

# NETWORKS AND TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES OF LETTERS: HOW CAN LITERARY STUDIES RECLAIM THE ‘NETWORK TURN’?

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IN RECENT YEARS, SCHOLARS IN LITERARY STUDIES have increasingly been encouraged to move beyond disciplinary boundaries and engage with what has been termed the ‘Network Turn’ in the humanities. This approach, while it encourages scholars to benefit from – and contribute to – the ‘visual and quantitative analysis of networks to shed light on the study of culture’, also acknowledges the value of ‘critical skills native to humanistic inquiry’ in the ‘theorisation and critique of our networked world’.<sup>1</sup> Such advocacy is found in key scholarly volumes, such as *The Network Turn: Changing Perspectives in the Humanities* (2021),<sup>2</sup> which has argued for the value of adopting network-based methodologies and frameworks – typical of fields like computer science – to expand and enhance the scope and reach of humanities research, beyond disciplinary boundaries. Within the ever-evolving domain of the Digital Humanities, network analysis has indeed often been used to uncover and visualize hidden connections, sometimes revealing unpredictable patterns, and to tease out and highlight important socio-cultural nodes emerging from complex webs of intersecting links. In particular, in the past twenty years, the use of Digital Humanities tools has been increasingly applied to Literary Studies to map out cultural networks. For instance, historical-bibliometric datasets have been used to trace the dissemination of ideologies across space and time,<sup>3</sup> while Social Network Analysis (SNA) has been used to map relationships between authors or between authors and cultural agents, extrapolating data from biographical works, epistolary correspondence and paratexts.<sup>4</sup> More recently, scholars in the field of the Digital Humanities have highlighted how visualizing networks via computational methods can yield immediate insights from larger corpora, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of research across disciplines and increasing its accessibility to a much larger public.<sup>5</sup>

As this growing body of scholarship demonstrates, this network approach is undeniably providing literary specialists with new tools to explore, systematize and disseminate hidden complexities, often in a transdisciplinary fashion, across texts,

genres and literary and historical contexts. Some such tools have had the ambition to '[open] the inquiry to a wider diversity of actors and to redefine our understanding of creativity'.<sup>6</sup> Within such discussions, the 'Network Turn' is often viewed as a more contemporary, democratizing, and ostensibly impartial, horizontal approach – one that stands in sharp contrast to more traditional notions of socio-cultural hierarchy and literary value. Such notions have long shaped the formation of the literary canon and have frequently been bound to specific nation-states, linguistic contexts, disciplinary domains and established traditions. In fact, visualization and mapping projects rooted in the Digital Humanities, such as the 'Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe' (ERNiE), to mention but one, have shown, not without irony, how the very boundaries of nationalism have transcended the frontiers of a given nation-state.<sup>7</sup>

In June 2024, the Literary Worlds Research Network at the University of New England in Australia held a two-day international workshop to encourage a broader discussion around the ongoing productivity of the idea of 'network' within Literary Studies. This original gathering aimed to foster a cross-disciplinary, diachronic, multilingual and innovative discussion of network as a framework for the inclusion of silenced, neglected or unjustly underrepresented voices in our literary worlds. Some of the papers then presented are now reworked in this 'Talking Point', which, beyond its original scope, also sets out to consider, and demonstrate in practice whether this relatively recent 'Network Turn' in Literary Studies might be a passing methodological trend, or whether it may indeed offer a meaningful path towards a more democratic, pluralistic, decentred and interdisciplinary Literary Studies. It might therefore come as a surprise that, broadly speaking, most of the contributions in this issue set aside – at least for the purposes of this discussion – Digital Humanities methodologies based on large datasets and visualization tools in order to return to a more foundational exploration of the concept of the network itself as a critical tool.

