Why I Dig: Feminist Approaches to Text Analysis

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I feel like I'm writing as part of a group of poets—historically—who are potentially looking at the end of the medium itself as a vital part of their culture—unless they do something to help it reconnect itself to mystery. . . . We need to recover a high level of ambition, a rage if you will—the big hunger."

—Jorie Graham (Gardner, 84)

In an oft-quoted interview for *Denver Quarterly* in 1997, Jorie Graham, who had just received a Pulitzer Prize, offered a blistering critique of the state of contemporary American poetry. Lamenting the field's lack of ambition, she proposed her own poetic experiments as a model for how contemporary poetry could pursue "the big hunger." Graham employs postmodern and feminist strategies—syntactic complexity, narrative gaps, and vertigo-inducing alterations in perspective—to pose expansive, metaphysical questions that demand equal parts patience, participation, and restraint from her readers in the midst of uncomfortable textual circumstances.

It is Graham's "big hunger"—the desire to ask sweeping metaphysical questions that speak directly to a contemporary moment—that has inspired my own work, where I have similarly sought to pose ambitious large-scale questions about literary tradition and genre convention. My "big hunger" compels me to consider what literary studies can bring to bear on the text mining of big data, a practice similarly steeped in the masculinized rhetoric of scale and ambition. Does the rhetoric of text analysis or its assumed empiricism dissuade feminist scholars from using it to pose questions about difference, erasure, and absence? How might the feminist literary critic approach text analysis without succumbing to the positivistic claims of objectivity that such methods so often encourage? What happens when we introduce diverse practitioners into text analysis, as Audre Lorde suggests, "as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic?" (Lorde, 112).

In 2012, Bethany Nowviskie responded to discussions about a "Digging into Data" grant competition by asking "what do girls dig?" and wondering whether data mining had become "a gentleman's sport." Three years later, the question seems to have changed to "should women dig?" or, perhaps more fundamentally, should *anyone* dig? My own sense is that not only *should* women dig, but that it is necessary that we do so. Just as Lorde's dialectic and Graham's poetics activate feminist strategies of discomfort to unsettle deep-seated ideologies, so can feminist approaches to text analysis in literary studies. Feminist theory and methodology has already addressed research practices in the natural and physical sciences and social sciences; similar engagement is necessary in literary studies with respect to text analysis. "Big data" and computational text analysis, in fact, give

rating moments of productive discomfort into four stages of the
research process: the assembling of text corpora; the translation
of methodologies across disciplines; the gauging of interpretive
value; and the selection of appropriate modes of scholarly ex-
pression. The language of feminist analysis, which challenges
traditional modes of knowledge production, is well aligned with
the practice of defamiliarizing a textual corpora in order to ask
"new" questions at different scales.

   While there is no single "feminist epistemology" or "feminist
method," feminist approaches to text mining might begin by
exposing implicit and explicit choices that influence the con-
struction of textual corpora, articulating the rationale for their
selection, and carefully scoping the claims they make in defer-
ence to the representative limitations of their datasets. For ex-
ample, by calling attention to androcentric biases, feminist em-
piricist approaches to text mining might deconstruct perceived
errors in datasets or correct biases through activist interventions
with the corpora that make gender a category of analysis (Scott).
When topic modeling poetic corpora in my own research, for
example, I have included detailed descriptions of my dataset,
which was scraped from the American Academy of Poets (poet-
s.org">poets.org) website in 2012 and includes a disappointing
ratio of three poems by male poets to every one by a woman.
Productive discomfort rendered through the assembly of my
dataset means balancing recuperative strategies for including
much higher representations of poetry by women with a com-
peting acknowledgment that the representation of work by
women in the collection remains unsatisfactory.

   Since most text-mining methods used in literary study have
been forged in linguistics or computer sciences, the algorithms
we use for literary text analysis projects, such as topic modeling
or sentiment analysis, potentially demonstrate an intrinsic bias
toward the source texts used during development. Though the
difference may be negligible, feminist approaches might lay
bare differences in disciplinary values embedded within an al-
gorithm's formal logic to expose moments of productive dis-
comfort among transdisciplinary engagements, an approach
akin to feminist calls for the integration of quantitative and
qualitative research (Sprague and Zimmerman). For example,
when beginning to work with topic modeling, my training as a
scholar of poetry contrasted with the method's tacit expectation
that "small" words, including pronouns, articles, and preposi-
tions, should be removed from the text. For literary critics of po-
etry, the position and selection of articles and pronouns signals
an interpretive significance that is disregarded in the usual
preparation of texts for computational analysis. To account for
this difference in disciplinary practice, I performed extensive
preliminary studies to measure the degree to which the extrac-
tion of small words interfered with values in literary criticism,
and in doing so sought to assure my literary studies audiences
that I had met their disciplinary, methodological expectations.[1]

   Algorithms do precisely as they are told, enacting a carefully
articulated and rigid logic; in text analysis, that logic is based on
assumptions about how language operates. Algorithms do not
interpret their own failures, but their errors generate moments

methods such as classifying and organizing text. Consequently, my approach to text-mining methods such as topic modeling differs from others. I use large poetic corpora to interrogate the assumptions of topic modeling—that documents sharing similar words likewise share thematic coherence. Where most topic-modeling results demonstrate thematic coherence, mine represent discourse coherence; subsequently, the model points to ekphrastic poems by women who share similar discourses as their male counterparts, but do so ironically. By challenging accepted research practices and testing the assumed logic of algorithms rather than using it to classify texts into settled categories, feminist interventions into topic modeling effectively resist the positivistic paradigms.

New forms of knowledge sharing that are familiar to practitioners in text analysis may elicit frustration or even confusion from colleagues in literary studies, exposing a fourth site of productive discomfort: scholarly communication. Unfamiliar forms of social scholarly exchange, such as R and Python vignettes in GitHub,2 blog posts (Swafford), or datasets on Figshare (Rand, Kraft-Todd, and Gruber), can unsettle deeply held expectations for sharing academic work. Here, feminist epistemologies of knowledge production afford scholarly debate in text analysis a language to begin engaging and responding to the collective unease of readers and authors. The formation of democratic communities of knowledge production requires mutual respect for the epistemic contributions of participants and care that their work is given credibility regardless of their academic status, identity, or mode of discourse (Grasswick).

So why do I dig? I dig as an act of re-vision. I dig to raise more questions than I can answer. I dig because—much like Jorie Graham's poetic "big hunger"—it affords one *more* way "to wrest beauty and meaning—however tentative and qualified— from the abyss of language and randomness of experience" (Costello). I dig because I believe that feminist literary studies can offer a necessary corrective to the androcentric tendencies of "big data," one that, in its unsettling, directly addresses the technological and epistemological challenges of our age.

Notes

1. I discuss this approach at length in "The Story of Stopwords: Topic Modeling an Ekphrastic Tradition," http://www.lisarhody.com/the-story-of-stopwords/.

2. Vignettes are detailed, academic walk-throughs of code packages for programming language. For an example, see Jockers, "Mjockers/syuzhet."

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