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SCALABLE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL (RE-)MEDIATIONS: THE CHALLENGE OF HYPER-NONFICTION WRITING IN JOAN DIDION'S *THE WHITE ALBUM*, ANNIE DILLARD'S *PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK*, AND SARA SULERI'S *MEATLESS DAYS*

1. Introduction

The last decades have been characterized by a remarkable process of digitization and hypertextualization of knowledge from various disciplines mainly connected to the spreading of the *World Wide Web*. In comparison, however, the ingenious adoption of hypertextual writing technologies in the main creative fields in the humanities is often regarded as a more circumscribed phenomenon. A privileged site for literary experimentations in new media in the early 1990s,[1] the practice of hypertextual linking seems to have recently become a more familiar constituent of our basic condition of writing in a situation of technological emplacement. Considerations on the degree to which contemporary writing practices need to presuppose technical expertise in technologies of digital communication often partake in the larger philosophical debate of whether, in Martin Heidegger's terms, we consider technology just as a mere tool (roughly, a means to an expressive end in this case) or we conversely frame it within a larger conceit of *poiesis*, namely of making and producing that implicitly includes expressive and artistic production among its instantiations.[2] Less philosophically speaking, we can point out how all sorts of writers operating in digital settings tend to increasingly encounter the practice of hyper-linking text as an implicit function of user-friendly interfaces in web writing. Even writers who are not *coders* can, in other words, usually perform hyper-linking by choosing the option among the many affordances of popular digital-based multimedia writing platforms.[3] In treating the density of the theoretical debate raised by hypertext technologies in the humanities as still relevant for literary criticism examining American literary productions, this paper, in Terry Harpold's terms, "joins with other recent scholarship in the field in emphasizing the merits of returning to what seems at first like old and familiar territory" (2009, 3). The reasons of such an old-fashioned appearance likely belong to the complex set of implications of what Harpold discusses in *Ex-foliations* as the ideologeme of the *upgrading path* and remains definitely beyond the scope of this study. It might be sufficient to notice in this context that few objections might be raised to the observation that, in recent times, the term hypertext is no longer all there is to digitally-mediated literary forms. If *hypertext* could be considered the official password shared by new media scholars operating in literature- and/or media-related fields throughout the 1990s, the first decade of the 21st century has registered an increasing centrality of terms such as *code*, *database*, and *posthuman*, and discourses on digital media textuality in general can be said to have recently revolved with remarkable recurrence around issues of *materiality*.[4] Accordingly, if the recalling of key-terms typical of early hypertext

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[1] Eastgate Systems has released between 1990 and 1995 a number of hypertext literary works that can still be considered as a richly diverse set of pioneering experiments in electronic literature. Among these, we can remember Micheal Joyce's *Afternoon*, Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*.

[2] See Martin Heidegger. *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. New York: Garland Pub., 1977. For a critique and qualification of Heidegger's position, see Randy Rutsky. *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999.

[3] See the tools and functional features offered by weblog services and content management systems (CMS), such as *Blogger*, *WordPress, Weebly, Wix* and others.

[4] See in particular Anne Munster. *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics* Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2006 and Matthew Kirschenbaum. *Mechanisms: New Media and the*

scholarship such as *hybridity*, *rhizome*, *transculturation*, *deterritorialization*, *othering* (and others) can reveal how much hypermedia studies and American literary studies could be envisioned as potentially interconnected at the time, the current terminological drift toward a more recognizably scientific model-making of e-literature and digital texts– presently understood in terms of their *intermediation*, *sensorimotor*, *inscriptional* effects[5] – shows how a convergent dynamic between the two disciplines is destined to become more and more problematic. Moreover, though we can count today more than a hundred hyper-literary works officially published,[6] digital artefacts of this kind have unevenly penetrated into academic courses over the past years and have often found attention within US English departments more as products of so-called new media culture than as actual literary works to be read side by side with other pieces of contemporary American literature.

Authors of hypertext literary works such as Michael Joyce, Shelley Jackson, and Jane Yellowlees Douglas had initially gained considerable attention in the American world of letters.[7] However, as George Landow still reminds us in *Hypertext 3.0*, "the expected explosion of hyperfiction does yet not seem to have taken place" (2006, 264). What makes fiction so resistant to a writing technology that conversely seems remarkably suitable to informational *Wikis*, various scholarly web portals, and forms of creative nonfiction such as *Blogs* is something that cannot, of course, be examined and exhaustively analyzed in this context. My analysis thus chooses to focus, more specifically, on some of the ways in which hypertext – and the critical perspectives such a technology is still able to generate – can still strike us as vibrantly resonant with our understanding of literary nonfiction. In order to shed light on this resonance, we merely have to look at how effortlessly we can draw relevant connections between issues often encountered in criticism about Anglo-American nonfiction and specific features popularized by practices of hyper-reading and hyper-writing in digital environments.

