Beyond the Colonial Present: Quantitative Analysis, "Resourceful Reading" and Australian Literary Studies

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In a recent *Meanjin* essay, David Carter identifies a number of trends in contemporary Australian literary studies. Prominent among these is "a kind of new empiricism", described as a direction of research in Australian literary studies developing "precisely through engagement with theories of culture that point beyond literary autonomy" (118). Such projects—and the eResearch resources and strategies that enable and foster them—have been increasingly successful in gaining funding in Australia. However, there is still a tendency for scholars in literary studies to regard empirical methods with "suspicion" (Joshi 264). Focusing on quantitative analysis—a particularly significant and, I believe, fruitful tool of empiricism—I will explore why we need to overcome such suspicion if Australian literary studies are to prosper. In particular, I argue that quantitative studies, and eResearch generally, are not only possible within Australian literary studies; they are the logical progression from (and the only feasible way fully to realise) the insights that have shaped the discipline over the past three decades. While employing such methods challenges methodological, critical and disciplinary orthodoxies, such a move has the potential to propel Australian literary studies beyond its current crisis of confidence by reinvigorating the discipline and offering renewed institutional, political, social and critical relevance, and alternative funding opportunities.

Over the past three decades, the canon has been fundamentally and irrevocably denaturalised. The broad school of identity politics has exposed the relations of race, gender, class and sexuality underlying supposedly universal notions of aesthetic and literary value and authorship. Concurrently, poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists have reconstituted the literary text as inherently part of a system. Impacted by individual, social, cultural, political, economic, environmental and geographical factors, no text—like no author—stands outside its particular and complex milieu. As an outcome of these insights, and a measure of their influence, Australian literary studies has gravitated

toward a cultural materialist approach. One of the first, and most influential, accounts of Australian literature to adopt this perspective was Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman's *The New Diversity: Australian Fiction 1970–1988*, which foregrounded the heterogeneity of the field and the cultural, political and material contexts in which Australian literature is produced and consumed. More recently, Elizabeth Webby's introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* asserted the commitment of that collection to cultural materialism, which she describes as a view of:

> [. . .] literary works not as aesthetic objects produced by gifted intellectuals but as cultural artefacts inevitably influenced and constrained by the social, political and economic circumstances of their times, as well as by geographical and environmental factors. (5)

However, the methods adopted by such studies work against the cultural materialist approach they advocate. Although these studies acknowledge, and indeed are conceptualised in terms of their acknowledgement of, the heterogeneous and proliferating body of work that constitutes the field of Australian fiction, they proceed by reviewing texts and/or authors individually—mentioning them one by one. To use the most comprehensive example of such work, Delys Bird's chapter on contemporary fiction in *The Cambridge Companion* refers to 107 authors. This is a substantial figure, and enormous by the standards of traditional text-based literary analysis. But it does not come close to the total of over 2500 Australian authors who published novels during the years she surveys (1970–99). The relatively small attention given to genre fiction in Bird's chapter, compared to the number of such novels published, illuminates the problems inherent in an approach that aims to explore the material, cultural and historical field as a whole, but which, due to protocol and expediency, is inevitably organised in terms of hierarchical, qualitative judgements and selections. The difficulties of pursuing a cultural materialist overview of the field by exploring texts individually are becoming increasingly apparent as the field of contemporary fiction exponentially expands.

The disjunction between intention and result apparent in Bird's chapter is merely compounded in the majority of literary scholarship, in which one or two, or at most four or five, texts and/or authors are explored. Moreover, although the canonical paradigm has been thoroughly challenged, it is more often than not the same handful of authors and texts that are analysed. The best of these studies leave the reader with a detailed and nuanced understanding of a particular text or small group of texts. No insight into the field as a whole is offered, but at least no such insight is claimed. In contrast,

much literary criticism makes broad generalisations about the field or era as a whole based on a small selection of texts. Ultimately, whether or not a broad understanding of the field is claimed, the way most literary scholars currently do literary criticism—individually analysing authors and texts—prohibits such an understanding while compelling us continually to revisit a select and elite (albeit somewhat more extensive than in the past) group of texts. This approach works against, often while claiming to uphold and progress, the denaturalisation of the literary canon.

