The digital humanities (DH) is a field without a method. Or so one might conclude when reading the numerous critiques of DH and even the pronouncements of one of its leading practitioners. Franco Moretti, whose name has long functioned as a metonym for DH, has provided openings for critics by alleging the field is “un-theoretical,” caught in a “heady mood of permanent exploration” (Distant 122). In 2017, Moretti wrote, “big data has produced a decline in theoretical curiosity, which, in its turn, has made our results often mediocre” (“Response” 687). Such comments encourage the belief in DH’s shortcomings and undermine the work of practicing digital humanists, who have, for several years, been developing a rigorous methodology around the concept of statistical models. In this essay, we focus on computational criticism, that subset of DH of which Moretti, through his work with the Stanford Literary Lab, was part, even as we recognize that it has moved beyond Moretti’s criticisms through its turn to modeling as method. We advocate modeling for literary studies with a case study in which we build a literary historical model, then manipulate it, to illustrate competing visions of economic life held by academic economists and black women novelists.

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historical model, then manipulate it, to illustrate competing visions of economic life held by academic economists and black women novelists.

In pursuing modeling, computational critics must contend with widespread awareness of the damage quantitative models can do when wielded by corporations or the state. In a critique of recent books that have reached large audiences and showcase “the dark side of Big Data” (O’Neil 13), Christopher Newfield expresses a series of concerns, including, of special interest for humanists, “a particularly subtle and difficult limit of the numerical: its aversion to the interpretive processes through which the complexities of everyday experiences are assessed.” Even as we share Newfield’s wariness toward naïve faith in quantification, and admire the work of Newfield and other scholars focused on critique, we propose that the humanities can do more than expose the misuse of data. Humanities scholars can—and should—build greater literacy about statistics and put these methods to use from a position of critique.

What are models? In the sciences, models are statistical, graphical, or physical constructions that simplify the representation of social reality or the natural world and often take the form of computer algorithms and mathematical formulas. Researchers deploy them to understand or predict the relationship between empirical variables, like SAT scores and college admission. The most important aspect of models, however, is that they can be manipulated. Quantitative researchers understand that models coarsely approximate reality, so they recursively alter models—changing parameters, introducing new variables—to better parse data. The danger with models is that they might become invisible, making the data appear natural and uncontested. Critical use of models requires the recognition, as Johanna Drucker notes, that “designing a text-analysis program is necessarily an interpretive act,” one with “cultural, historical, and other prejudices built into [its] design” (631). To avoid the naturalization of models as objective—and to nurture a culture of critique—scholars must always make visible the design and decisions that go into building their models. Each step of modeling involves an act of reasoning and interpretation. Models offer a solution to Newfield’s worry that the numerical is limited by resistance to interpretation. Models afford interpretive access to the numerical.

What does modeling look like for literary studies? In his aim “to begin the long overdue process of reflection on the act of computational modeling” (67), Andrew Piper understands close and distant reading as complementary methods even to be used recursively, thus construing his essay as a “polemic” against the ossified “either/or” debate (69). Building a hermeneutic process to analyze texts at scale, Piper envisions beginning with a research question and a belief,
based on close reading. Then one tests that belief with a model for
the purpose of refinement and validation. The model redirects one to a
new passage to read closely, then to a revised model based on that
close reading, and so on. The model’s requisite simplification enables
“understanding complexity at a greater degree of scale” (70), while
we return to close reading to refine our understanding with the granu-
larility that models miss. Piper offers this movement as an iterative, re-
cursive, dialectical process that moves in the shape of a spiral,
approaching, if never reaching, “an imaginary conceptual center” (68).

Here we build on Piper’s approach to study the use of eco-
nomic language in the US novel between 1950 and 2000. How has
the language of economics, as codified by economics as a discipline,
entered the US novel in the postwar period? Have economists influ-
enced novelists at the level of language, and if so, how and how
much? We begin with the belief, inferred from current scholarship
on economics and culture, but never before empirically tested, that
economic language became more prevalent around 1980, especially
among white men—a belief that we strive to complicate and give
nuance. Readers may detect an irony in the relationship between our
method and case study. No academic discipline has valorized the
use of quantification for social analysis more than economics. As a
discipline, its language has become saturated with the language of
modeling. Cultural and literary critics have long argued that eco-
nomics has even harmed society by creating false accounts of how
humans behave and think. Can we take their tools, however, and
make them ours as a way to critique economics itself?2

We make two major discoveries. First, we show how US novel-
lists adopted more formal economic language in the 1970s; we also
show how black women writers used far less of such language than
other racially identified groups, exposing a gap between how they
and academic economists envision economic life. Significantly, this
gap led us to discover that our model’s version of economic
language—drawn from professional economists—lacked the words
slave, slavery, and plantation, each of which is central to economic
life for many of the novels written by black women—including
Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, and Alice Walker—in this period. In re-
sponse to this lacuna, we manipulated our model, adding these words
to it, to dramatic results. With the addition of just these three words
to a lexicon of several thousand, our account of the postwar US
novel and economic language significantly alters, leading to a third
major discovery, this one revealing surprising facts about the novel
in the mid-1990s: black women change course, using economic lan-
guage with greater frequency, while men far outpace women in their
use of slavery-inflected economic language. Thus, we revised the
model to force it to deal with its own limits and, in doing so, we
discover a threshold to how academic economists formally define the “economic,” as well as an important blind spot in how literary scholars have written the postwar history of the US novel.

1. Data

We begin by describing our corpus, which represents “the US novel, 1950–2000,” and which, with colleagues at the University of Chicago, we constructed in the following way. First, we identified the 35,089 most commonly held US novels in libraries across the world based on WorldCat records. Why 35,089? We found that novels outside of the top 35,089 most-held texts in libraries tend to be held by only one library. We felt that a cutoff of two libraries would allow us to produce a corpus of reasonable size for computational analysis (fewer than 100,000) but one large enough to represent a nontrivial cross-section of the US literary field. If a novel was held by fewer than two libraries, we believed that too few ordinary readers probably read that novel at the time of its publication and that it was unlikely to have contributed powerfully to the field. One more point: What percentage of the actual field of US novel production does this sample represent? Precisely calculating the number of novels published in this period is notoriously difficult. Yet, based on research by R. R. Bowker and others, we estimate the total number of US novels published between 1950 and 2000 to be approximately 350,000 texts (roughly 5,000 a year). So our WorldCat sample represents slightly more than 10% of all the novels published in that period, a figure we were comfortable enough to call substantial.