In highlighting such connections, it is worth noticing how theories on essay writing and actual representative texts in this genre have often converged in characterizing nonfiction writers as practitioners of acts of social and cultural *readings*. From Michel de Montaigne's admonition "that we are to judge by the eye of reason"(1877), to Thomas Carlyle's rhetorical stance as a decoder of the "Signs of [his] Times,"[8] from Aldous Huxley's characterization of essayists as "look[ing] at the world through the keyhole of anecdote"(1959, v) to Annie Dillard's metaphysical urge of waking up to an innocent *seeing*, authors of nonfiction have often seemed to deal with writing as an activity precisely consisting in mentally taking in heterogeneous cultural inputs. By considering, in George Landow's terms, recent nonfiction writers as the "twentieth-century heirs of the Victorian sages," (1986, 21) it is possible to carry out a thematization of the contemporary nonfiction writer as an outstandingly skillful *reader*. Just like ancient prophets, the contemporary ones do not improvise either and they know what the minor details worth of reading, i.e., noticing, scanning, and parsing are. Thomas Wolfe and Joan Didion, just like John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle in their own times, are writers who perform throughout their texts unusual and ex-centric readings of the vast amount of data of their present – readings often focused on grotesque marginal details as the clearest symptoms of allegedly

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Forensic Imagination. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008. Recent influential DH scholarly studies such as Matthew Jockers's *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* University of Illinois Press, 2013 and Daniel Shore's *Cyberformalism: Histories of Linguistic Forms in the Digital Archive* Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018 also point in the direction of parsing large bodies of textual artifacts rather than addressing the non-linear conceptual configurations of their literary constituents.

[5] See Katherine Hayles's use of neurocognitive terms, Mark Hansen's focus on the *haptic*, *kinetic*, and *proprioceptive* effects of the digital, Matthew Kirschenbaum's recourse to forensic investigation, and Franco Moretti's use of abstract scientific models in exploring the material dynamics of digital texts.

[6] The *Hyperliterature Exchange* web site, for example, listed 132 titles of hypermedia literature available for sale. The web site was launched in 2003 "to encourage the sale of hyperliterature - electronic literature, cyberliterature, hypertext, new media literature, nonlinear literature, digital poetry, Flash poetry, etc. etc. - particularly work self-published by its authors or brought out by small independent publishers, writers' cooperatives etc." The Hyperliterature Exchange, http://hyperex.co.uk/ [Last visited March 30, 2012].

[7] Some of these authors and electronic works have earned academic canonization by being included in collected anthologies. Michael Joyce and Jane Yellowlees Douglas, for example, appear in the "Technoculture" section of the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction*, a title frequently featuring in American Literature classes' syllabi in the US.

[8] The quotation paraphrases the title of Thomas Carlyle's essay "Signs of the Times" originally published in June 1829 in the Edinburgh Review.

pathological societies. Scanning, mining, and deciphering lie at base of these writing strategies and the same processes seem to stay as characteristic features of nonfiction writing even when the authors are themselves involved in the scenario in the guise of readable subjects, as it were. A writing that unfolds as self-reading ends up implicitly transforming the autobiographical habit of *speaking first* into a matter of remaining responsive to one's self. Examining contemporary samples of autobiographical production in North American essay writing, Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues how

> these writings represent response, responsibility, responsiveness even under pall. The adjective "autobiographical" flails and gasps, an inadequate descriptor of what is going on, even though some writers may indeed use the word *I*. These are works of "reading," for essays are acts of writing-as-reading. (1996, 17-18)