But what is the alternative? Obviously, maintaining an individualised focus while widening the scope is not feasible. Bird could not mention every novel published between 1970 and 1999—even mentioning the 222 novels published in 1970 would more than double the number of texts Bird engaged with in her original survey.[1] Moreover, as Franco Moretti asserts in his critique of traditional "close reading" methods in literary studies, "it's not even a matter of time, but of method"; even if Bird had the time and energy to read and discuss the work of every Australian author, such a study would offer no real understanding of the complex interactions and interrelations that produce the literary field as it functions in its social, political and material context. As Moretti puts it, "a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases, but it *isn't* a sum of individual cases: it's a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole" (4).

Quantification, on the other hand, allows us to perceive and represent literary culture in much broader and more comprehensive ways than would be possible or justifiable based on studies of individual or small groups of texts or authors. As an empirical strategy, quantitative analysis is fundamentally problem-based and pragmatic: such studies are tailored responses to specific questions or issues.[2] For this reason, it is not possible to identify a discrete set of forms that quantitative analysis of Australian literature might take. In each of its possible forms, however, it is the abundance of data on which quantitative studies are based that permits the overall shape of, and interconnections within, the literary field to emerge.

Robert Darnton compares the potential of statistics in literary studies to the knowledge made possible by the first maps of the "new world":

> [H]owever flawed or distorted, statistics provide enough material [. . .] to construct a general picture of literary culture, something comparable to the early maps of the new world, which showed the contour of the continent even though they did not correspond very well to the actual landscape. (240)

Priya Joshi makes this point using the same comparison, arguing that, "Statistics, like maps, are indeed lies to some extent, but [. . .] they are the lies that tell a truth that would not otherwise be evident" (264). By enlarging the literary field and reconceptualising it, quantitative analyses have the potential to challenge and refigure fundamental historical and theoretical assumptions in literary studies, and the underlying divisions upon which these assumptions are based: such as the distinction between high and low culture, the canon and the archive, and national literatures.[3]

Tim Dolin's work on nineteenth-century Australian readers is a case in point. Dissatisfied with the tension between studies of individual readers and reading communities, Dolin analyses public library borrowing records to discover what books and combinations of books were read in nineteenth-century Australia. The results enhance understanding of the history of the novel in Australia in ways that studies of particular nineteenth-century texts or authors would not allow. Indeed, in demonstrating the prevalence and cultural significance of popular fiction and novels by overseas non-Australian authors to nineteenth-century Australian readers, Dolin's quantitative analysis fundamentally challenges and refigures what we understand as the history of the novel in Australia.

This capacity to contest and reposition our understanding of the field is not unique to Dolin's work, but is in fact a common outcome of quantitative analysis. To give an example from my own work: in Australian literary studies, the 1970s are widely understood as a moment of fundamental change—the beginning, as Gelder and Salzman contend in their renowned study of the period, of "an immediate and dramatic increase in the production of Australian fiction" (2), especially Australian novels (3). So common is this perception of the shape of Australian literary history that it colours virtually every discussion of the contemporary field. It underlies, for instance, the timeframe of Bird's chapter on contemporary fiction in *The Cambridge Companion*. But this conception of the field is mistaken. A simple quantitative analysis of the number of Australian novels published from 1960 to 1979 shows that the 1970s were in fact a time of decline, rather than growth, in the size of the field.[4] The potential and scope for similar quantitative interventions into Australian literary history is enormous. In offering new research questions and directions, and particularly in its capacity to challenge and show the fallacy of existing and accepted theoretical explanations, quantitative analysis has real potential to reinvigorate the study of Australian literature.