Since we expected to perform text mining on this corpus, we also had to acquire digitized versions of these texts. Again, with colleagues at Chicago, we acquired such versions of as many texts as possible through a combination of purchasing digital books, web scraping versions of texts available online, and hand-scanning published novels. Of course, we could not get electronic versions of all 35,089 novels. We acquired some 5,931 e-texts or about 17% of the WorldCat corpus. An obvious concern is that the texts we have found digital versions of represent a skewed version of the WorldCat corpus, but after running several simple tests, we found the following: (1) the percentage of novels published per author is roughly the same and (2) the average number of libraries that hold each text in the corpus as a distribution is roughly the same. We did find one major skew: compared to novels in our WorldCat corpus, the novels in our acquired list lean toward the present, likely reflecting a bias among consumers to buy and read recent books. In sum, we found one nontrivial skew in our filtered list of e-texts. Later in
the essay, we take measures to address this skew so that it will not negate our overall results.

Finally, we performed one additional filtering of the corpus. We decided from the start to pursue the implications of economic language across the axes of gender and race. For our list of 5,931 novels, we identified the gender and racial background for each author. We used a rigorous standard for this process, given the complexity of social identity: we independently researched each author, and only tagged the author by gender and/or race if we found a reliable scholarly source that identified the author as such, and/or if the author themselves identified their gender and/or race. Only then was an author tagged. We then confirmed that our tags matched. After this process, we were left with 4,857 novels and 1,646 authors. So, last, we performed the same analysis of the corpora as above and found that our newly filtered corpus was commensurable with our first filtered corpus based on the phenomena initially tested for (number of books per author, average number of books held by libraries, distribution of texts over time). Statistics for the final corpus: 60% male, 40% female; 95% white, 3% black, 1.6% Asian American, Latinx, and Indigenous. Concerned that this corpus contains too few novels by African American writers to arrive at significant conclusions, we supplemented it with novels from the period collected by colleagues at the University of Kansas. This added an additional 101 novels and 30 authors, increasing the total percentage of black authors in the final corpus to 5%. How were these novels collected? For the past 30 years, a group of librarians and scholars at Kansas, under the aegis of the Project on the History of Black Writing, has identified and gathered every work of fiction they could find written by a black person in the US from 1880 to 2000. They have located some 1,200 texts, of which 250 have been digitized. Of those 250 texts, 101 were not found during our first filtering process (held by two libraries) and were added to our first corpus of novels. Many of the works in the overall Kansas corpus were self-published or published by a tiny press, and thus were unlikely to find their way into a library and WorldCat’s records.

In total, 4,857 novels and 1,676 authors, all authors identified by gender and race. This is the final form of our corpus for analysis in this essay. Importantly, we acknowledge that several of the decisions leading to the construction of this corpus introduce bias: the decision to restrict our WorldCat list to novels held by at least two libraries; the fact that our filtered list of e-books skews heavily toward the present. Our corpus is not perfect—none is—but it represents a broad and nontrivial version of the US literary field: namely, those texts deemed worth holding by libraries and, in many cases, maintaining in electronic form by publishers.
2. Oxford Dictionary of Economics

Our model uses the *Oxford Dictionary of Economics (ODE)* as its source text in identifying a set of terms we regard as indexing “the economic.” One might ask why we chose a normative dictionary that reflects economics as a hegemonic discourse. We chose the ODE because we want to determine the extent to which normative economic language has penetrated novelistic discourse. Our expectation is that the model will not register large swaths of literary expression that imagine the economic in nonhegemonic terms, an omission that we anticipate will have implications for the model’s scoring across axes of race and gender, and which we will account for with close reading. We recognize that the ODE offers a limited view of the economic.

Why did we choose this dictionary in particular? It is the most widely held economic dictionary based on WorldCat library holdings. The ODE is currently held by 701 libraries, while 626 hold the *American Dictionary of Economics (ADE)*, 460 hold *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics and the Law*, and 446 hold the *Routledge Dictionary of Economics*. These latter three dictionaries represent the ODE’s competitors. We chose the ODE rather than the ADE because the latest edition of the ADE was published in 1983, which means it lacks terms that appear in the latter third of the corpus. We also note that the transnationalism of US economics as a discipline obviates the risk that national variation would skew our results. To ensure the correctness of this approach, we hand-checked each term in the ODE to make certain that national variation would not influence our results.

The ODE provides a standardized account of “the economic.” This is what we are interested in measuring: the diffusion of the language of economics in its codified form into US novels after World War II. Therefore, we did not choose a dictionary that reflects, for example, African American vernacular conceptions of the economic as lived in more everyday terms. Such a lexicon would index the economic as substantially as a dictionary of terms developed by professional economists, but again, we stress that, for this essay, we are interested in how normative economic language manifests and exerts force on the postwar US novel. Understanding how this language works then offers a basis to study its mutation and the resistance to it in other contexts. At the end of this essay, we gesture toward what this work would look like.

We used the third edition of the ODE published in 2009 by John Black, Nigar Hashimzade, and Gareth Myles. The first edition was written by Black, a British economist, and published in 1997. In 2009, Hashimzade and Myles, two British economists currently
active, completed a revision. They strove to balance “formality and accessibility” (Hashimzade et al. 11). The dictionary should be rigorous enough to reflect modern economic scholarship but general enough to be useful to nonacademics. Appropriately, the revising authors imagine the ideal users of the dictionary as both “[s]tudents taking a first course in economics” and more advanced graduate students and professional economists (Black et al. 1). This approach is confirmed by a book review, which notes that “it is comprehensive enough for advanced users, yet it uses simple language to keep concepts accessible to newcomers” (Mossman 123).

One might object that a dictionary published in 2009 might lean heavily on terms that emerged later in, or after, the period under consideration and skew our results. What if the ODE includes a great number of terms that were coined after, say, 1980? What looks like a trend toward more economic words in US novels might be simply a reflection of the contents of the dictionary. To test for this contingency, we checked each potentially confounding term that appears at least 100 times across the corpus against its first noted use in the Oxford English Dictionary. The first term that aroused our suspicion was takeover, which appears 608 times in the corpus. According to the OED, takeover was first used as an economic term by The Economist in 1936. Next, we considered buyout, which appears 369 times in the corpus—it only shows up as an economic term, according to the OED, in 1976, in the journal Mergers & Acquisitions. We wondered about trickle-down, which appears 336 times in the corpus, though President Harry Truman spoke about abandoning trickle-down economics in 1949. Finally, we flagged multinational, which OED has first appearing in Businessweek in 1968. It appears 281 times in the corpus. The only words, then, that appear more than 100 times in the corpus and were first used as economic terms after 1950 are buyout and multinational. Together, they appear 650 times in the corpus, accounting for 0.04% of the total. More terms, new to the period, appear fewer than 100 times, but altogether, these new terms do not skew our results.