By focusing on selected works of contemporary nonfiction, I try to stress how this activity of writing-as-reading affects issues of both style and textual structure when the particular/marginal object of the reading specifically involves the author's own self. In their dealing at various levels with the personal, works like Joan Didion's *The White Album*, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* can be said to anticipate writing practices that have become familiar only in recent technological times – indeed via the introjection of hypertextual writing technologies. All these books can be considered as self-studies performed by positioning the self in relation to a community: mythical for Didion (the 60s), historical for Suleri (post-colonial Pakistan) and spiritual for Dillard (a metaphysical construct interweaving nature, ecosystem, and cosmos). As authors engaged in writing-as-reading their own selves, these writers develop techniques and rhetorical strategies that can now be legitimately defined as proto-hypertextual. In other words, if the essay as a genre can be conceived of, in DuPlessis's terms, as an activity of *writing-as-reading*, this activity often takes the form of a fragmented and rhyzomatic writing when the process of reading involves the author's own self. This feature, in its own turn, requires the reader of the final printed product to perform the opposite configuration activity of *reading-as-writing* typical of hypertextual and electronic textual environments. Though constrained within the materiality of print technology, narratives of the self in these works do not mechanically flow in a traditional linear fashion. They become, instead, an assemblage of branches of texts often taken from different sources, often fragmented and truncated in length, and frequently recognizable as distinct – but inter-dependent – units. This fragmentary writing style asks the reader to perform an unusually active process of cognitive connection-making which pushes the activity of reading remarkably near to a virtual form of writing up visualizations of scattered data. In all the three books the authors' selves are represented as de-centered or, better, multi-centered entities whose constellations of elements would need constantly reconfigurable mapping. They are therefore open to multiple readings depending on which connections appear to be most relevant among their textual units and ultimately encourage – if not multi-linear – multi-focal forms of fruition.

Two preliminary clarifications are anyway necessary to the development of my argument. In the first place, it is important to stress from the very outset that these three works of nonfiction do not form a homogeneous literary set as far as (sub-)genre distinctions might be concerned. They actually range from what can be considered a collection of personal essays (Didion) to what would commonly be perceived, contradictions notwithstanding, as a proper autobiography in the case of Suleri. I treat Dillard's book as located somehow in between these two poles. On the one hand, by focusing on a different theme in each chapter, Dillard provides good reasons for "somebody [to call] the book a collection of essays" (1998, 280). On the other hand, the mere presence of an *Afterword* external to the main text implicitly seems to endorse the view that, as Richard Lillard observes, "among the various kinds of writers, only autobiographers appear to feel the need to explain why they are writing" (1956, 3). Secondly, by treating these works as examples of proto-hypertextual prose styles, it is not my intention to claim that they are representatives of a larger tendency common to nonfiction writings featuring authors engaged in the reading of their own selves. Works like these, however, undoubtedly draw attention on how literary modes become – in Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's terms – re-mediated (Bolter and Grusin 1999) by technological innovations in the field of reading and writing in the contemporary humanities and on how, in this case, digital writing technologies allow us to examine American literary works from previously unavailable critical perspectives. The mere existence of the dynamics highlighted here asks therefore literary criticism for further interrogation on the field of

autobiographical writing in the information age, especially in an age when the focus of a discipline such as humanities computing aims at making sense of large-scale of textual data. Moreover, such dynamics seem to be sufficiently grounded to suggest the importance of persisting in the investigation of hypertext as a privileged site to test issues of literary self-representation in the contemporary digital era.

2. Web-Writing in Printed Works: Problems and Perspectives

Before delving into what can hopefully appear as an attempt at a paper-based *scalable reading*[9] of the examined literary works, some kind of explanation is ultimately due in relation to the choice of these specific autobiographical narratives as representative nonfiction samples as well as of the choice of hypertextual technology as a lens of analysis. As Dirk Van Hulle observes, "especially toward the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, authors prove themselves increasingly skillful in applying characteristic features of electronic literature to print" (2008). However, the texts here selected have been released between 1974 and 1989, namely slightly before the time in which the *World Wide Web* went popular and would eventually accustom both readers and writers to a collective imagery of inventive possibilities in terms of language technological manipulation. In this respect, the lack of expectations to find in these pieces skillful applications of writing techniques borrowed from the digital mediasphere allows us to see more clearly their latent proto-technological features – features certainly not accessible to sight even for their very authors. The choice of focusing on proto-*hypertextual* traits closely follows the same line of reasoning. In a time of so-called second-generation electronic literary works that, as Adalaide Morris points out, have been "composed for the most part after 1995 in DHTML, JavaScript, Java, QuickTime, Macromedia Flash, Shockwave and other programs that combine verbal element with graphics, images, animation, sound, and other multimedia effects" and "tend to be compressed, multilayered and time-driven – closer to Mallarmé than to Balzac," (Morris 2006, 14) and even third-generation digital literature,[10] the choice of hypertext might risk appearing anachronistic or nostalgic at best. For too long, however, hypertext has been examined mainly in relation to reconfigurable textual space and its ability to re-enable readers in relation to the composition of individually assembled structures of meaning, and very few times as a responsive entity to be probed and interrogated both by end users and media historians. Even smaller is the number of the current attempts at reconfiguring its characterization in the light of the computational turn in literary studies that – via the insightful ways in which, in Johanna Drucker's terms, Willard McCarthy treated "digital humanities as an epistemological undertaking" (Drucker 2007) in his *Humanities Computing* – has brought us the current debate on how to negotiate (and possibly welcome) the empirical approaches of computer sciences within the speculative domain of humanities wisdom. Contrary to such tendency, hypertext – intended both as organizational configuration of information and more specifically as hypertext *software* – is seen here as a subject-oriented writing tool for *qualitative* analysis that at the same time prefigures today's widespread object-oriented high-computation tools for quantitative analysis. The proto-hypertextual features of these autobiographical processes of self-readings become therefore a productive site for hypertext's thematization as a tool for one