One of the main reasons why quantitative analyses have this potential is that they allow us to ask broader temporal and comparative questions—and find

answers—than is possible or defensible based on close readings of individual texts or *oeuvres*. In the Australian context, such questions might include: does Australian literature and literary criticism change over time? If so, how does it change, and do these changes follow patterns? How does this relate to patterns and trends in the emergence of narrative forms in other national literatures? What is the relationship—in terms of reception and impact—between the canonical texts in the Australian literary tradition and other, peripheral, works? Does this relationship change over time? What is the relationship between patterns in the field of Australian literature and those that emerge in other countries, or across a number of countries? Asking and addressing such questions requires quantitative methodologies. Yet for too long a focus on aesthetics and literary value, and more recently, on critical theory has insulated literary scholars from these approaches.

The value of quantitative analyses to Australian literary studies lies in the potential to address such questions. In particular, this new empiricism would bring the discipline into much more direct conversation with cultural history and cultural studies than has traditionally been the case. This shift in focus is a necessary component of meeting and realising the critical insights of the past three decades. Inherent in the challenge to the canon in recent history is a realisation that literature itself is not an inherently privileged textual form or mode of communication. The literary sphere might function as such in particular cultures and at certain times, but this is not an absolute state. Additionally, just as literary texts in no way stand outside the social, political and material environments in which they are produced, disseminated, read and understood, literary culture is not separate from other forms and methods of communication. The impact of the Internet and other technologies on the nature and meaning of the written word merely compounds the interoperability of textual and non-textual media in contemporary society. Such interoperability does not mean that Australian literary studies must collapse into a general discipline of historical and cultural scholarship; although not isolated from other textual and non-textual forms, literary texts and culture have a specificity that requires disciplinary knowledge and modes of investigation. At the same time, however, awareness of the interoperability of literature with other forms of communication necessitates a much greater level of co-operation—and methods to foster that co-operation—between the different disciplines concerned with human communication and interaction.

As well as offering a new perspective on, and insights into, the national field and the position of literature within that field, quantitative analyses have the potential to answer the implicit intellectual dilemma posed by the

disjunction between the nation-based approach of much literary studies, and the inherent internationalism of literary culture. Just as a literary text is intrinsically part of a system, national literatures do not stand alone, but operate in the context of other-national and trans-national texts, movements and trends. Whereas traditional approaches to literature can discuss individual texts and authors in relation to these international movements and trends, quantitative analyses have the potential to more fully investigate global literary culture, as well as to situate Australian literary culture in relation to it. In particular, if trends, shapes and cycles within the national literature can be seen, it is easier to gauge how Australian literature connects to other-national, multi-national and trans-national trends, shapes and cycles. A growing body of analyses of fiction in countries other than Australia is adopting quantitative methodologies. Engaging in this trend provides Australian literary scholars with ready-made opportunities for comparative studies with the potential to greatly enhance the relevance of the discipline both nationally and internationally.

Moretti, one of the foremost proponents of analysing literature within a world literary system, insists that empirical methods like quantitative analysis should *replace* rather than *complement* traditional, text-based strategies. However, I believe such a perspective misapprehends the nature of the literary field, which includes quantifiable as well as non-quantifiable elements. Just as quantitative analysis cannot provide a detailed and nuanced interpretation of a particular literary work, traditional, text-based methods of reading cannot hope to make sense of literary culture's quantitative aspects. Accordingly, restricting ourselves to one form of analysis or the other produces an impoverished understanding of the complexities of the field. Instead, as Joshi contends, "rather than forcing a divide between quantitative method and literary study, between statistics and cultural understanding, we should use one to enhance the other" (273).

The development of approaches to Australian literature that employ both traditional, text-based strategies and empirical methods—through a model of "Resourceful Reading"—is the basis of the ARC project I am currently conducting with Gillian Whitlock, Robert Dixon and Leigh Dale. Resourceful readings use strategies such as quantification to identify and pose new and innovative research questions and problems, to discern and understand trends and turning points, and to provide and test emerging hypotheses. At the same time, resourceful readings incorporate traditional, text-based analyses to allow for more detailed explorations of particular moments, movements and shifts. Importantly, however, the objects of close, textual

analysis in such studies are selected not on the basis of aesthetic or qualitative judgements, but for their relationship to or within the overall patterns and trends discernible through quantitative studies. In other words, traditional modes of literary analysis are at all times integrated with quantitative and empirical approaches, such that these text-based analyses constitute a method for assessing how external factors are inscribed thematically and/or stylistically within individual texts.[5]

