THE CANONICITY PROJECT

THE HISTORY, THEORY, ETHICS, AND QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LITERARY SPACES

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SOME ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
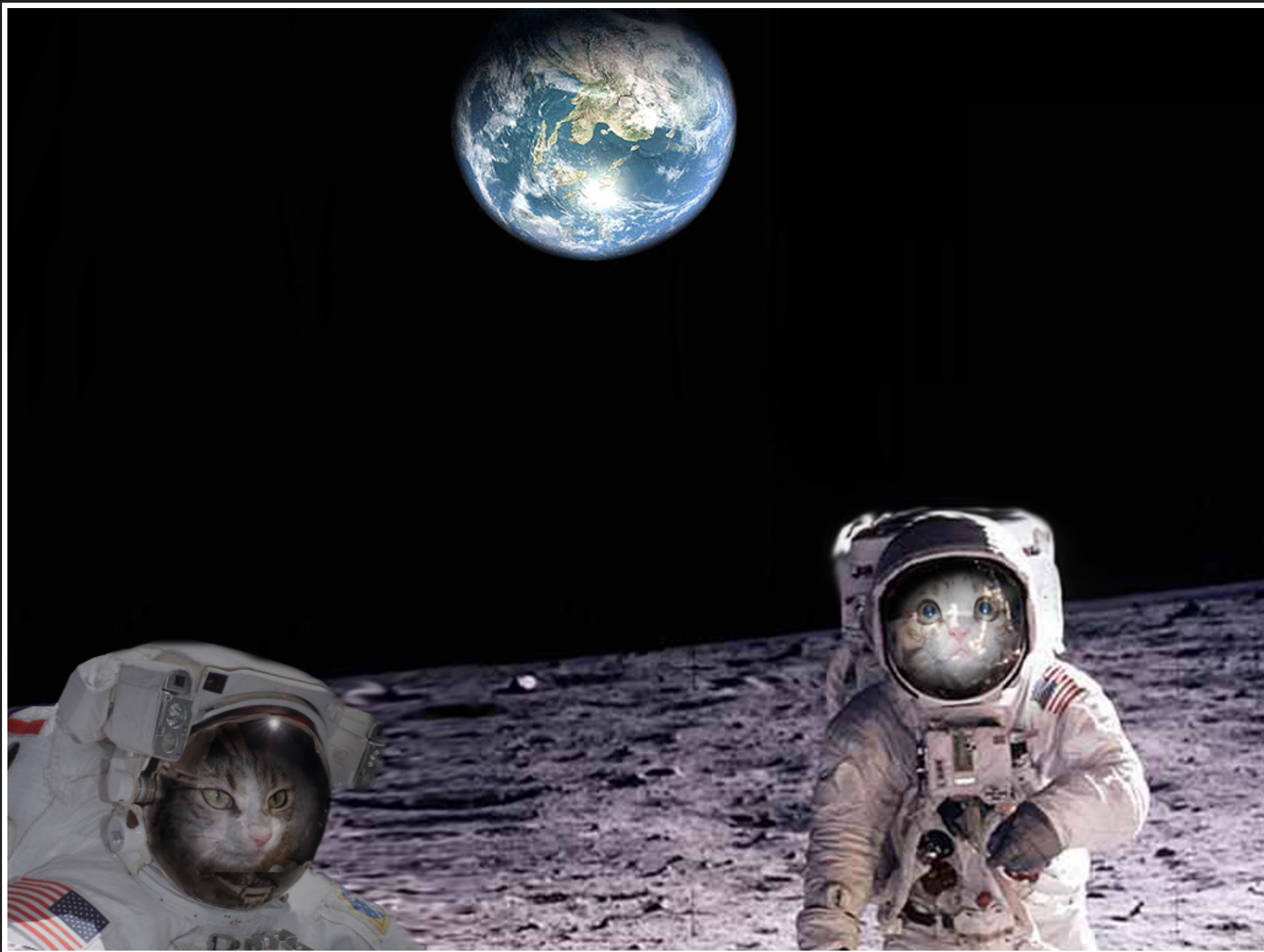
We would like to thank:

Dr. Gillian Paku for supporting and guiding us, even when it seemed like we were grasping at straws;

Dr. Paul Schacht for often pointing us in the right direction as we entered into new territory;

Dr. Ken Asher for listening to us work through more than one problem in the 15 minutes after class.