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[9] For a basic explanation of scalable reading, see Seth Denbo and Neil Fraistat, "Diggable Data, Scalable Reading and New Humanities Scholarship." (paper presented at the *2nd International Conference on Culture and Computing*, Kyoto, Japan). As Seth Denbo explains, "Scalability in this context utilizes new computational approaches that allow for the interrogation of massive text objects far beyond the capability of the individual reader, while simultaneously allowing for traditional forms of close reading." (MITH, http://mith.umd.edu/diggable-data-scalable-reading-and-new-humanities-scholarship/ [Last visited March 30, 2012]). In my specific case, by focusing on small structural and stylistic details of the three texts by Didion, Dillard, and Suleri, I hint at the potential computational tractability of these materials.

[10] See Leonardo Flores's lecture at: https://www.uib.no/en/rg/electronicliterature/114122/leo-flores-third-generation-electronic-literature. Flores explains that "Third generation electronic literature emerges with the rise of social media networks, the development of mobile, touchscreen, augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) platforms. This generation is less concerned with inventing form and more with remixing and creating work within well-established platforms and their interfaces, parallel to a return to recognizable poetic forms, Romantic subjectivity, and pastiche in Postmodern poetry. This includes Instagram poetry, bots, apps, kinetic typography, lyric videos, memes, Twine games, and works that take advantage of smartphone, touchscreen, and VR technologies. This generation leaves behind book and open Web publishing paradigms and embraces new funding models, such as crowdfunding and software distribution platforms."

of the emerging primary methodological needs for digital humanities, namely an effective blend of computational-enhanced readings and insightful human-based interpretation of sample literary works into appropriate forms of so-called *scalable reading*.

Hypertext as a textual device characterized by a different way of organizing information compared to printed manuscripts had been envisioned since the 1940s, namely well before the Internet era. Vannevar Bush's idea of *memex* immediately comes to mind as it is described in his article "As We May Think," (1945, 101-08) namely as an instrument to link information by associative connections rather than by indexes. A striking, but foundational, point raised by the article is that Bush strongly believed that, during the process of reading, the reader usually feels the urge to link to the text his or her own thoughts. In Bush's envisaged usage of the *memex*, anytime the reader needs it, "he inserts a page of longhand analysis of his own. Thus, he builds a trail of his interest through the maze of materials available to him. And his trails do not fade" (Bush 1945, 46). Particularly interesting in this passage is the reference to the possibility of adding thoughts and comments to the text in an 'indelible' way, or, in any case, in a way less transitory than the one guaranteed by mnemonic processes only. Ideally helpful in dealing with any text, this potential option becomes actually indispensable in relation to texts that show a high rate of structural complexity.

The kind of complexity involved in autobiographical narratives like Didion's, Dillard's and Suleri's is connected with the fact that all these writers create in their literary works intricate webs of words, images, and passages that force the reader to perform a remarkable amount of mental connection-making in order to make sense of the content as a whole. Challenging for the common reader, this kind of complexity becomes utterly evident whenever a literary work of this kind undergoes the activity of critical re-reading. As we will see, the proto-technological characterization of these writings would require a computer-assisted study of literature of the kind illustrated by Thomas Rommel in his introductory remarks in the section "Literary Studies" in the *Companion to Digital Humanities*. In my account, these printed works allow us to reconsider Bush's idea of the *memex* (and, by extension, hypertext) as a crucial intermediate step towards the moment in which it becomes "no longer acceptable, as John Burrows pointed out, to ignore the potential of electronic media and to continue with textual criticism based on small sets of examples only, as was common usage in traditional literary criticism" (Rommel 2008). Bush's reference to the necessity of tools to record associative connections selected among huge amounts of data applies, in fact, also to texts that, in an apparently unproblematic way, defy basic principles of sequence clarity and logical progression. As Jay David Bolter remarks,