To summarize: the 3,227 keywords found in the ODE reflect the terms and concepts most prevalent and significant in the economics discipline. Our account of “economicness” is, then, based on the instantiation of these dispositions.

3. Model

We built a model to determine the “economicness” of each novel in our corpus. Our first step was to count how often the terms from the ODE appear in our corpus of novels. Economic terms include both single words and short phrases. We had to ensure that we
only counted instances of words used for their economic meanings. For example, bond could be that which connects to people or things, in which case it would not be economic; but it could also be a debt security, in which case it would be economic. The same is true of many other words, including bank and union. We did rigorous computational and analytical work, coding each polysemous term so that we only counted terms in their economic senses as specified by the ODE.

After we computed a count for each term in each novel, our next step was to normalize these counts. By “normalize,” we mean that we took the total number of economic terms that appear in a novel and divided that sum by the total number of words that appear in the novel. This is a common strategy to control for the length of the novel and thus make each novel’s count of economic terms comparable, despite differing lengths. This calculation produced a score for each novel, but after ranking each novel in the corpus, and then studying that list, it became clear that this simple computation was not adequate to measuring the “economicness” of the novels.

We found the problem. We discovered that a small set of economic terms accounts for the majority of the counts. Specifically, we calculated that 70.2% of the occurrences of economic words in the corpus are clustered in the most common 25 terms, or less than 1% of the ODE. When a novel uses an economic word, it tends to use one of only a handful of economic terms. These are everyday economic terms, like dollar, money, bank, business, rent, cash, property, and credit. In fact, 34.5% of the occurrences are accounted for with just two terms: work and job.

The first model, then, presented us with a novelistic world of everyday economics. This would be fine, if that was what we had wanted to model, but given that we wanted to model the diffusion of disciplinary economics into the literary field, this first model was not adequate. To control for this effect, we computed another value to identify the amount of unique economic words that appear in a novel. If a novel uses economic words 500 times, but only 30 different words, we call those words “unique” for the purposes of our model. Then we divided this value by the total number of unique words in the novel as a “normalization.” Finally, we took our two computed values and added them together to produce a final score.

Mathematically, the model consists of the equation in Figure 1. The first term corresponds to our normalization of total economic terms per novel; the second term corresponds to our efforts to measure the breadth of economic terms per novel by considering the number of “unique” economic terms in each novel. Summed, and multiplied by 100 to give us more legible numbers, they give us a quantitative measure of “economicness.”
4. Analysis

4.1 1973

Moving on to our results and analysis: first, we plotted the rate of use of the terms throughout the corpus across the period (Figure 2). Does the rate of use of economic terms in US novels change between 1950 and 2000? Our first graph suggested that it does not. If anything, the use of economic terms slightly declines. But the trend is too small to serve as the basis for definitive claims. When we investigated what we were modeling with this graph, we realized that, though our model works well when balancing the influence of terms in ranking individual novels, when aggregated we were capturing the effects of the most common terms, those that appear in everyday life. Our first graph tells us that, when considering everyday economic language, we see no trends. But we wanted to explore the use of disciplinary economic language. We decided to test what would happen if we removed the top 100 terms. The result changed dramatically (Figure 3).

This graph is striking. We see a sudden and sustained 20% increase beginning in the early 1970s. (The smoothing line somewhat obscures the suddenness of the shift. Look at the collection of points prior to 1973 compared to the collection after.) Why would we see such a change after removing the top 100 terms? These terms remain largely quotidian, including work, job, money, bank, and cash. Even toward the bottom of these 100 terms, we see terms like economy, employee, budget, pension, employment, mortgage, saving, bonus, and lease. Once we pass that threshold, we begin seeing terms like economics, consultant, capitalist, marketing, commodity, tariff, monopoly, and subsidiary. If the former lists consist of everyday terms, the latter suggests the world of economists, business, and policy. Consider the difference between economy and economics. The former is part of commonplace discourse; everyone gripes about the state of the “economy.” “Economics,” though, names a discipline of study; it signals a certain amount of professionalization. (James Carville’s line was not, “It’s economics, stupid.”) To be clear: the top 100 terms index the discourse of everyday economics; the rest index the discourse of economics as a discipline. The latter is what we want to isolate and model. When we do, we find a clear trend, marking a major shift in novelistic discourse.
Economically oriented literary critics will be unsurprised to learn that 1973 marks a pivot in fiction writers’ use of economic language—or, they will be surprised only by the haste with which we see writers responding to shifting economic conditions and discourses. David Harvey begins *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989): “There has been a sea-change in cultural as well as in political-economic practices since around 1972” (vii). Famously, for Harvey, the early-1970s pivot from Fordism to post-Fordist flexible accumulation compressed our experience of time and space, necessitating new artistic forms. Hence, postmodernism. (Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism* [1990], located the shift a bit earlier, in the late...
1950s, early 1960s.) Economically oriented literary critics also turn to Giovanni Arrighi, for whom 1973 heralds the rise of US finance capitalism. Historian Robert Brenner identifies 1973 as the year in which the US fully pivoted from the postwar boom economy to the long economic downturn in which we still remain, an extended period governed by structural limits to economic growth. From Harvey, Arrighi, and Brenner, among others, we have come to understand 1973 as the year in which major changes crystallized for global cycles of accumulation with implications for labor, finance, and wealth distribution.

Scholars more inclined toward discursive analysis than materialism, Michel Foucault rather than Karl Marx, also have reason to home in on the 1970s. Foucault, Wendy Brown, and Daniel T. Rodgers, among others, point to the rising hegemony of markets, originating in economics departments but quickly proliferating across conservative think tanks and into popular culture. According to this argument, the early 1970s instituted neoliberalism, defined, following Foucault and Brown, as the “[w]idespread economization of heretofore noneconomic domains, activities, and subjects” (Brown 31). The stakes for Brown, a political theorist, are no less than the fate of democracy. She argues that neoliberalism “transposes democratic political principles of justice into an economic idiom,” which threatens democracy itself (35). To account for this process, she cites and borrows the term “economization” from sociologist Michel Callon, who advances an argument for “the role of economics as a discipline, in the broad sense of the term, in the formatting of calculative agencies” (23). He draws attention to how economics “performs, shapes and formats the economy, rather than observing how it functions” (2). The infiltration of the idiom of economics departments into US novels after 1973 corroborates and extends this much-contested neoliberal narrative into the field of literature.

