

SAMPLE PROPOSAL SUMMARY

Chris Forster, "Statistical Foundations for Computational Literary Study" Mellon New Directions (2019)

DRAFT: I will use the Mellon New Directions Fellowship opportunity to shift the focus of my research towards computationally enabled literary history by developing both a solid grounding in relevant statistical methods for computationally driven textual analysis and applicable skills in computer programming. The field of computationally driven literary interpretation has emerged over the past decade. In an earlier moment called "humanities computing," such work has sometimes been discussed as part of the wider category of "digital humanities," as well as under the narrower rubrics of "distant reading" and "computational literary studies." While I have spent time working in this area, it has become very clear to me that without a firmer, formal grounding in relevant statistical methods, it is very difficult to pursue this work. It seems, indeed, impossible to take full advantage of the opportunities afforded by new large text datasets without additional training. Resources like HathiTrust enable literature scholars to pursue research questions across wider periods of literary history, with far greater numbers of texts. The sort of methods I am interested in pursuing are mostly basic measures of statistical similarity. Although these are not cutting-edge methods from the perspective of a statistician, they are utterly foreign to literary study. While it is common for graduate training in the social sciences to include at least some quantitative skills, such training has never been typical in the humanities and remains almost entirely absent. The rapidly developing availability of textual resources, makes a basic grounding in quantitative methods newly vital to the humanities in general and to literary studies (grounded, after all, in the study of *text*) in particular. With this training I will be able to help reshape the field of literary studies as these developments continue to make new methods and new sets of texts available for interpretation.

FINAL: Using computers to bring quantitative text analysis to literary studies has reached a point of maturity. Once labeled "humanities computing," this trend has emerged over the last decade, sometimes as part of the wider category of "digital humanities," or under the narrower rubrics of "distant reading" and "computational literary studies." Taking advantage of newly available large-scale text databases, such approaches use statistics to inaugurate a radical shift in literary studies, a shift to a study of literature that is both broader (because no longer bound by the canons of conventional literary study) and more empirical (because grounded in quantitative analysis). Is such an "empirical" or "quantitative" literary studies possible without sacrificing what is unique to the field? What would be its benefits? I take this question to be a genuine and pressing one, which can only be answered by literary critics and literary historians who have mastered (or at the very least understood) these new tools and methods. While the true value of these methods remains uncertain, I am convinced that understanding and evaluating their potential is a vital concern for contemporary literary studies. I will use the Mellon New Directions Fellowship to equip myself for such research in two ways: first, and primarily, I will establish a solid grounding in relevant statistical methods for computationally assisted textual analysis; second, I will solidify and extend my existing skills in computer programming to better use these methods. The New Directions Fellowship offers a unique, and ideally timed, opportunity to master these methods that by turns promise and threaten to reshape the study of literature and culture.