The idea of network as a theoretical framework owes much to the French sociologist Bruno Latour's Actor-Network theory, which postulated that our natural and social world is construed as a constantly shifting network of relationships. As Rita Felski has warned us, however, 'the alliance of actor-network theory and Literary Studies, like all alliances, requires translation, tinkering, and diplomacy'.<sup>8</sup> In particular, we would argue, embracing such an alliance should not be a leap of faith. For instance, during our original discussion, the Digital Humanities scholar John Ladd invited us to consider how network analysis is far from a completely objective and unbiased tool. Networks are just as neutral and fair as data permit and cannot account for archival gaps, silenced voices and the powerful forces that determined which historical and literary sources would or would not survive and be deemed worthy data points in the first place. In other words, 'Humanities' – and the human element – within 'Digital Humanities', remains an essential element, as the contributions in this issue demonstrate, whether by engaging directly with the concept of 'network' or by illustrating its potential through specific case studies.

In this context, Pierre Bourdieu's writings on the cultural field – with its inevitable corollary of power struggles – remain highly relevant. Within a network approach, we cannot forget that the *champ* [field] remains a structured social space, 'un réseau de relations objectives (de domination ou de subordination, de complémentarité ou d'antagonisme, etc.) entre des positions' [a network of objective relations (of domination or subordination, of complementarity or antagonism, etc.) between positions].<sup>9</sup> Within the *champ*, cultural agents compete using their cultural capital and ultimately contribute to the development of cultural trends. Bourdieu's cultural capital is relevant to literary production and consumption, as these processes are always mediated not only by the authors themselves, but also by a wide range of cultural agents, including patrons, translators, editors and publishers. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that Bourdieu's theories of the cultural field can be strengthened when complemented by network analysis, since 'the interaction within the field is consequential to its structure and to the classifications and qualifications used within the field'.<sup>10</sup>

In light of all this, the first two contributions in this collection use epistolary networks as a productive framework to explore women's cultural agency in the early modern period. Studies on epistolary exchanges between elite women, particularly in England, have demonstrated the sociability of letter writing and its role in forging 'female alliances'.<sup>11</sup> Yet, these women's cultural networks remain largely unexplored and, within Italian Studies for instance, the emphasis placed on Isabella d'Este has resulted in a discounting of the complex and diverse networks within which she operated. Cultural agents do not operate in isolation.<sup>12</sup> Thus considering networks as social and textual relationality enables us fully to understand the contribution of cultural agents towards the development and dissemination of cultural objects.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital underpins Giulia Torello-Hill's 'Epistolary Networks: Elite Women as Cultural Agents in Early Sixteenth-Century Italy', which examines the cultural agency of elite women in early sixteenth-century Italy, focusing on their role in the dissemination of Spanish chivalric romances *Tirant lo Blanc* (1490) and *Amadís de Gaula* (1508). This study highlights how elite women like Isabella d'Este and Antonia del Balzo leveraged epistolary networks to acquire, translate and circulate these texts, reinforcing their social prestige and shaping the literary canon. By adopting a networked approach to literature, Torello-Hill demonstrates how transnational and multilingual interactions enriched the chivalric genre, offering a nuanced understanding of literary production as a dynamic and transnational cultural process.

Diana G. Barnes's 'Madame de Sévigné's Letters and the Formation of Elite Community' analyses Madame de Sévigné's epistolary exchange with her daughter Françoise-Marguerite de Grignan as a model of elite, familial and transnational networking, emphasizing their role in shaping sociability, cultural transmission and epistolary traditions. Published posthumously after a heavy-handed editorial intervention, their letters were welcomed in England as a model of tasteful sociability and translated into English not long after. Their influence on the development of the

epistolary genre both in the private and public sphere, invites a reflection on the very definition of the literary canon.

The essay collection *Early Modern Women and Transnational Communities of Letters* has offered tangible examples of the interconnections between early modern women writers, their cultural geographies and their crossing of linguistic, cultural and literary borders.<sup>13</sup> These encounters often determine a cross-fertilization of genres. As Kate Chedgzoy contends, an exploration of cultural geographies would help enlighten the complexities of these networks of authors, as well as cultural agents, 'simultaneously demanding a reconsideration of the canon and proposing new methodologies for reading it'.<sup>14</sup> Building on Steve Pile's definition of location as 'places defined and places taken up through experience, identity and power', Chedgzoy urges scholarship to remap what 'delineated the boundaries of communities and nations, and thus inflected the meanings of location, in the early modern period'.<sup>15</sup> This, in turn, challenges the principle of the nation as a network, inviting us to think about literary outputs as the product of transnational networks. Lateral networks of this kind can tell us a lot about the (un)making of the very idea of the nation and national identity. By embracing Caroline Levine's reorientation of Literary Studies around the network rather than the nation, the ambition of this Talking Point is thus to highlight 'patterns of circulation rather than rootedness, zigzagging movements rather than stable foundations'.<sup>16</sup>