4.2 Genre?

Before we continue our analysis, we turn to a brief consideration of genre. Genre is typically a major determinant in how novels function, and we wanted to see if genre was determining the “economicness” scores of our texts. We created a subcorpus divided by four major categories of genre: bestsellers (a proxy for the popular), prizewinners (a proxy for literary fiction), detective fiction, and science fiction. A novel was categorized as a bestseller if it was recognized as such by Publishers Weekly; a novel was categorized as a prizewinner if the novel won a major US literary prize, such as the Pulitzer or the National Book Award; texts were identified as
detective fiction or science fiction by a manual tagging process carried out by a team of research assistants. We gathered approximately 200 examples of each genre category for a subcorpus of some 800 novels tagged by genre. Results: genre does not measurably affect a text’s “economicness” score.

4.3 Themes

We now know that, dispersed across the discourse of thousands of widely disseminated US novels, economic language appears with considerably more frequency after 1973. What does this mean for individual novels? Can we discern any trends regarding what, within the broad category of economics, these novels address? Do we see a disproportionate rise in novels about finance? Are these novels critical of neoliberalism, or do they tacitly endorse it? What can we say about this economic imagination?

To answer these questions, we hand-coded each term in the *ODE* according to metadata standards, cross-checking with Paul Samuelson’s *Economics* (1948), the leading economics textbook during much of the postwar period. We arrived at eight categories: finance, public, international, labor, money, macroeconomics, microeconomics, and other. The language of labor dominated the top 100 terms: *work, job, wage, skills*, etc. Four money terms ranked very high: *dollar, money, cash, coin*. When we eliminated the top 100, following the protocol described above to focus on disciplinary economic language, the discourse shifted considerably. Labor dropped to the fourth most common category (*overtime, payroll, entrepreneur, strike, automation*). Finance comes in third, just above labor (*banking, credibility, stock market, creditors, dividend, brokerage, investment bank*). Terms so general they fit in no single category are second most common (*distribution, capitalist, economics*).

The most common category of discourse, though, outside the top 100, is microeconomics: that branch of economics that studies the behavior of individuals and firms. Here we find terms like *utility, marketing, thrift, liability, coupon, expenditure, innovation, consumer*, and *altruism*. Theorists who follow Foucault, like Brown and Michel Feher, argue that the saturation of the citizen by microeconomic logic, producing the human as homo economicus, is what is most characteristic of neoliberalism. Whether or not these theorists are correct, we show that the language of microeconomics is the dominant discourse of economics as it increases its presence in the US novel from 1973 to 2000. Inferences about the meaning of the lexical migration of these discursive categories ought to be made with caution, not least because our act of categorization flattens and erases distinctions between categories and because the same
economic term might signify differently when deployed by a novelist rather than an economist. Even so, our attention to discursive categories provides an overview of the breadth with which novelists write about economics.

Our model, which ranks texts according to “economicness,” allows us to see what this breadth means at the scale of the individual novel. Note that we do not equate a novel’s use of economic language with its adequacy at representing economic conditions. Extensive scholarship builds on Jameson’s insight, adopted from Frankfurt School theorists, that art expresses its relationship to the economic through form, and Pierre Bourdieu’s argument from Distinction (1979) that to understand art’s relationship to the economic we need to analyze its embeddedness in the class-based politics and sociology of taste, to name just two prominent theoretical schools. We name them to observe the modesty of our project, in which we track the movement of language between discursive spheres with awareness that lexical uptake is not necessarily the best measure for understanding a novel’s representation of the economic conditions from which it emerges. And we name them to mark our aspiration: unlike these well-developed traditions of critique, our method of developing a nuanced computational model to track movement across discourses is in an early stage of development, and promises to reveal unknown patterns of lexical migration.14

Our model offers a rich archive for scholars interested in literature and economics, identifying dozens, perhaps hundreds of novels that rely heavily on economic language, novels, often, with large readerships, as well as some never studied before. This model also allows us to survey the top tiers of economic novels to interpret further the significance of the post-1973 pivot. Consider Table 1. It lists 10 of the most economic literary novels, where “literary” takes its common usage as trade fiction that is not pegged to genre categories. Some of the topics that prevail in this small sample include academic economics, corporate politics, Wall Street, the publishing industry, and the life of a merchant in a postcolonial African country. Beyond the table, Don DeLillo (Great Jones Street [1973]), Stanley Elkin (Mrs. Ted Bliss [1995]), Jonathan Franzen (The Twenty-Seventh City [1988]), and John Updike (The Coup [1978]) are among the literary writers who most often use economic language.

Turning to high-ranking genre fiction, we find financial thrillers, novels that espouse neoliberalism (J. Neil Schulman’s Alongside Night [1979], at eighth, is blurbed by Milton Friedman), neoliberal dystopias, bank heists, and whodunits. Katherine Neville’s financial caper, A Calculated Risk (1992), ranks fourth. Crime writer Donald E. Westlake has three novels in the top 100. Pat Robertson’s Christian apocalyptic novel, The End of the Age (1995), comes in at...
21, in the top 0.5%. *The Redhunter* (1995), William F. Buckley Jr.’s attempt to redeem Joseph McCarthy, ranks 556, just outside the top 10%. This is to say, economic language representing a range of economic phenomena and political positions infiltrates US novels across political orientations, and it does so with greater frequency after 1973.

The most economic novel, according to our model—Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith’s *A Tenured Professor* (1990)—illustrates well this breadth. The novel satirizes Ivy League academia, American optimism, and the kind of free-market fundamentalism, with its protagonist the rational actor, promulgated by F. A. Hayek and Milton Friedman that became increasingly in vogue after 1973. Montgomery Marvin, a young Harvard economist, educated at Philips Exeter, Harvard, and Berkeley, with a specialization in refrigerator pricing, develops an economic model based on the euphoria of irrational actors that allows him to invest in securities, hedging...
against the faith of others in endless economic growth, earning him immense wealth. His profits peak after he notices, in the months leading up to the Black Monday crash—19 October 1987—that “[i]rrationality was becoming general; euphoria was becoming endemic and universal” (83). Galbraith, a Keynesian, aims with his novel, to undermine the ascendant moralism in which “[t]he good man” must show uncritical “faith in America, faith in the free enterprise system” (66). The object of Galbraith’s attention is the ambition of economics to account for the behavior of individuals and firms, its failure, and the consequent hypocrisy. That is, it is a microeconomic novel.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, we might best describe its genre as microeconomic farce.\textsuperscript{16}

