To See What is Not There: Visualizing Two-Hundred Years of American Literary Journalism

American literary journalism, as a genre, was born of the penny press in the nineteenth century and has persisted for nearly two-hundred years. And yet it remains, as Barbara Lounsberry writes, "the great unexplored territory of contemporary criticism." This is, at least in part, because the genre has been the victim of what John Hartsock calls a "critical marginalization" by critics and scholars from both English and journalism who "construct critical paradigms that would prove exclusionary, whether intentionally or not, of literary journalism." A critical historicization of American literary journalism is essential to situating it in the broader context of American literature, a category from which it has long been excluded. Equally important, however, is the recognition that even as the genre has been marginalized, so too do scholars within the field construct exclusionary paradigms. In particular, there is a significant dearth of recognition of and scholarship about women literary journalists. My project seeks to both visualize the history of literary journalism using methods derived from the digital humanities as well as to make apparent the significant gaps in the scholarship.

In order to accomplish these goals, I created a comprehensive digital bibliography of the genre—including both primary and secondary sources—which I compiled by mining and combining already extant bibliographies. Once the new, combined bibliography was created, the long history of the genre, as well as the absence of women writers—both practitioners and scholars—from the canon became clear. To visualize these absences—to see what is not there—I created an interactive web application using RStudio's Shiny framework that includes both a digital bibliography and visualizations that illustrate the history of the genre as well as the gender disparity. The bibliography is available as a fully searchable database and is filterable by publication year, source, author name, gender, and whether it is a primary or secondary text. Additionally, I have included two interactive data visualizations (with more to come): a line graph that shows the long history of literary journalism and makes visible the various peaks and valleys of the genre's popularity over the last 200 years, as well a bar graph showing the disparity in the number of works by both male and female authors. A beta version is online here: http://ljbib.jonathandfitzgerald.com.

This project critically engages with an important, but often marginalized American literary genre as well as illustrates the potential for digital bibliographic editions to chart a genre's development over time and—crucially—to make apparent significant gaps in the canon. This has long been a concern of digital humanists, from Franco Moretti to Stephen Ramsay to Lauren Klein, as well as literary scholars at large; everybody knows that there are absences in the literary record, but by their very nature they are difficult to "see." It's one thing to understand that there are omissions in the canon, but these omissions take on new significance and urgency when visualized. My project, then, is a first step; to visualize the gaps in an effort to begin to fill them. Indeed, that is the aim of my larger project, to work against the marginalization of and within literary journalism and to bring into our critical field of view this important genre and the women who have helped shape it from the nineteenth century to today.