; *disgrace*; *poverty*; *family, class or status*; *duty*; *attachment, family bonding or not*; *sacrifice or renunciation of self-interest or desire*; *triumph as overcoming adversity or opposition*. Finally, we have Discourse types: *comparison of environments*; *allusion to female, persona's contemporary*; *figureOrImage, weather*; *summary, more, much or all life in less prose*; *periods or times compared*; *time measured as persona's age*.

All digital humanities work not only requires collaboration but also demands resources that humanities methods customarily do not. Is the game worth the candle? Some but not all types of events, agents, locations, topoi, and discourse could be located even if they are not interpreted programmatically, though machine learning is more suited to masses of text lacking metadata cues. *Collective Biographies of Women* as a digital study begins after the annotated bibliography and extensive human reading of these publications, serving narratology and the history of gender ideology in Anglo-America. The thorough measure of distribution of these recurrent features across hundreds of texts in different typological contexts (Irishwomen, saints, actresses) will offer an unprecedented profile of representation of historical women across centuries of English-language publishing.[9] I look forward to comparing the intensive BESS experiment with textual analysis of the corpus of twelve hundred books.[10]

Distant reading, which Moretti calls "a little pact with the devil" in his much-quoted manifesto, invites us to "learn how *not* to read," letting the curation of the sacred text go by the way (*Distant Reading* 48).[11] The pronouncement seems the opposite of an Eliotic ethics of attention; start with the world or even the nation-state, and don't ask about a miller on the river Floss. But if it were true that all previous methods have been obviated, Stelling would have been right that applying a plow to all minds alike results in uniform classical culture. No vantage point is sufficiently distant; a "larger literary history" of twenty thousand novels has not sufficed or fixed one evolutionary law, as the self-correcting chronological essays in *Distant Reading* attest (66–67). Moretti has already responded to objections about his focus on the novel and his model of the interdependent "core" and "periphery" of the "literary world system" (107). Further, he agrees that his world literature should include nonfiction, poetry, and drama (111), and escape Europe. But from any location, it seems premature to throw out the bathwater when so much of what has been written has not even been recognized as other peoples' babies. I am not writing a manifesto. I would not call topic modeling too hot, close reading too cold, and mid-range reading just right. Many literary studies outside digital humanities are cool, and all literary researchers in the second decade of this century are using digital tools. It is exciting to collaborate on experimental humanities, recognizing the hand of the encoder, the confirmation of our bias, the beauty of big data and of lurking iotas, the vast spaces reduced to a map, and the notion of a metaphor.

Notes

1. *MAchine Learning for LanguagE Toolkit* is "a Java-based package for statistical natural language processing, . . . topic modeling, . . . and other machine learning applications to text." Topic modeling is "useful for analyzing large collections of unlabeled text" (Description).

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2. Lisa Rhody, in her essay in this issue of *PMLA*, portrays Moretti's apparent shift to scientific objectivity as a switch to the spatial in the ancient quarrel about the differences between poetry and painting.

3. *Collective Biographies of Women* (cbw.iath.virginia.edu/index.php) lists the many collaborators on my digital project ("About"). Please consult this site for the discussion below.

4. See also Johanna Drucker's essay in this feature of *PMLA*. Algee-Hewitt et al. write of gaining a telescope to see "new galaxies," "200,000 novels instead of 200" (1).

5. *Collective Biographies of Women* is supported by the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, and the English department at the University of Virginia, in collaboration with Worthy Martin, Rennie Mapp, Daniel Pitti, and Jeremy Boggs.

6. The staff at the lab includes specialists in geographic information systems, as well as specialists in immersive and 3-D technologies. *Neatline* is our geospatial timeline software, a plug-in for the *Omeka* Web-publishing platform. I have explored *Voyant Tools* (Sinclair and Rockwell).

7. Kwame Otu, assistant professor of African studies, conducts research on the collaboration of Ghanaians worldwide on one such Web site, *GhanaWeb* (www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage), hosted in Finland; at an event dedicated to his research, the Global Inquiry Lunch at the University of Virginia on 31 March 2017, he illustrated how *GhanaWeb* facilitated debate on gender politics and the homophobic policy of the government of Ghana (Discussion forums).

8. Mitford's person record can be explored in *Collective Biographies of Women* ("Mary Russell Mitford"). We call the BESS interpretation of versions of one person "horizontal" and the interpretation of all biographies in one volume "vertical." In one chapter, from Reginal Brimley Johnson's *The Women Novelists* (1918), Mitford joins Ferrier again, with Trollope, Gaskell, Harriet Martineau, and Mary Shelley ("*Persuasion*").

9. *Collective Biographies of Women* has also focused on cohorts of African Americans, women in medicine, and others, and the National Endowment for the Humanities is funding our work with the Mellon-funded project *Social Networks in Archival Context*, a collaboration that will involve interconnecting millions of unpublished records with the narratives and persons in *Collective Biographies of Women*.

10. Piper models an approach to distinguishing fiction and nonfiction in some 28,000 documents.

11. Among many interlocutors, see Dimock on Moretti's "overcommitment to general laws." She says, "the literary field is still incomplete"; we need to be open to adding "emerging forms" (79). See Love on the descriptive turn.

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