In the end, Congress summons Marvin for a hearing where his “serious absence of faith in the American free enterprise system” is assailed as “[u]n-American” (159–60). Congress passes a law to prohibit his model, criminalizing his behavior and stripping him of his wealth—ironically regulating the market in the name of its freedom. Congress acts, in part, because Marvin had begun using his wealth to influence politics, financing liberal candidates against conservative incumbents. Earlier, he and his wife, Marjie, had fought for gender equity among corporate executives, had endowed academic chairs in peace studies, and had even bought out Harvard’s investments in South African apartheid. In its engagement with disciplinary specialization, finance, theories of the free market, money in politics, gender in the labor force, institutions and bureaucracy, and global justice, Galbraith’s novel shows off part of the wide range of economic phenomena that have infiltrated novelistic discourse. It also helps explain why economic language increased after 1973, marking a kind of sea change for the role of economic language in novelistic discourse: a quarter century of economic stability gave way to sustained instability, inspiring the invention of behavioral economics, based on a critique of rational choice theory. Post-1973 witnessed the dissemination of economic thought into the public sphere and everyday life, as Friedman’s rising career as a public intellectual exemplified. Finance grew increasingly influential in public life; feminists began to fight for equity in the workplace.

\textbf{4.4 Race and Gender}

Yet a focus on the range of economic phenomena that appear in post-1973 novels risks obscuring disparities in the use of economic language based on the race and gender of the author. Consider the below graphs (Figures 4 and 5).\textsuperscript{17} On average, women use 20\% fewer economic terms than men, and African Americans
use 10–15% fewer than white authors. Historical and systemic factors created a situation in which normative economic language came to signal the privilege associated with white men, and, at times, provided authors and their characters access to this privilege. In terms of novels by white male authors, what does this privilege look like within individual texts?

To consider the implications of economic language with regard to race, we return to *A Tenured Professor*. Concerned with social justice, Marvin aspires to make his “‘small contribution to the liberal agenda. Peace, a better break for the poor and the inner cities, greater equality in income distribution’” (38). He is in a position to do so, thanks to his prestigious education, paid for by his father and his wife’s inheritance. As Thomas Piketty has shown in *Capital in the 21st Century* (2013), the growth of inherited wealth outpaces earned wealth, exacerbating racial economic inequality in the US, to the benefit of the Marvins. Those who begin wealthy, stay wealthy. Deep race- and gender-based privilege, in other words, enables Marvin’s lifestyle and his “small contribution to the liberal agenda.”

Marjie holds great sway over her husband’s decisions. The narrator contends that, because she audaciously made investments based on her husband’s economic model early on, when he was too timid, she gained “powerful leverage in influencing and, indeed, governing Marvin in the years to come” (59). Yet we learn almost nothing about her that does not pertain to her husband. It is difficult not to arrive at the sense that however much she influences him, her greatest value, as Marvin puts it, is that “she added impressively to his standing” (44).
In this novel of which Marvin, with his aspirations to help inner cities, is the protagonist, there are no evidently nonwhite characters. *A Tenured Professor*, like the market according to widely held economic theories, is colorblind. Repeatedly, policies that disproportionately affect nonwhites become recoded as class issues, a recoding accomplished with normative economic language. Welfare, migrant farming, Critical Legal Studies, and South African apartheid appear in the novel without reference to race; instead, normative economic language facilitates a liberal colorblindness.

Consider the novel’s treatment of apartheid, which is never cast as an issue of race segregation. Instead, the narrator categorizes apartheid, when debated by professors in the Harvard Faculty Club, as pertaining to “financial matters” (91). Marvin assumes Harvard’s South Africa-tainted securities, relieving the school of its embarrassment, but he does so because their purchase will also realize for him a “not insignificant profit” (124). Or consider Marvin’s efforts to require farms to offer toilet facilities for migrant workers, who are disproportionately Latinx. Again, the debate unfolds in economic terms. *The Wall Street Journal* praises “the congressional resistance to toilets, saying they were an egregious assault on free enterprise” (140). The whiteness of economic language manifests in this recoding of debates that entail the intersection of race and class as singularly economic. Race does, however, come up explicitly once in the novel. During Marvin’s tenure review, one faculty member “drew attention, as often before, to the department’s continuing failure to find women and minority candidates” (74). His concern is passed over in silence.
4.5 Black Women Writers

Black writers generally have lower “economicness” scores than white writers, and women writers lower scores than male writers (Figure 6). According to our model, black women consistently have the lowest scores of all. Insofar as economic language provides symbolic access to whiteness and patriarchy, as suggested by our reading of *A Tenured Professor*, this result is unsurprising. Yet it also introduces an opportunity for reflection on our model. Were black women in this period truly uninterested in economics, or did they find other ways to write about economics that our model did not register, ways that we might discern through close reading and that could help us understand with specificity the limits of our model and, thus, the limits of disciplinary economic language? Finally, we wondered, how can we account for the sudden spike in “economicness” score of black women writers in the 1990s?

For scholars of late twentieth-century black women’s writing, especially novels by authors associated with the “Second Black Renaissance,” including Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Toni Cade Bambara, this separation from other groups hardly comes as surprising. Black women’s literature, particularly from the mid-to-late 1970s and into the 1980s, extended the period’s broader Black Arts Movement in subverting traditional norms of mainstream US literature. It also signaled a parting from the Black Aesthetic in challenging that movement’s masculine and patriarchal bias. According to Madhu Dubey, black women’s texts “restructure and supplement the ideological program of black cultural nationalism” (1). Scholars such as Barbara Christian and Mae Henderson have thus contended...
that black women’s fiction is formed through a double alterity: as other to normative white American fiction, and as other to black male fiction. Now-canonical essays, like Henderson’s “Speaking in Tongues,” reveal the formal and discursive manifestations of this alterity. While black women’s writing enacts literary features common across much of black literature—for example, an interest in oral forms of storytelling—it also possesses a heightened form of narrative dialogism in which it negotiates both hegemonic and nonhegemonic discourses in deliberately unresolved terms. For Henderson, “Black women must speak in a plurality of voices as well as in a multiplicity of discourse” (5). If this plurality and multiplicity are shaped in part to subvert prevailing norms, it makes sense that black women’s writing would appear separate according to our model. Yes, but why also least economic?