WHAT WERE NOT TALKING ABOUT TODAY

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HOW WE GOT STARTED

Two years ago offered an opportunity to study any topic

Chose to research genre

Some conclusions were:

1. Genre conventions are fairly arbitrary
2. Genres help us to see patterns
3. If we came up with new standards for genres, we could observe some interesting patterns

...the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how, when it comes to genres, shifting the way one approaches constructing them can have radical implications on the subsequent analysis of a text.

"From Bakhtin to Skyrim: An Exploration of Chronotopes, Genre, and the Chivalric Romance." by Sean Fischer

The findings from this research were published in:

Fischer, Sean. "From Bakhtin to *Skyrim*: An Exploration of Chronotopes, Genre, and the Chivalric Romance." *Metamorphosis* (2014).

TWO PERSPECTIVES

HOW DO WE GET THEM TOGETHER?

WHY SHOULD WE GET THEM TOGETHER?

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THE THEORY AND HISTORY OF SPACES

Let's begin with two definitions:

Literature is an interconnected system of texts that use techniques to represent aspects of human existence.

A **literary space** is an arbitrary division inside of literature.

The first theorist to promote the idea of literary spaces was Aristotle in his *Poetics*:

> *Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic: poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation. They differ, however, from one: another in three respects , — the medium, the objects, the manner of mode of imitation, being in each case distinct.*

Poetics by Aristotle

Following Aristotle, theorists have been creating new spaces and organizing texts into them

See:

- Longinus
- Giambattista Vico
- Mary Wollstonecraft
- T. S. Eliot

From a contemporary literary perspective, Eliot is the most important of these critics

T. S. Eliot becomes the champion of New Criticism

New Criticism comes to dominate Western academia by the 1950's

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot calls for a distinction between great and not-great literature

Eliot tries to define what makes some literature great:

> *Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.*
>
> *"Tradition and the Individual Talent" by T. S. Eliot*

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THE PROBLEMS WITH SPACES

Thinking about spaces in this manner is really problematic

Promotes thinking in terms of what is *not* instead of what *is*

Groups are created through exclusion

Consider Terry Eagleton's definition of **liberal humanism**:

> *Liberal humanism seeks to oppose or at least modify such [conservative] ideologies with its distaste for the technocratic and its nurturing of spiritual wholeness in a hostile world.*
>
> *Liberal Humanism by Terry Eagleton*

Consider Tobin Sieber's qualification of **violence**:

...depriving [the classified] of rights in political and psychological contexts

The Ethics of Criticism by Tobin Siebers

When we are thinking in terms of exclusion, we are more likely to fall into the trap of marginalization

Marginalization goes against the purpose of literature studies

Literature studies is meant to develop an understanding of how human experience is represented in language

Literature studies claims to be objective and in turn open to all potentialities

As soon as you begin grouping along *good/bad* lines, you open the door to ignoring/rejecting any texts you object to

The greatest danger to literary criticism is assuming one's beliefs are universal

Consider Eliot's claim:

Dante and Shakespeare have poetry of design as well as of detail.

"Ben Jonson" by T. S. Eliot

Consider Literary Theory vs. Trancendental Theory

Literary Theory deals with the actual content/techniques in texts

Trancendental Theory uses outside contexts to explain texts

Thus, making up spaces without having a solid grounding in textual elements runs an extreme risk of turning into criticism based on political or ideological preferance

QUESTIONS?

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OUR SOLUTION TO THE SPACES PROBLEM

Begins with how we think of literature

Literature is an interconnected system of texts

A **literary text** is any work that uses literary techniques to represent a piece of human experience

How do we solve this problem?

How, within the unity of the artistic construction, is the direct material presence of the work, its here and now, to be joined with the endless perspectives of its ideological meaning?

The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship by P. N. Medvedev and M. M. Bakhtin

Important to focus on the application of literary theory to literary criticism

When we focus on techniques, we create an understanding of the text

Once you have an understanding of the text, you can do whatever you want

Consider James Longenbach's point:

...a poem's consolation is neither permanent nor complete.

The Resistance to Poetry by James Longenbach

The benefit of this simple framework is that you can make much more open and interesting connections

Literary criticism is furthered when we recognize the unique/interesting interplay between texts

Allows us to recognize the systematic qualities of literature

Textual criticism allows us to comment on how individual texts affect the entire system that is literature

So how can we consider Kendrick Lamar as a great author?

