Paper PDF

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4/14/2020

Contents

This is my pdf document for my milestone 5 for GOV 1006..[1] I make use of So, Long, and Zhu (2019), Jarrett (2007), Stepto (2001), Spillers (2003), and Earhart (2015).

1 Abstract

The authors of the paper "Race, Writing, and Computation: Racial Difference and the US Novel, 1880-2000" seek to implement a computational study of race that explores how computation can present new opportunities for thinking about racial difference and its patterns and regularities at scale. They develop a case study that focuses on race, religion, and the United States novel and build a model that tests if novelists marked as "white" versus "black" produce different narratological effects with respect to the interaction of race and religious authority, in particular, the authority of the Bible. In simpler terms, do writers identified as racially different contextualize the Bible in different ways in their novels? Then, the authors identify a set of general patterns in these effects that they interpret through the model's reliance on concrete categories of racial identity. The ultimate aim of this is to propose a method for deforming this very categorical thinking. The authors' logistic regression model reveals the relationship of race, gender, and biblical citation to the "sociality" of contexts where the Bible is quoted. That is, they model the relationship between the "Bible" and "race" variables to determine what are the odds of a Bible context being "social" increases or decreases based on the race variable, the options being "white" or "black." For the purposes of this paper, moments of sociality, are defined as the presence of two or more characters engaged in dialogue or interaction. The question at hand is how a writer's identity as "white" or "black" significantly changes the likelihood that the scene of their citation of the Bible in their work is "social". The study ultimately finds that when a white writer quotes the Bible, it is less likely that she/he quotes it in a social context compared to when she/he writes about non-Bible related topics. However, when a black writer quotes the Bible, it is more likely that she/he quotes it in a social context.

2 Literature Review

This scholarly project bridges two scholarly fields historically seen as incompatible: cultural analytics (also known as "computational criticism") and critical race studies. It does so by discovering generative points of contact between data science and critique, two sets of methods typically viewed as antithetical. Cultural analytics is an emerging field wherein humanist scholars leverage the in- creasing availability of large digital materials and the affordances of new computa- tional tools. This allows them to study, for example, semantic and narratological patterns in the English-language novel at the scale of centuries and across tens-of-thousands of texts. While cultural analytics scholars have taken on an expanding array of topics, including

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[1] All analysis for this paper is available at my Github repository

genre and cultural prestige, the topic of race and racial difference has remained relatively understudied. Since computational methods demand the quantification of one's objects of study, it's likely easier to accept measuring a novel's popularity by sales figures or classifying its genre by diction than labeling it according to discrete racial identifiers. Such labeling is an affront to critical race studies, the mission of which is the deconstruction of racial categories. As such, recent scholarship on the relationship between computation and race has been critique-oriented. Scholars of science and technology, such as Cathy O'Neil and Safiya A. Noble, have documented how computational algorithms used by banks and online search engines intensify racial stratification and oppression by articulating racial minorities as fixed, quantified types that reinforce existing patterns of social inequality. Tara McPherson has shown that the history of modern computation is deeply intertwined with the history of racial formation in the US since the 1960s. The authors of this paper uses a computational model to study race and literature in order to determine both the model's affordances and its inadequacies.

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