Delving into the expanding field of the Digital Humanities and data visualization, Valentina Gosetti, Paul Gibbard and Alistair Rolls's 'Translation Nation: Literary Translation as Cultural Mediation in Australia' introduces a larger project that aims to construct the first chronological map of French literary texts circulating in translation in Australia from the colonial period, when translations were largely imported from Britain and disseminated, adapted and edited to suit local conditions, through to the present day, when a local industry is flourishing and exporting to the world translations featuring distinctively Australian characteristics. The overall idea is to use the mapping of this unexplored network as a springboard to propose an alternative cultural history of Australia via its consumption and production of translations and adaptations of French literary texts. In doing so, the project critically engages with the 'network turn' by focusing on the human element. By means of close textual analysis of historical documents and interviews with contemporary Australian translators, the project brings otherwise unheard voices to the fore.

In this light, the theoretical approach that underpins this Talking Point invites us to 'look sideways to lateral networks that are not readily apparent', thus decentring the traditional canon.<sup>17</sup> Networks invite us to view literature as the result of transnational and translingual encounters that often bypass the 'centre'. Clara Sitbon's 'Decentring through Islands: Archipelagic Approaches to Multilingual Crime Fiction' explores islands as a metaphor to reflect upon networks in their articulation of distance/difference and encounters/multiplicity that dynamically shape crime narratives. Combining literary analysis, cultural geography and transnational studies,

her essay calls for scholarly collaboration to expand the thematic and geographic scope of island-based crime fiction.

To investigate the multiplicity of dynamic encounters that shape autobiographical texts authored by twentieth-century Italian-Australian women, Alice Loda's 'Entanglements: Emplaced, Transnational and Transcultural Trajectories in Life-Writing by Italian-Australian Women' draws upon the concepts of 'locational feminism' and 'transduction'.<sup>18</sup> This theoretical framework captures the transcultural nature of women's writings, which are grounded in the local and at the same time adapt and transform.

This Talking Point also explores networks as theorized scholarly practices, drawing on diverse approaches – including First Nation epistemologies – which encourage us to recognize our 'true status as a single node in a cooperative network' and to understand that non-linearity should not be seen as an anomaly, but indeed as the norm, accepting that 'the winding path is just how a path is'.<sup>19</sup> This process enhances critical differences and encourages us to engage with the text in non-linear ways, creating new meanings. Alistair Rolls and Brooke Collins-Gearing's 'Imperfect Seclusion: Critiquing Networks and Networking Critique' explores the challenges of reading a topical text of crime fiction such as 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' *uncritically*, resisting genre seclusion and the model of linearity that comes with it – the reader is guided by the detective who in the end unravels the truth – and reorienting our reading of the text. A 'networked critique' can enable scholars to appreciate critical differences reaching beyond the confines of disciplinarity.

Networks also enlighten the dynamics of intertextuality, calling into question the role of the reader and the layering of a text that borrows, adapts and reinvents materials, style and imagery from other authors, traditions and genres. Jennifer Rushworth's 'Reading Dante with George Eliot and Co.' takes the first chapter of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) as a case study to approach intertextuality as a 'transtemporal, multilingual network', exploring the complexity and fragmentariness of the mediated experience of both author and reader. 'Reading with' an author allows one to understand intertextuality not as a linear process, but as a complex network of mediated readings, including translations, adaptations (sometimes through other mediums) and paratexts.