Consider *Tristram Shandy*

> *I leave the affair entirely to the invoked, to inspire or to inject me according as he sees good...Gentle Spirit of sweetest humour, who erst did sit upon the easy pen of my beloved Cervantes*

> *...A COCK and BULL, said Yorick - And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard.*

Consider Kendrick Lamar and Dr. Dre on "Compton"

Now everybody serenade the new faith of Kendrick Lamar
This is King Kendrick Lamar
King Kendrick and I meant it, my point intended is raw
Fix your lenses forensics would've told you Kendrick had killed it

I pass the blunt than pass the torch of course that's my decision. . .

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THINKING EMPIRICALLY ABOUT SPACES

Quantitative methods offer literary scholars new ways to evaluate hypotheses

Claims about texts and literature as a whole can now be tested

Let's walk through an example!

When considering the Western Canon we want to assess if there are broad stylistc differences between canonical and non-canonical works

Needed to pull texts to study, so we built a corpus from texts availble through Project Gutenberg

The corpus was organized by year

Here, Dropbox came in a lot of handy for sharing the corpus files between multiple computers

All relevant information is stored in a database shared over Google Drive

We record:

- File Path
- Title
- Author
- Year
- Canonicity
- Type of Work
- Genre

We can download the database at any time in order to load it into R

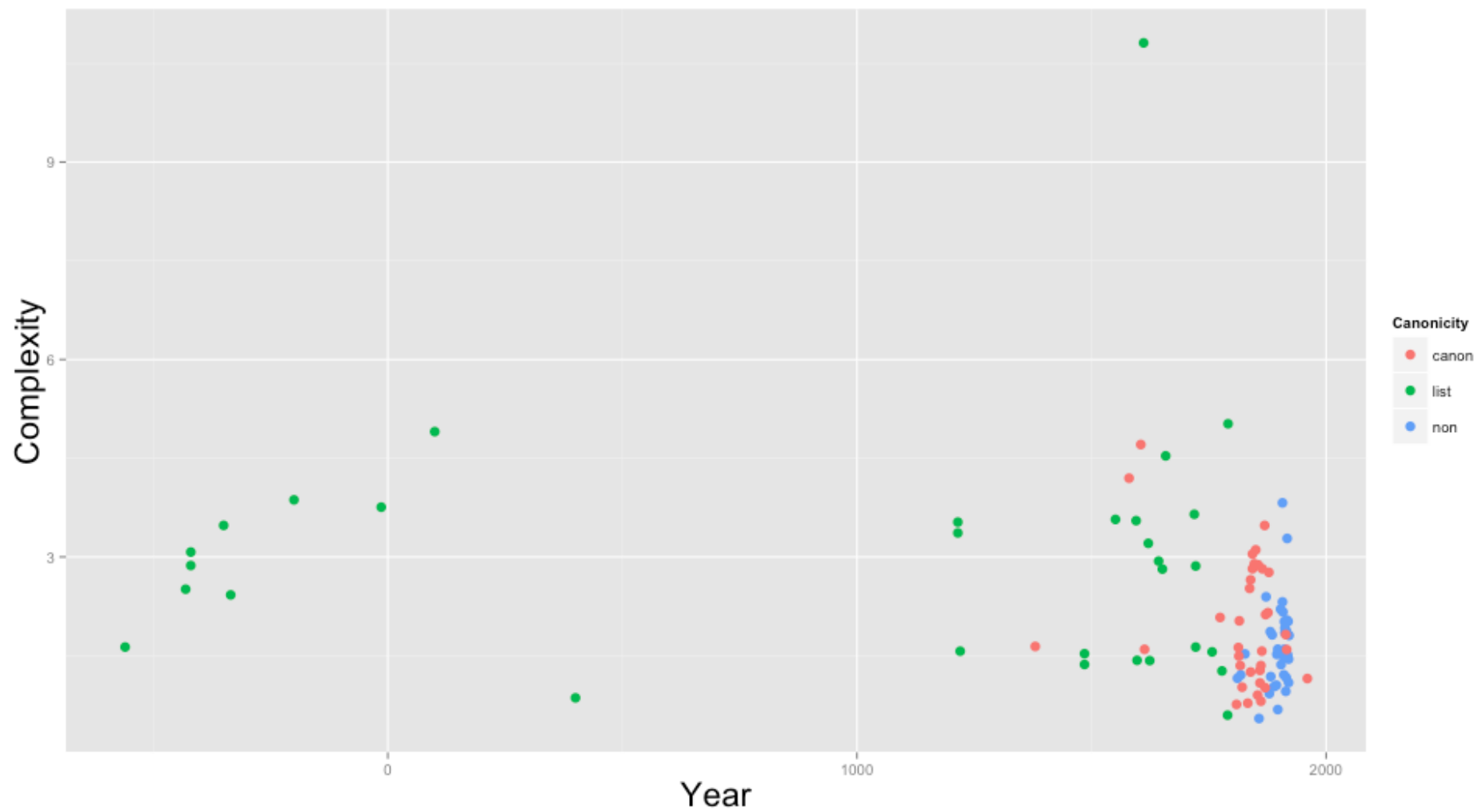R is flexible enough to handle all of our analytical demands