A resourceful reading of novels in the 1930s, for example, would first conduct a series of empirical experiments to investigate the field and era as a whole. The possible scope of such experiments is enormous. In quantitative terms, such experiments might involve analyses of elements of the literary works themselves, such as sales figures, publication and genre types, and places of publication; the authors of those works, including levels of remuneration received, numbers of men and women publishing, and the cultural or ethnic background of authors; or patterns and trends in the public and critical reception of those works. Directions for close reading would develop from the quantitative findings, and might involve a close reading of fiction or criticism published in a particular week of each year, or of novels with themes that seem to relate to or reflect a particular characteristic of the period. Thus, rather than abandoning traditional, text-based analyses of literature as Moretti implies, the model of resourceful reading proposes that empirical methods like quantitative analysis can complement, work in conjunction with, complicate and be complicated by individualised readings of literary texts.

As well as realising intellectual and critical developments in literary studies, incorporating quantitative methods is necessary to meet the demands, and the possibilities, of new technology. The introduction of the Internet and the potential for online searches, catalogues, databases and journals has fundamentally changed the way we approach research in literary studies. In Australia, the coming of the digital age has involved national investment in electronic archives on Australian literature, such as the AustLit database and new online projects like the Australian Poetry Resources Internet Library (APRIL).[6] Certainly, the scope of information we now have access to, and are obliged to scrutinise, is extensive, and would have been difficult to imagine even a decade ago. Indeed, whereas many investigations into national literary fields are hindered by a lack of quantitative information, Australia's previous incarnation as a colonial outpost—and the bureaucracy accompanying this incarnation—means that data on books, readers and publishing in Australia is relatively plentiful (Dolin 117). Accordingly, while Darnton and Joshi are right to point out the often unreliable nature of statistics on literature, the

scope of data available on the Australian field means that, in performing quantitative analyses, opportunities arise to cross-match datasets and, in the process, arrive at progressively closer approximations of the operations and interrelations in the field.

In addition to this massive expansion in the amount of data available on Australian literature, there has been a dramatic shift in the way we are able to store and analyse that data. Computerised databases allow us to search, record and manipulate multi-dimensional information in extremely complex and integrated ways. Technologies such as the Geographic Information System (GIS) offer the potential for studies of literature that include and require the analysis of spatial data.[7] Such technologies, as John Pickles asserts, are not "merely more efficient counting machines [. . .] [but] new technologies and tools [. . .] [for] accounting, recording, archiving, overlaying, cross-referencing and mapping information" (5). Despite such technological innovations, and the enormous amount of information on Australian literature that is now available, the questions we ask in literary studies, and the way we approach those questions, have been much slower to change. In other words, the way we study literature is largely tied to the way we were previously able to find out and process information about that literature. Accordingly, our methodologies need to change in response to innovations in the types of questions we can now ask and the ways we can ask them, as well as in the information available to answer such questions.

Yet in Australian literary studies, even in sectors that have arisen as a result of technological innovation, like the AustLit database, an adherence to traditional methodological paradigms predominates. The extensive nature of this database—containing over 90 000 author entries—seems to demand search options that allow scholars to access and manipulate large amounts of data about Australian literature. However, the query options provided by the database are predominantly tailored for individual author and text research. While necessary, these individual search options do not fully realise the potential of the database and the information it contains.[8] Thus, even when we are using technology, the discipline as a whole is not taking advantage of—or even realising—the possibilities thereby made available. Accordingly, our discipline and methodologies are lagging behind the vast majority of other academic disciplines in terms of technological innovation, and the approaches and transformations those innovations enable.