We hasten to acknowledge that we do not interpret our results as indicating that black women writers did not write about “the economic,” which risks stigmatizing black women’s writing as failing to engage in serious economic thinking. It seems likely, given what we know from the scholarship, that black women wrote in resistance to dominant trends of economic discourse, a hypothesis we pursue. Susan Willis, for one, has argued that black women writers exist outside of normative forms of economic discourse, producing alternative modes of expressing the economic and financial: “In black women’s writing . . . money is never perceived as a fact of life . . . . In black women’s novels [economic] endeavors are transformed out of the grim reality of marginality and dependency and become instead metaphoric statements of alternative economics not incorporated within capitalism” (11–12). Here the particularities of topic and language in black women’s writing come together. In black women’s writing, economics—normative, disciplinary, dominantly white male economics—is opaque because black women often experience financial precarity, and this opacity is intensified in novels due to the specific way that black women novelists employ language to apprehend and narrate that precarity. We illustrate Willis’s thesis in a moment with a reading of Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), which also serves as an occasion to test the limits of our model.

So far, we find nothing very surprising. If we use normative criteria, such as the ODE, to measure “economicness,” we find that texts that use nonnormative forms of expressing the economic, such as black women’s writing, are opaque to those criteria. We might then argue that the ODE is flawed, perhaps even racist as the basis for our model, and move on. But this adversarial response would prevent us from asking further questions, like how exactly does the ODE fail to account for black women’s writing? If we think of our model as a tool that delivers simple, intractable “facts” that one
accepts or rejects, we end here. But our model, to iterate an earlier point, is a mechanism to reason and think with. We can analyze how the model thinks to grasp even better the meeting between the ODE and black women’s writing.

In the final part of this essay, we analyze Corregidora. We chose this text for two reasons: first, according to our model, the novel is low-scoring—in the bottom 10%; second, the novel marks an inflection point for black women’s novels. Shortly after the publication of Corregidora, black women’s texts drop in “economicness” until they become 40% less economic than novels by black men, the largest disparity we see between any demographic groups across the period. It is precisely in 1975 that, after a brief moment of convergence, black male and female writers begin to diverge sharply in their representations of the economic. So we focus on the year 1975 and Corregidora in particular. Both are harbingers of change. Upon its publication, Morrison prophesized that “No novel about any Black woman could ever be the same after this. [Corregidora] had changed the terms, the definitions of the whole enterprise” (14). Accepting Corregidora as a precedent for the black women’s writing soon to come, we can see that the novel marks the moment at which the ODE begins to fail to register black women’s writings with special severity.

Corregidora tells the story of a black woman, Ursa, a blues singer, and her relationships with her extended family and estranged husband, Mutt. Set in the late 1940s, the narrative takes place primarily in Kentucky, but it also weaves in a story about Ursa’s parents and grandparents, who had been slaves owned by a Brazilian, Simon Corregidora, in the previous century. Chronologically and geographically, the narrative pivots between past and present, the US and South America, via the common thread of slavery. Cheryl Wall, among other critics, has drawn attention to the way that the novel maps continuities between the sexual violence animating the relations between white slave owners and black slaves, and the relations between black men and women in the post-slavery period (5). Such relations persistently frame black women as sexual objects and mere producers of offspring. When the novel begins, Mutt has battered Ursa, causing her to miscarry and to need an emergency hysterectomy. Throughout the rest of the story, Ursa searches for a new reason to exist beyond reproduction now that she is no longer able to give birth. As she sets upon this journey of self-discovery, she learns more about the history of her parents and grandparents as former slaves, finding troubling links between their time and her own. She also intuits a possible way to break the cycle of sexual violence among black men and women.
According to our model, *Corregidora* has an “economicness” score far below the mean. Even a cursory reading of the novel makes clear why this is the case. The novel occasionally uses words deemed “economic” by our model, such as *job* and *work*, but other words that tend to drive up the “economicness” score for our other texts are absent. Indeed, *Corregidora* includes a mere 14 words from the ODE. Novels that score in the top 10% use, on average, 97 unique economic words, or seven times more than *Corregidora*. Among *Corregidora*’s peers in the bottom 10%, the average novel uses 37 unique economic words. Thus, relative to the other books in our corpus, Jones’s novel appears to lack any discernible “economicness.” One might point to the novel’s heavy use of dialogue as one factor; or its focus on sexuality; or that the novel fixates so heavily on domestic life, rarely leaving the space of the home; or simply that most of the characters are poor and do not talk about what they do not have.

Yet this would ignore the fact that a central narrative arc concerns the history of slavery in the Americas. Punctuating the present-day of Ursa’s life are long narrative recollections of Simon Corregidora and his mid-nineteenth-century plantation, where Ursa’s grandmother and mother grew up. The point of such regular interludes is to provide a form of historical explanation for contemporary familial dynamics among the postslavery generation, an explanation entirely “economic” in nature—that is, pertaining to things that the ODE generally cares about and aims to register, like *wealth*, *property*, *value*, and so forth.

Consider one scene that Ursa’s mother narrates about her time on the plantation. She begins by talking about the work of “making generations” or sexual reproduction (124) and how Simon Corregidora rigorously monitored her sexual life, prohibiting her from having sex with dark-skinned black men; then she describes how the slave owner particularly favored her because of her good looks, and that she was his “little gold pussy” whom he would “cultivate” by all means (124, 125). She ends with general memories of life on the plantation and the lives of slaves, with a passing reference to “Palmares” (126), a free slave colony in Brazil that arose in the seventeenth century.

What we have here, of course, is an elaborate description of one of the major economic systems of the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: slavery and the plantation. Confounding our model is the language used to describe slavery, which mixes apparently “uneconomic” language associated with the body, such as *making generations* or *cultivation*, with so-called economic terms like *property*. The phrase *little gold pussy* illustrates this semantics in its most grotesque form. Our model will register
gold, but it will miss the broader signifying chain of the economic in the context of slavery, one that relies on words like cultivation, discourses about the body, and of course slavery and plantation. None of these words are in the ODE.

One might defend the ODE’s elision of slavery by arguing that the dictionary is only interested in defining terms related to the contemporary practice of economics. Corregidora, however, skirts this distinction since it blends past and present and confuses temporality through its use of narrative dilation to argue that the economic effects of slavery persist into the present. Indeed, the novel insists that the semantics of slavery are required to register present-day economic life for black people. For example, Ursa often uses the expression “making generations,” a holdover from her mother’s era, to describe her relation to modern-day economic productivity (her main “job” is to make children, an echo of her mother’s life as a slave). The economic is not absent for black women in Corregidora; the semantics of slavery just remain more relevant than the semantics of “contemporary economics.” What we see when our model presents low scores for black women’s writing in the 1980s is an encounter between models of economic life. We consider this encounter a challenge from black women to the discipline of economics to rethink its selective relationship to and epistemological prejudices against black history.