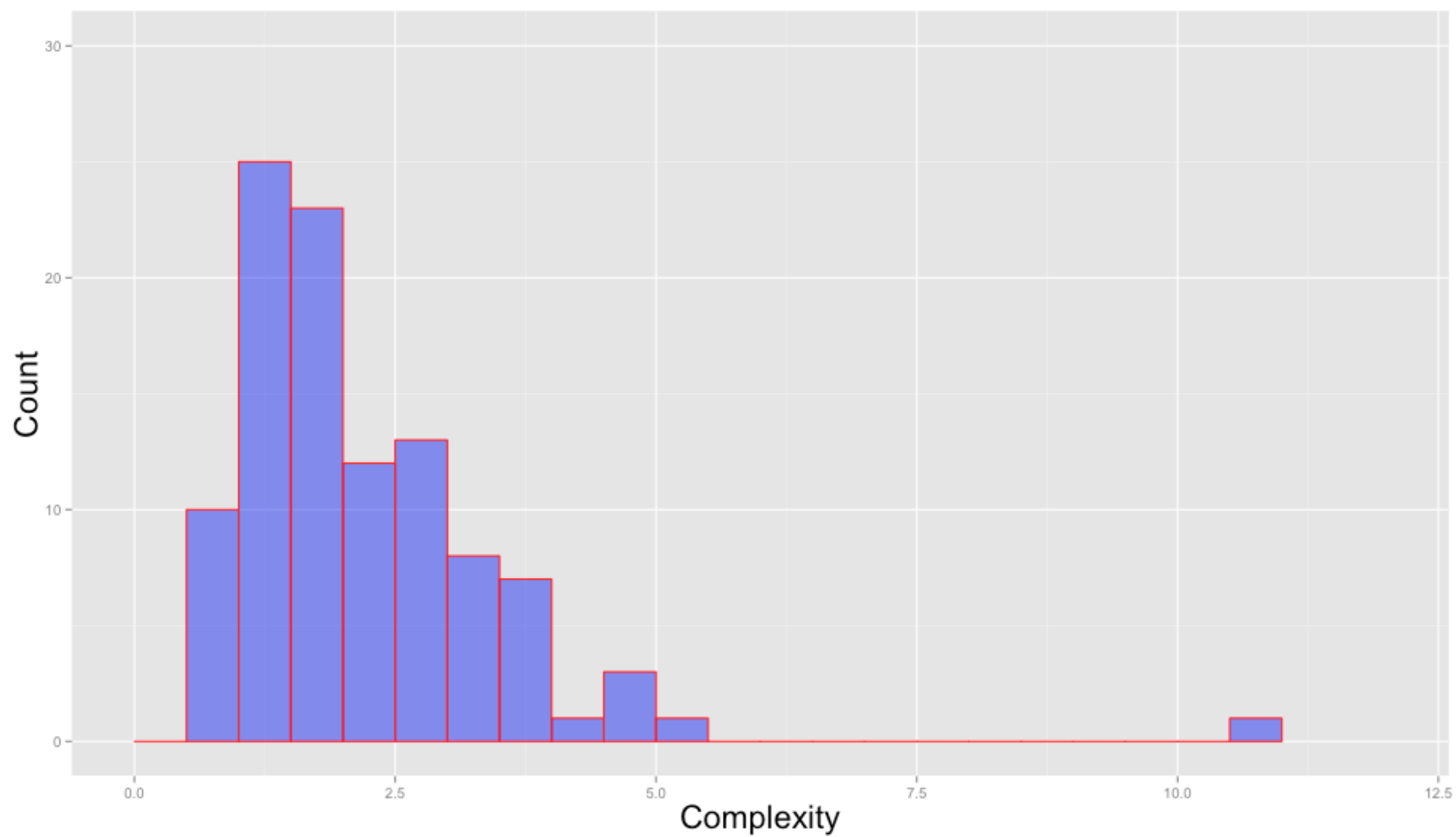R also allows us to save and share our work