> Hyperbaton was the name given in particular to the departure from conventional work order in a sentence, but we can also think of the displaced order of episodes in a hypertext as hyperbaton. […] The technique requires suspension: the reader must hold the displaced unit in mind while waiting for the rest of the syntax. (2001, 130)

Bolter here uses a scheme of sentence construction as a metonymy for textual structures that are a common feature of hypertextual works conceived for digital environments. However, syntactic hyperbaton might prove to be quite problematic when applied to textual structures in printed works. We might as well think of the *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*'s opening as exemplary to evaluate problems connected with such a writing technique. Dillard opens her narrative with a specific image: "I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my bed in the middle of the night and land on my chest. I'd half-awaken" (1974, 3).

Dillard's initial reference to her cat is articulated in the book as the mere beginning of a large sequence of digressions and expansions opened by her narrating self. After a long series of meditations over a myriad variegated of topics, she eventually links together – precisely through that reference – two of the main commonly recognized thematic nodes in the book: the coexistence of horror and beauty as it is described in the first chapter and the impossibility of *feeling* the present as it is addressed in chapter six. The reference to her cat reappears on page 99, namely after a considerable amount of textual wandering.

> Behind me, Tinker Mountain, and to my left, Dead Man Mountain, are eroding one thousandth of an inch a year.

> The tomcat that used to wake me is dead; he was long since grist for an earthworm's casting, and is now the clear sap of a Pittsburgh sycamore, or the honeydew of aphids sucked from that sycamore's high twigs and sprayed in sticky drops on a stranger's car. (Dillard 1974, 99)

The cat's life-span is drawn to its conclusion and simultaneously kept eternally alive in the perennial mutation of existence about a hundred pages further in the book. It is possible to interpret the unexpected reference to her cat as the link/anchor connecting the author's initial interrogation on heaven and heart ("what blood was this, and what roses?" (1974, 3)) to the sudden urge to "feel the now" (1974, 99). According to this interpretation, the original separation between horror and beauty or, that is, death and life, would find unexpected reunion in the immanency of time through the use of a returning image as a conceptual anchor. An unexpected event causing a sudden epiphany for the reader, the image cannot but constitute a hypothetical origin for possible stylistic, textual, and narrative structures for the critical re-reader. Should every single image in the book be taken into account as a potential element of textual *hyperbaton*, holding in mind the infinite series of 'displaced units' would be utterly unmanageable. This is a kind of narrative suspension for which readers would have to engage in a mnemonic effort that clearly exceeds human cognitive abilities. Re-readers would have to become, that is to say, syntactic parsers able to survey literary materials (of narrative language) in ways that are today performed only on computer-readable corpora. Moreover, the frequency of such unexpected recurrences in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* implicitly draws ever-changing conceptual maps across the textual content. By putting the reader in a condition that cries out for forms of visualizations of the kind today digital humanists build for purposes of knowledge representation, such virtual narrative maps anticipate the will for cognitive grasp that high computation can adequately grant.[11] However, confined to the technology of the printed book as it is, Dillard's work offers the reader only the possibility of hoping to bump into the desired missing element of its 'suspended syntax' along the single reading path of its unfolding pages. In a sort of prescient approach to digital treatment of literary big data, hypertext software such as *Storyspace* provides navigation tools such as links lists, tree maps, overviews, and bookmarks in order to grant the reader some sort of conceptual orientation (see fig. 1).