Yet in accounting for black women’s fiction and normative economic discourse, there is an even more surprising discovery. If we return to our gender and race graph, what is distinct about the trend associated with black women writers is not merely the downturn in the late 1970s, which we have argued is vividly embodied by Jones’s novel, but an equally rapid reversal starting in the mid-1990s. That is, what is surprising is less that the ODE erases the economic language of black women and more that this erasure appears short-lived. In our close reading of Corregidora, we identify slavery as an economic discourse that the ODE is ill-equipped to index, which is why black women writers drift down our model’s grid. But, again, this drift is ephemeral. How does the economic language of black women’s writing change by the mid-1990s to make it more directly engaged with normative economic discourse? We would have to do more close reading of more novels, and develop a new model, to understand. But our main point remains: there are obvious lacunae in the ODE, particularly in relation to the language used by minority authors. At the same time, minority authors are not content to let this elision stand; from our results, we can infer that within 15 years black women writers start to extend their representation of the economic, no doubt still invoking tropes of slavery, even as they are
taking on normative economic discourse, joining the overall trend of novelistic discourse across these decades.

5. Manipulating the Model

Earlier, we noted a likely critique: our model relies on a disciplinary academic source (the ODE) as the basis for how we define “the economic,” and, thus, it erases large swaths of literary expression that imagine the economic in nonhegemonic terms. We agree. The point of modeling, however, is not to produce a set of results that we defend as a unitary truth. Rather, its point is to understand how the model is constructed and to use its limits, first, as instructive in and of themselves, and, second, as the basis to revise the model in a recursive process. As our close reading shows, our model—with its built-in assumption that the ODE offers, through its lexicon, a reflection of economics as a discipline—is limited insofar as it is incapable of identifying slavery as a basis for imagining the economic. As a salient tradition of novels by black women testifies, this is a not a minor shortcoming.

An obvious next step in this work is to reconstruct our model to account for articulations of the economic from a subaltern perspective. That may include incorporating a dictionary of African American vernacular or hand-curating a list of economic terms that occur frequently in novels by black authors in the period. Indeed, what would “economicness” in the US literary field look like if we took black women’s writing as the basis of our model instead of the ODE?

As a first pass at this question, we added slave, slavery, and plantation to our model and reran it. This simple adjustment is a modest attempt to account for the low number of novels by black women. The model continues to gauge the use of disciplinary economic language, but now includes three new words. In this new model, black women, as we expected, score better, bringing them closer to—even to the point of at times exceeding—other groups (Figure 7). The model gives a bump to well-known novels about slavery by black women like Corregidora (from 4,405 to 3,874) and Octavia Butler’s Kindred (1979) (2,769 to 1,497). It also raises the scores of historical novels by white men, like Russell Banks’s Cloudsplitter (1998) (1,029 to 292) and Gore Vidal’s Lincoln (1984) (1,587 to 1,247), and novels about Jewish history, like James Michener’s The Source (1965) (1,388 to 995).

In one way, the new model performed as we anticipated, raising the scores of black women in comparison with other groups. But it also surprised us; we had not thought about Jewish history, or
about how often men might have written about slavery in this period. Though women as a group score closer to men across most of the period in the new model, men break away strongly in the 1990s, scoring 50% higher than women from 1995 to 2000—the same period during which, as we earlier discovered, black women quickly adopt disciplinary economic language (Figure 8). Something is happening here, though it requires further research to discover what. This is the work of literary modeling. It is to recursively analyze the thing one is trying to understand.
6. Conclusion: On Literary Modeling

We have learned that the language of economics, as codified by the discipline, becomes 20% more common in US novels in the mid-1970s—and that this is especially true of novels by white men. If we accept A Tenured Professor as exemplary of at least one trend in how white male authors adopt economic language, we see how the use of this language often depends on, and reinforces, white male privilege, even when ostensibly criticizing the dominant economic ideology. We have also found, contrary to expectation, that the dominant discourse of economics in the US in the second half of the twentieth century is not finance but microeconomics.

We have also learned about the postwar US novel and race. Our brief case study shows that Corregidora is an exemplary novel not only because it introduced a new type of literary vernacular but in how it expresses the economic. The novel is instructive because, in addition to refusing normative economic disciplinary language, it foregrounds the persistence of slavery as the basis for contemporary economic thought for black women novelists. Counterintuitively, we discover that this trend, while strong in the late 1970s and 1980s, is reversed by the mid-1990s, at the same time that men begin to use slavery-inflected economic language far more than women—for reasons that demand further research and inquiry.

Finally, we manipulated our model in order to capture the economic imagination of black women novelists more accurately. The new model confirmed our expectations while giving us new and surprising results, in need of interpretation, beyond the scope of this essay. We did this work to understand literary history better. We also hope to provide a methodological template for other scholars. In sum, we contend that literary modeling recognizes the limits of empiricism as a basis for studying literature, even as it leverages the affordances of quantity and scale to build provisional arguments that provide local insights and generate further questions.

Notes

1. We are concerned here with literary criticism, not book history or textual editions. For a robust account of modeling in the latter fields, see Julia Flanders and Fotis Jannidis, “Data Modeling,” A New Companion to Digital Humanities (2016), edited by Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth, pp. 229–38. Modeling for literary criticism goes back at least to 2004, when Willard McCarty contributed “Modeling: A Study in Words and Meanings,” A Companion to Digital Humanities (2004), pp. 254–72. In “Knowing . . . : Modeling in Literary Studies” from several years later, McCarty sets out important guidelines: that making a model is “a consciously simplifying act of interpretation” that involves “selective omission”; that scholars must not “mistake the artificial for the real”; and he hinted
without extrapolating, in an insight we take up here, that “failures and every other well-crafted error we make are exactly the point” (394, 400). Two more recent essays on literary modeling that follow McCarty are Andrew Piper, “Think Small: On Literary Modeling,” *PMLA*, vol. 132, no. 3, 2017, pp. 651–8; Richard Jean So, “All Models are Wrong,” *PMLA*, vol. 132, no. 3, 2017, pp. 668–673, a roundtable response on Franco Moretti’s *Distant Reading*.

2. We join a spate of recent studies that deploy modeling to make discoveries about literary history. To name just three: Lauren Klein used network theory to visualize the absence of James Hemings—slave and chef of Thomas Jefferson—from the archives in “The Image of Absence: Archival Silence, Data Visualization, and James Hemings,” *American Literature*, vol. 85, no. 4, 2013, pp. 661–88; Ted Underwood, David Bamman, and Sabrina Lee developed a model for literary character that allowed them to show that the gender of characters has become less distinguishable across the previous two centuries in “The Transformation of Gender in English-Language Fiction,” *Journal of Cultural Analytics*, 13 Feb. 2018, web; Elizabeth F. Evans and Matthew Wilkens built a model of literary geography in “Nation, Ethnicity, and the Geography of British Fiction, 1880–1940,” *Journal of Cultural Analytics*, 13 July 2018, web, with which they map the differing global, national, and London municipal geographies within three corpora of British modernism: prominent writers, foreign writers, and London writers.


