Response by the Special Interest Group on Digital Literary Stylistics to Nan Z. Da's Study

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ABSTRACT

The publication of Nan Z. Da's study in *Critical Inquiry* has triggered a debate about the methodological and conceptual dimensions of digitally assisted inquiry in literary studies. Nan Z. Da's fundamental critique of what she calls "Computational Literary Studies" addresses the work of the international Special Interest Group"DigitalLiterary Stylistics"(SIG-DLS) of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO). Thus we—the five scholars forming the SIG's current steering committee—would like to make a short statement.

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Initially, we found it a bit surprising that a paper with so many formal, methodological, and theoretical flaws has received so much serious attention. Formal and conceptual problems of the paper have been documented in abundance (see Andrew Piper's Do we know what we're doing?, the responses at the Critical Inquiry blog, and twitter), and we don't see it as our role to add much at this level of the discussion. However, from the point of view of an international SIG dedicated to literary stylistics—and digital literary studies—stretching across traditional disciplinary and methodological boundaries, we would like to make a few observations.

First, we observe that Nan Z. Da does not refer to the wealth of European, South-American, Australian, African, and Asian contributions to what she calls

"Computational Literary Studies." Meanwhile, there is a substantial body of non-North-American contributions to international journals (such as Digital Humanities Quarterly or Digital Scholarship in the Humanities), and also our SIG represents members from around the world. It thus appears that the paper is to be primarily understood within the North-American frame—including its particular reference frame of prestige, distribution of research funding and recruitment strategies. A geographic, or cultural, bias may thus indeed be added to the problems that the paper has. And of course, there is room for asking questions about the author's actual motives.

Second, the fact that the paper has triggered a very serious debate points to a larger phenomenon extending beyond the North-American scholarly frame. It is thus of direct importance to any scholar using computational assistance in the study of literary texts: within the Humanities there exists a number of scholars and institutions mounting an irreconcilable reproach against any "digital" or "computational" approaches to literary texts. This position centers around the contention that "literature" is not "reducable" to "numbers" (as well as on a perceived excess in distribution of funds to "DH"). In its extreme forms, this position goes beyond a "healthy skepticism." Past experience shows that limiting "permissible" scholarly approaches for ideological reasons is both harmful and ineffective.

Third, we would like to highlight the difference between "CLS" and "DLS", thus, between "computational" and "digital" approaches, where "digital" is the more encompassing notion subsuming contributions from the established disciplines of computational linguistics, text mining, and NLP, as well as corpus linguistics and corpus stylistics. It thus comprises also computer-enhanced *close reading*, for example by means of keyword in context (KWIC), or digital annotations of various—including hermeneutic—kinds. This factual practice counters Da's statement that CLS analyses are essentially run "without regard to position, syntax, context, and semantics" (p. 611). Da does not seem to be aware of the actual range of methods and the various traditions present in DLS. Whether in quantitative or qualitative studies, scholars have persistently striven to account for the complexity of literary discourse, and thus get much beyond "basic word frequencies" (p. 606).

Fourth, digital literary studies, including Cultural Analytics, are an interdisciplinary, collaborative, and highly diverse endeavor. In opposition to traditional literary studies, digital studies require many hands, with labs as spaces for collaboration. It is precisely at these spaces, which can have many different organizational incarnations, where an interface of "hermeneutic" and "computational" communities is created. With a growing number of opportunities for making this kind of contact, it is up to the individual scholar to explore the full range of methods, scaling the grade of reduction, contextualization, and degree of direct scholarly interpretation.

Finally, in his opening response, Andrew Piper (quite generously) states that Nan Z. Da's paper "is part of a growing body of work that seeks to introduce the idea of replication into the humanities." We fully endorse this line of work, and see it as one of our SIG's main offices to further it—by fostering exchange and discussion, as well as methodological and terminological transparency, and the fit of models to data and method. One of our current initiatives is the DLS Tool Inventory, and an upcoming workshop at DH 2019 dedicated to the critical assessment of widely used methods in DLS.