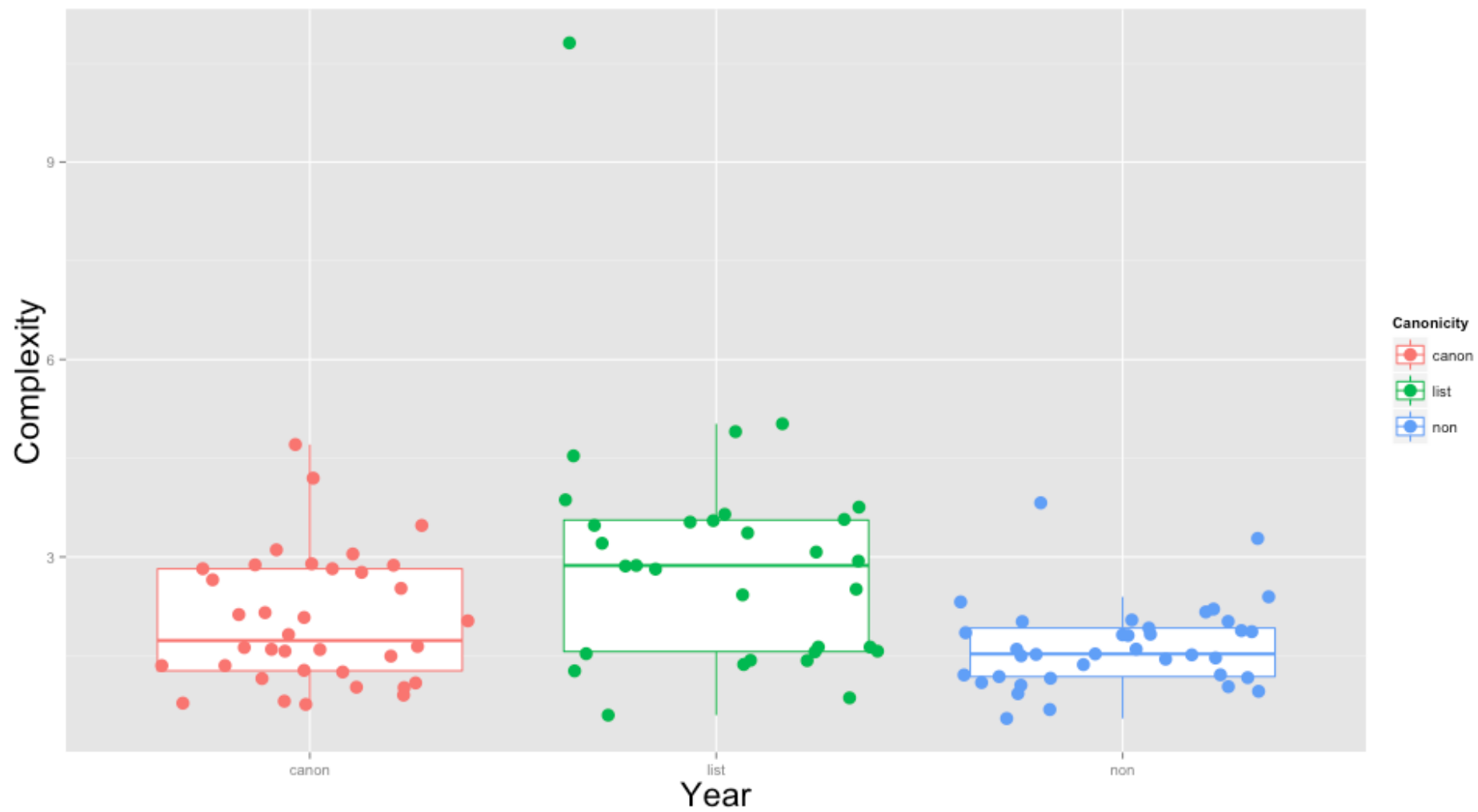For our analysis, we chose to consider three areas of stylistic complexity:

