Impact Report:
Discover How the Gale-ASECS Fellowships Helped Open New Research Pathways

Read How One Fellow Used Digital Humanities Tools to Save Countless Hours Researching 18th-Century Women Writers

MEET THE SCHOLAR

As one of five scholars awarded a fellowship from Gale and the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) in 2022, Heather Heckman-McKenna used digital humanities tools to enrich her research on women writers of the eighteenth century. Conducting the first sensibility study based entirely on the subversive body, Heckman-McKenna sought to show how women writers used feminine actions such as sighing, trembling, and fainting to create disruption as a literary response to systemic oppression.

All Gale-ASECS Non-Residential Fellowship recipients were granted access to Gale’s Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) and Gale Digital Scholar Lab (the Lab) for a six-month period of research. ECCO is the most comprehensive online historical archive supporting eighteenth-century studies, connecting researchers to every significant English-language and foreign-language title printed in the United Kingdom between the years 1701 and 1800. The expanse of content housed in ECCO meets substantial research potential in the Lab, an industry-leading, data-mining research environment that removes barriers to digital scholarship.

Fellows received training to use the text- and data-mining tools available in the Lab to explore ECCO and advance their work using digital humanities methods. Read on to see how Heckman-McKenna used this powerful cloud-based analysis platform to build a robust body of data with materials from ECCO and expand the possibilities of her research.

Heather Heckman-McKenna
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Gale-ASECS Non-Residential Fellowship
VISUALIZING THE POWER OF TEXT & DATA MINING

Heckman-McKenna’s purpose was to research how women write about the body in eighteenth-century literature. She aimed to catalog texts that include sighs, trembles, faints, and relevant synonyms in the literature of that period, sourced from material housed in ECCO.

Before her experience as a Gale-ASECS fellow, Heckman-McKenna’s process was limited by the tools available to her. According to the scholar, “I had been searching ECCO for key terms, then data entering into Excel by hand.”

“In effectively one fell swoop, the Lab allowed me to instantaneously access and download data that would likely have taken me years to build by hand.”

Heckman-McKenna was able to take advantage of text- and data-mining tools in the Lab to compile information efficiently and get a “far more complete picture of how women authors wrote about the sentimental body.” The scholar said, “I knew that the Lab would allow me to quickly find and download vast amounts of data that are relevant to my project, thus allowing me to build my database. I was particularly excited about using the Lab’s ngram analysis tool to ascertain which words related to my study (i.e., trembling, quivering, quaking, shaking, etc.) occurred most frequently throughout the period as a whole as well as in different decades.”

ASSEMBLING A ROBUST BODY OF DATA

So what data was Heckman-McKenna able to source and organize using digital humanities tools? “The Lab allowed me to find all texts housed in ECCO that included sighs, trembles, and faints (as well as key synonyms, i.e., quivering, quavering, etc.), resulting in a total number of 51,308 hits,” she said. “Given that I’m looking at trends of bodily actions of sensibility, for the sake of this project, specific documents weren’t as pertinent. What’s exciting is that they will be pertinent in the next phase of my work: I’ll be using the data drawn from the Lab to determine highly representative sentimental texts, and the distant reading work will allow me to hone in on close readings of particularly representative individual texts.”

When reporting on the potential of her database to support future research, Heckman-McKenna wrote, “Having access to this data alone is groundbreaking. With .csv and .json files in hand, I am able to organize and parse data on bodily sensibility in almost any configuration. For example, I might sort all 51,308 lines by decade to determine usage of key terms over time; I might find how many texts include sighs, trembles, and faints versus those only with trembles and faints; I might search only for trembles by decade to see how frequently they appeared during different periods of the century.”

“Having so many data points per text available for download allows me a wide range of productive inquiries and helps me look both broadly and at the minutia of how bodily sensibility was written about. I’m incredibly grateful for the opportunity this fellowship has given me.”
DISCOVERING NEW RESEARCH PATHWAYS

The Lab was essential in providing more-efficient avenues for Heckman-McKenna’s research, but it also helped advance her digital humanities skills to discover new research pathways. “Learning about topic modeling, parts of speech analysis, and named entity recognition makes me wish I had another year of access to the Lab,” she said. “I'd not before used a sentimental analysis tool, and, though understanding that it is better suited to a modern lexicon, still I was curious how it would work and what I might find through using it. Similarly, I wondered what the clustering tool and topic modeling might help me find thematically across my corpus.”

When considering her future research, Heckman-McKenna noted, “The 51,308 text dataset I now have to use offers me the foundation for many years of research.” In particular, the scholar said, “Proximity searching will be a game-changer for me. The fact that I can study, for instance, how many texts include sighing followed by trembling within fifteen words (or how often sigh* coincided with subver* within 50 words, and so on) could allow significant breakthroughs in sensibility studies in the coming years.”

“I am able to perform research that simply would not have been possible without the immediate access to data that the Lab allows. It is an exceptional tool, and I’m grateful to have been granted this access that exponentially progressed my work.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERESTED SCHOLARS & FACULTY

To other scholars interested in implementing digital humanities research methods with the Lab, Heckman-McKenna noted, “I can see myself recommending all tools that the Lab offers. For scholars interested in linguistic patterns, the parts of speech tool could be especially compelling. For those working to ascertain topics across large swaths of data, I would suggest the topic modeling tool. The named entity recognition tool could be a starting point for those looking to geographically track datasets in ECCO’s collection. In short, I can see terrific potential in using all of the tools the Lab currently offers.”

“The Lab is already an incredible resource, and it’s obvious that it will only continue improving from here. The download and analysis functionalities that Gale has developed offer scholars significant opportunity for new ways to ask questions and think about eighteenth-century literature.”

To faculty interested in sharing digital humanities research methods in an instructional environment, Heckman-McKenna also recommended, “In teaching undergraduates, I imagine I would use proximity searches and ngrams most frequently. Allowing students the freedom to make their own inquiries based on ngram results could help students recognize that studying literature is far more than mere close reading. They could learn that they could approach literature with a more methodical, scientific mindset to uncover potentially brand new ways to think about texts.”
Get an Inside Look at Powerful Research Tools

Want to learn more about the resources Heckman-McKenna used to expand her research and develop her digital humanities skillset?

Discover the possibilities of Gale Digital Scholar Lab at gale.com/digital-scholar-lab

Find more information about ECCO at gale.com/ECCO

Interested in learning more about ASECS?

Find more details about the ASECS, including the society’s initiatives and events, at asecs.org