A networked approach to literary texts has the potential of unveiling the layered and relational nature of cultural transmission. The transnational and translanguing dimensions of texts, which are disseminated, adapted and translated across space and time, underscore the porousness of national boundaries. This is likely to encourage a more inclusive and nuanced picture of cultural transmission that recognizes collaboration and cross-cultural adaptation as the driving forces that have shaped and continue to shape literary texts. At the same time, by collectively embracing and exploring a broadly conceived network-based approach to Literary Studies, this Talking Point also aims to foster constructive critique, invite thoughtful feedback and encourage an ongoing collective critical reflection on its inevitable limitations,

oversights and opportunities for growth and improvement, with a view to providing an ever-expanding critical network of scholarly voices on the very idea of network.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Ruth Ahnert and others, *The Network Turn: Changing Perspectives in the Humanities*. Elements in Publishing and Book Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> 'Mapping Print and Charting Enlightenment', 2015 <<http://fbtee.uws.edu.au/mpce/advistory-board/>> [accessed 1 May 2025].

<sup>4</sup> Christopher N. Warren and others, 'Six Degrees of Francis Bacon: A Statistical Method for Reconstructing Large Historical Social Networks', *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 10.3 (2016) <<https://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/10/3/000244/000244.html>> [accessed 1 May 2025]; Dan Edelstein and others, 'Historical Research in a Digital Age: Reflections from the Mapping the Republic of Letters Project', *The American Historical Review*, 122.2 (2017), 400–24; John R. Ladd, 'Imaginative Networks: Tracing Connections Among Early Modern Book Dedications', *Journal of Cultural Analytics*, 6.1 (2021), 180–216; 'Digital Mitford Project' <<https://digitalmitford.org>> [accessed 1 May 2025]; Catherine Kikuchi, 'Competition and Collaboration in the Venetian Book World from 1469 to the Early Sixteenth Century', *Annales histoire, sciences sociales* [English edn], 73.1 (2018), 179–205.

<sup>5</sup> Gundela Hachmann, 'Network Analysis in Literature and the Arts: Rethinking Agency and Creativity', *Journal of Literary Theory*, 17.2 (2023), 221–40.

<sup>6</sup> Hachmann, 'Network Analysis in Literature and the Arts', p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> 'Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe' <<https://ernie.uva.nl/>> [accessed 1 May 2025].

<sup>8</sup> Rita Felski, 'Latour and Literary Studies', *PMLA*, 130.3 (2015), 737–42 (p. 741).

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 321.

<sup>10</sup> Wouter de Nooy, 'Fields and Networks: Correspondence Analysis and Social Network Analysis in the Framework of Field Theory', *Poetics*, 31.5–6 (2003), 305–27 (p. 325); Helmut K. Anheier, Jürgen Gerhards and Frank P. Romo, 'Forms of Capital and Social Structure in Cultural Fields: Examining Bourdieu's Social Topography', *American Journal of Sociology*, 100.4 (1995), 859–903.

<sup>11</sup> Amanda E. Herbert, *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. with an introduction by Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 6, and Bourdieu, 'Le champ littéraire: avant-propos', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 89 (1991), 3–46.

<sup>13</sup> *Early Modern Women and Transnational Communities of Letters*, ed. by Julie D. Campbell and Anne R. Larsen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Kate Chedgzoy, 'The Cultural Geographies of Early Modern Women's Writing: Journeys Across Spaces and Times', *Literature Compass*, 3.4 (2006), 884–95 (p. 889).

<sup>15</sup> Steve Pile, 'Introduction: Opposition, Political Identities, and Spaces of Resistance', in *Geographies of Resistance*, ed. by Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1–32 (p. 25), quoted in Chedgzoy, 'The Cultural Geographies of Early Modern Women's Writing', p. 889.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Levine, 'From Nation to Network', *Victorian Studies*, 55.4 (2013), 647–66 (p. 657).

<sup>17</sup> Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, 'Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally', in *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 1–24 (p. 1).

<sup>18</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Lubomír Doležal, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Jasmina Lukić, 'Reading Transnationally: Literary Transduction as a Feminist Tool', in *Pluriversal Conversations on Transnational Feminisms: And Words Collide from a Place*, ed. by Nina Lykke and others (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 139–54.

<sup>19</sup> Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save The World* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019), pp. 90, 33.