As well as meeting the demands of the contemporary critical and digital age, incorporating quantitative analyses into Australian literary studies offers the discipline social, political and financial benefits. Policy decisions made

over the last year (including a $1.5 million endowment for a new Chair in Australian Literature and two $100 000 annual Prime Minister's literary awards) suggest a shift in the position and perception of Australian literature and literary studies in the public sphere.[9] The recent proliferation and popularity of book clubs, literary festivals and writing classes and workshops indicates the resonance between such funding decisions and community interest in literature. This environment creates ideal opportunities for literary scholars to engage with—and provide expertise and leadership in—conversations currently going on around reading and literature in Australia.

Quantitative studies provide complementary, innovative and effective ways for literary scholars to enter and influence such conversations. While the analysis of individual literary texts offers valuable and powerful insights into "the way a culture thinks about itself" (Thompkins xi) at particular historical and cultural moments, quantitative studies explore patterns and trends in such thinking, and offer insight into the movements and cycles that occur when literature is produced, and when it comes into contact with readers, the critical establishment, and the marketplace. As Simon Eliot asserts:

> Identification and quantification of crude trends and large-scale changes over time may not have the appeal of a forensic discussion of subtle changes over short spans of time, but they are much more likely to produce information that is a reasonably accurate reflection of what probably happened in the past. In other words, macro-level analysis is much more likely to deliver worthwhile results than micro-level studies. (288)

Indeed, the recent response to Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees* suggests that Eliot might be underestimating the level of general interest in and receptivity to quantitative analyses of literature.[10]

For scholars in Australian literary studies to function as leaders in debates about the discipline, it is also vital to engage in the political arena. While the findings of quantitative analyses have the potential to impact on government decisions about Australian literature, knowledge of statistics is also necessary to participate in discussions about the position of literature and literary studies in the policy arena. Many decisions about funding, research and teaching are made on the basis of statistics: this might include the number of women receiving writing grants, or more notoriously, the number of undergraduates enrolled in literary studies or the number of Chairs professing the discipline. The ability of scholars in the discipline to engage in and provide information about—and criticisms of—such governmental decisions and practices would further expand the relevance of Australian literary studies in the public

and policy arenas. The potential of quantitative results to facilitate the communication of literary ideas and findings is not a matter of "dumbing down" scholarly research to pander to politicians and the general public. Nor is it a cynical way of accruing funding (although Australian literary studies, like many other disciplines in the arts and humanities, could certainly use the funding that flows from actively publicising disciplinary findings). Far beyond an economic imperative forced upon us, impact and relevance are things we must aim for and embrace if we are to make our discipline not only relevant and useful, but influential—and even existent—in the future.

Incorporating quantitative methods into Australian literary studies therefore has the potential to resolve many of the critical, social and institutional pressures and problems contributing to the current sense of crisis in Australian literary studies. But at the same time, such a strategy entails significant individual, disciplinary and epistemological shifts. In a paper on the "Humanities eResearch Revolution", Paul Arthur identifies the impact of recent technological innovations on the humanities as the most significant transformation in the field since the introduction of the printing press. And like the printing press, technological innovation requires fundamental transformations in the ways in which literary scholars think about writing, researching, funding and knowledge. At an individual level, incorporating quantitative methodologies and eResearch strategies into literary studies requires a new set of literacies, computational as well as statistical. The possibility of a split in the scholarly community between those with technological capabilities and those without may present future difficulties involving communication within the discipline, and more divisively, equality of access to funding opportunities.

Employing quantitative methods in Australian literary studies also requires a rethinking—at interpersonal and institutional levels—of the ways scholars interact with others inside and outside the discipline. Forums such as the Sarsaparilla blog, and the literature discussion group of *Larvatus Prodeo*, have facilitated informal, but constructive and energetic, discussions of and collaborations on issues pertinent to Australian literary studies. Within academe, however, the continuing dominance of an individualistic approach to research impedes the cooperation and coordination—the sharing of information, ideas and resources—that makes empirical research possible. Incorporating collaborative research (both disciplinary and interdisciplinary) into Australian literary studies is not only necessary for the success of quantitative approaches. The growing acknowledgement of collaboration (particularly of a transdisciplinary nature) as central to the enhancement,

production and communication of new knowledge,[11] reinforces the potential of such strategies to reinvigorate Australian literary studies and progress knowledge in the discipline.