4. One concern is that when you have a small group (here, black writers), all of its members are different from each other (here, their “economicness” scores). To account for this, we tested the standard error—each author’s deviation from the average score of the group. With large groups (here, white authors) this is rarely a problem. The group as a whole will usually converge on a stable average. But if the standard error of the small group is large, you cannot compare the two groups. The smaller group has no identity as a “group” in the way that the larger one has. We tested for this effect and found that our subcorpus of black authors is coherent in terms of its “economicness” scores. We were not able to calculate the percentage of black authors in our corpus of 35,089 titles due to limited research resources, so we do not know whether our sample’s 5% representation of black writers accurately reflects the percentage of black authors in the full corpus. It is our best attempt at an estimate.

5. The fact that only 250 novels by black authors are currently available for digital analysis creates a natural bias against black authors for researchers interested in studying US fiction at scale insofar as the available corpus of works by black authors will always be tiny compared to the corpus available for works by white authors. For computational methods that require a large sample—word embeddings come to mind—the relative paucity of novels by black authors will necessarily create a problem in experimental design. This is a concern that is worth addressing at length but is beyond the scope of this essay.

6. All code and derived data used for this article will be posted to a public GitHub repository upon publication. Contact the lead author for more information.

7. We emphasize that, in itself, ours is not a statistical model, insofar as it does not account for probabilities and uncertainty; rather, it provides a basis for statistical
modeling. Our model is a novel quantitative metric that, when supplemented with a qualitative review, provides an objective measure of “economicness” and a thorough account of the language and usage of economics across the years of our study.

8. The line is a LOESS smoothing line. It smooths the data to reveal patterns.

9. As in the previous graph, the line is a LOESS smoothing line (see note 9).

10. We used the “economicness” scores from 1970 and 1980 as proxies to test whether the difference in scores we observe across the period is statistically significant. It is. Because the variances of the two years are different, we used a Welch two-sample $t$-test with $df \approx 140$. Because we compared 1980’s average to that of the base average from 1970, the test returned a negative $t$-value of $-2.35$. The $P$-value was 0.02.

11. The movement of language is not unidirectional, from economics to culture and literature. Economics has incorporated language and literary figures from literature and rhetoric. Deirdre N. McCloskey—who was at the University of Chicago from 1968 to 1980 with giants of neoliberalism, like Gary Becker, Milton Friedman, and George Stigler—discovered rhetorical theory in the 1980s and wrote extensively on how “economics is literary” (102). We are pursuing the lexical aspect of the inverse project: how is literature economic?


13. The specific book prizes we have identified as a “major US literary prize” are: the Drue Heinz, the PEN/Hemingway, the National Book Award, the PEN/Faulkner, the Pulitzer, and the Whiting. A few comments: the challenge with creating this category and building a corpus to reflect it was finding enough digital copies of texts to computationally analyze. First, we selected prizes that award distinction to both novels and short stories—“fiction” generally speaking. For example, Katherine Porter’s The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter (1965) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1966, and this text is included in our corpus. Furthermore, because only two of the prizes listed above—the Pulitzer and the National Book Award—span the length of our period (others, such as the Whiting prize, begin only in 1985), we had to increase the representation of “prizewinningness” in this period, and thus we added to our corpus 76 examples of works of fiction (we were only able to find that many which existed in digital form) that were finalists for the National Book Award between 1950 and 2000. These measures signal imperfect solutions to the larger problem of how to build a large and robust enough corpus of “prizewinning US novels between 1950 and 2000” to test for the effects of “prizewinningness” on the relationship between novels and economic language. To create such a corpus, we had to expand our notion of “the US novel” to include works of fiction more broadly, including short stories—essentially testing the relationship between postwar American fiction and economic language. However, we feel this is not such a dubious conflation given the extensive authorial traffic between short fiction and novels in this period. And we had to include in our corpus examples of finalists for one of our major
awards: the National Book Award. This too seems like a reasonable compromise insofar as being a finalist for such a major prize also meaningfully indicates a mark of distinction of US “prizewinningness.” Again, both measures were essential to creating a large enough corpus—at least 200 novels—to make this category viable for computational analysis. Ultimately, our corpus of “US prizewinning novels” consists of 231 works of fiction.


15. Galbraith’s novel is microeconomic in the most explicit possible way: it is about the economic study of microeconomics. Jane Elliott argues that, especially starting in the late 1990s, the model of choice promulgated by microeconomics “becomes unmoored from the market focus of economics as a discipline” to unleash what she calls “the microeconomic imagination” which takes literary form in what she calls “the microeconomic mode” (9, 1). Annie McClanahan makes the case for a more capacious understanding of “the microeconomic novel,” which she traces back to the Marginal revolution in economics in the 1870s. She argues that, since, “microeconomics and the modern novel worked contemporaneously and in parallel to retheorize the nature of the individual subject in a social world” (266). In her account, the modern novel aims to restore the individual depth and social breadth that microeconomics leaves behind.

16. Galbraith’s interest in the language of economics was longstanding. He wrote an essay with that title—“The Language of Economics”—in Fortune in December 1962, pp. 128–71. In it, he addresses criticisms of the discipline that would, two decades later, be commonly lodged against literary theory: that it is too obscure and jargon-laden. He acknowledges that obscurity and jargon serve a sociological purpose of gatekeeping and granting prestige, though he also defends economic terminology as being no more pretentious than that of other disciplines, like, say, “advanced poultry husbandry” (129). “One indication” that economic language is not pretentious, he argues, “is the speed with which the important words and ideas . . . pass into general use” (129). Our study is the first to test a particular case of this general claim, the novel as an instance of general use. If important economic words entered general use with haste in 1962, they did so with considerably more frequency in the final quarter of the century.

17. As before, the lines on these graphs are LOESS smoothing lines (see note 9). These lines are sensitive to outliers, which, given outliers from black writers in 1955, exaggerate the closeness of white and black writers at the beginning of the period. The convergence between white and black writers at the end of the period is accurate, and suggestive. We consider the convergence with respect, in particular, to black women writers at the end of the essay.

18. Other manipulations of our model, which would be generative but exceed the scope of this essay, might include adding vocabularies specific to migrant worker, refugee, and Indigenous discourses, among others absent from the ODE.
Works Cited