1. Ratio of Unique Words to Total Words
2. Median Word Length * Median Sentence Length
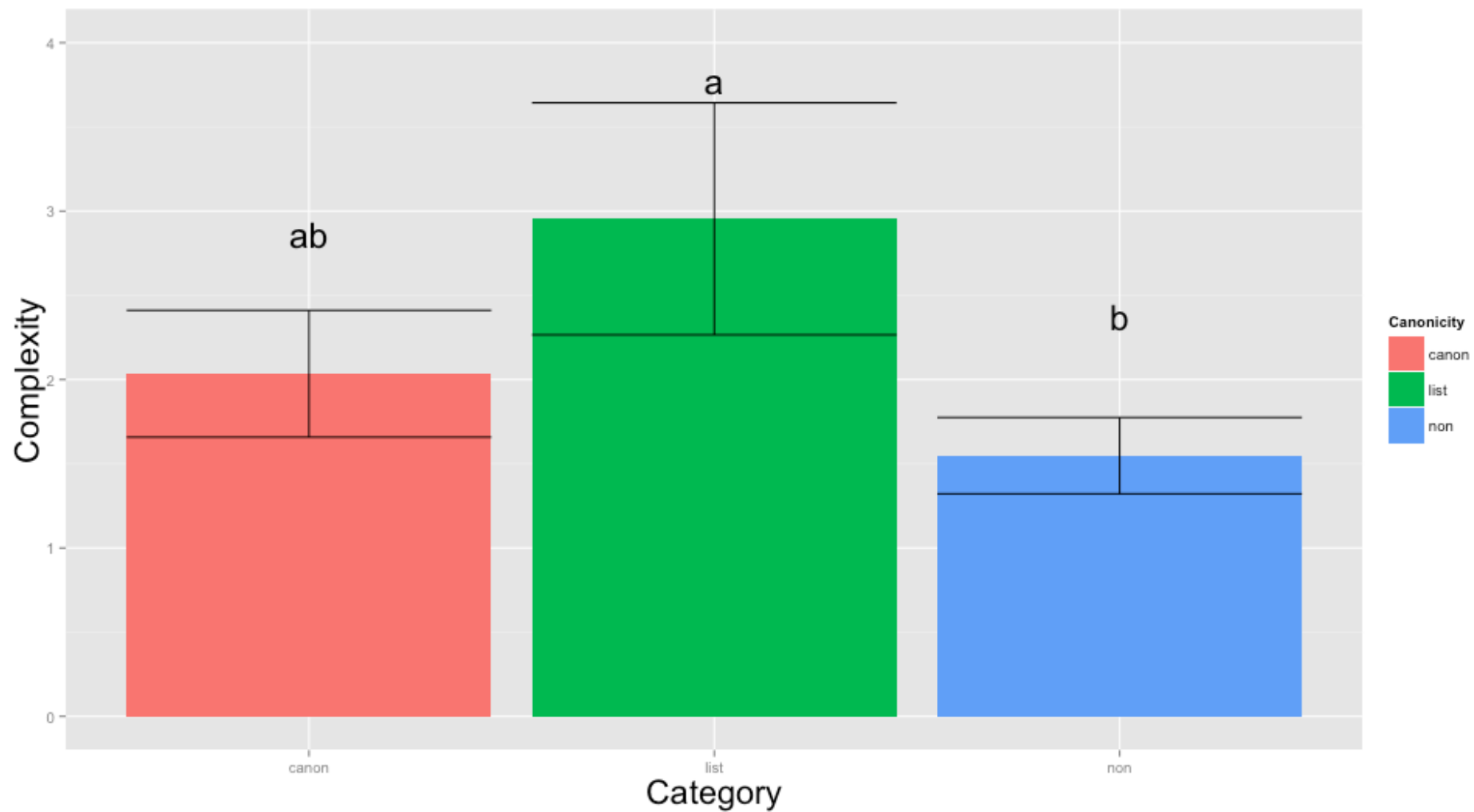3. Ratio of Non-End Punctuation to Number of Sentences

To evaluate the complexity we computed Z-Scores for each category and then summed them to get a total "complexity"

We then ran through a variety of statistical tests

QUESTIONS?