As disciplines are at least partly defined by the methods they employ, an incorporation of empirical strategies like quantitative analysis into Australian literary studies will inevitably resituate and redefine the discipline itself. Confronting this same situation in the discipline of history, Katherine Lynch notes that if humanities scholars view the sciences as opposing and competing with the arts and humanities, the adoption of such empirical methods "will appear fraught with danger and sacrifice". On the other hand, if we understand the sciences as a set of beliefs united by "accuracy to sources and judgements based on evidence" rather than assumption, "then the outlook for interdisciplinary research in the human sciences seems less perilous" (61).

Even with this realisation in mind, these are challenging issues, requiring fundamental shifts in individual and disciplinary practice. Nevertheless, the advantages of embracing quantitative analysis, resourceful readings and eResearch more generally far outweigh the difficulties and uncertainties such strategies introduce and the reorientations they require. Embracing such methods will meet the demands, and realise the potential, of recent critical insights and technological innovations, while at the same time making our discipline relevant institutionally, socially and politically. Certainly, the problems posed by the individual and institutional transitions necessary to employ quantitative methodologies—as well as the questions raised by such studies—may not have immediately apparent solutions. But rather than fearing such a challenge, I believe, like Moretti, that "problems without a solution are exactly what we need in a field like ours, where we are used to asking only those questions for which we already have an answer" (26).

NOTES

   1   This figure is taken from AustLit database records, but omits novels classified as Non-AustLit Novels and those that are included in AustLit search results but are not definitely published in 1970.

   2   In a related development, the importance of understanding empirical methods from the sciences and social sciences for cultural studies in Australia was acknowledged in the creation of the Australian Research Council Cultural Research Network. Central to the philosophy of this network is an acknowledgement of the usefulness and necessity of empirical strategies in fostering disciplinary knowledge, and the cooperation necessary to pursue such knowledge.

3 For a detailed discussion and demonstration of how quantitative analysis can transcend these fundamental dichotomies, see Moretti.

4 I presented this research at the "Manifesting Literary Feminisms" conference held in December 2007 by Monash University.

5 As one outcome of this project, the role and function of eResearch strategies and resources to research in Australian literary studies will be explored and debated at the eResearch and Australian Literary Culture Symposium, to be hosted by the University of Sydney in December 2008.

6 A number of other projects involving the creation or supplementation of digital archives and resources have also been funded by the ARC, including the Resourceful Reading group I am part of, and projects being conducted by Dolin, Richard Nile, Margaret Harris and Elizabeth Webby.

7 Jason Ensor's current PhD project on the place of publication of Australian novels represents an innovative and exciting application of GIS technology in Australian literary studies. Based on early results presented at the 2007 ASAL conference, his study has the potential to refigure understanding of the place of Australian literature in the international market. For a further discussion of the applications and possibilities of GIS technology in literary studies see Fiona Black, Bertrum MacDonald and J. Black.

8 The discrete and limiting nature of this approach to data is particularly apparent in the decision to publish that information in hard copy. Admittedly, this resolution is rendered virtually compulsory by the current organisation and attribution of funding in the Australian tertiary sector (where publishing is rewarded above vital bibliographical work). Nevertheless, such publication counteracts the most important characteristic of the AustLit database: its fluidity.

9 Such investments in the national literature present a marked contrast to the political environment a decade ago, marked, as Graeme Turner asserts, by "a decline in the legitimacy of certain traditional rationales for policy driven interventions aimed at shaping and protecting the national culture" (4-5).

10 Even a brief Internet search reveals economists, biologists and anthropologists, as well as interested members of the general community and scholars within literary studies, excitedly exploring, interrogating and expanding on Moretti's models and arguments.

11 See Dixon for a discussion of the intellectual and institutional benefits of "boundary crossing" for Australian literary studies. As Dixon points out, cross-disciplinary collaboration is co-operative and applied, rather than individual and theoretical: that is, groups of scholars with diverse skills unite and collaborate in response to particular issues or problems, rather than individually applying pre-existing theories and methodologies to literary texts and themes.

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