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[11] See John Unsworth. "Knowledge Representation in Humanities Computing." (paper presentation at the *National Endowment for the Humanities*, April 3, 2001), http://www.iath.virginia.edu/~jmu2m/KR/.
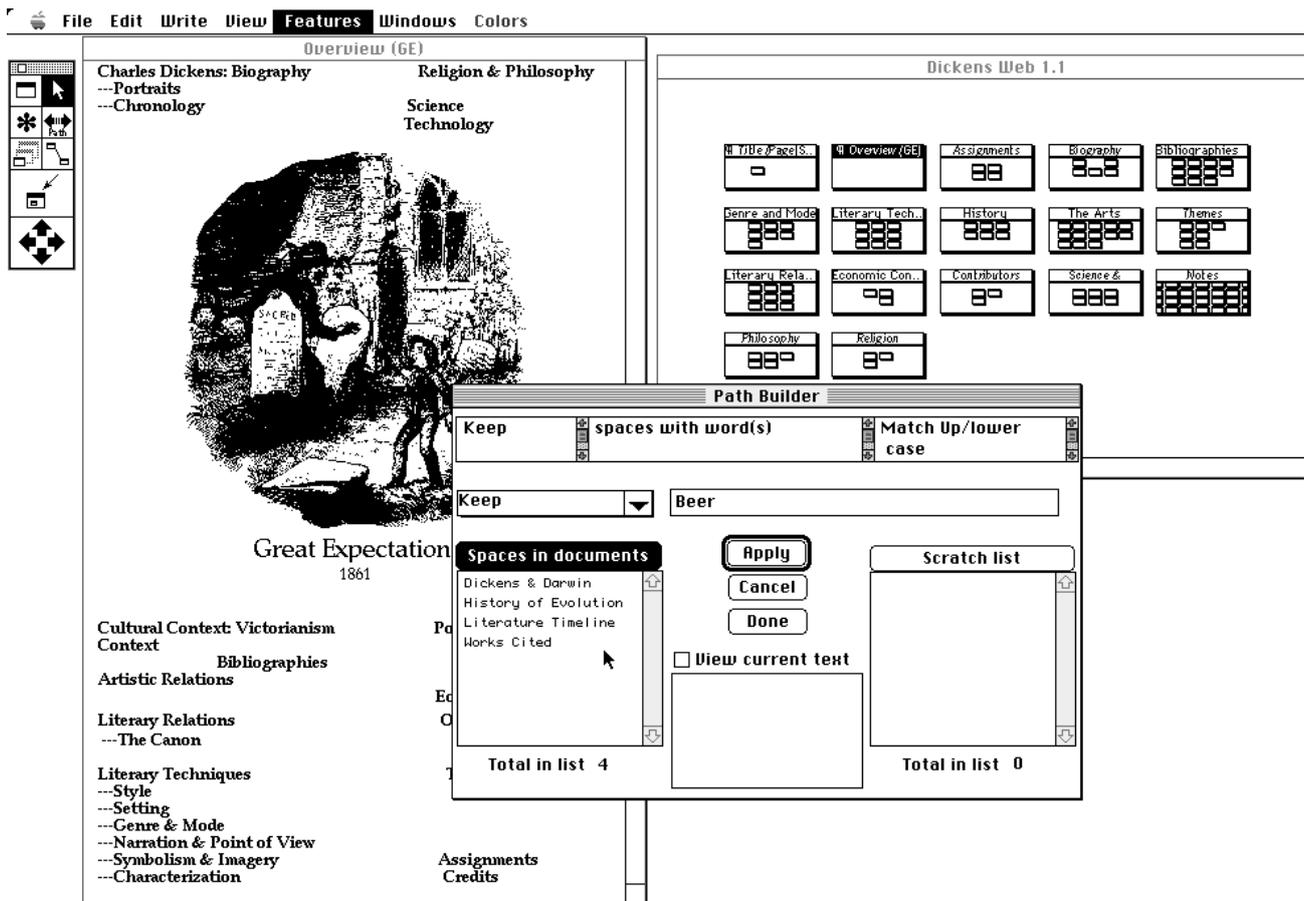
Fig. 1: *Storyspace* screenshot. Searching for the name "Beer" in the *Storyspace* version of the *Dickens Web* (Landow and Kahn 1992).

Further specific options of hypertextual environments such as saving reading paths the reader might want to preserve for future textual access, various ways of visualizing links and their networked structure, or the possibility of adding comments to text (namely the most concrete example of the reading-as-writing the book encourages), would provide a more adequate framework for the reading experience of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Such features would, in fact, allow forms of proactive textual search aimed at scanning, surveying, visualizing, and quantifying, i.e. at scalable-reading the immense expanse of its literary elements.

3. Interfaced Texts: From Real-Time Access to Hierarchy Structure Redefinition

Besides issues of intratextuality (Landow 2006, 71) as the ones we have just encountered in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, these books also challenge the reader with additional issues of intertextuality. If, on the one hand, the narrating self creates webs or references, on the other hand these authors (Didion and Dillard mainly) carry on an actual representation of the self as a web of texts in itself. Dillard, for instance, effectively materializes in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* Roland Barthes's notorious idea that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin […] where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing." (Barthes, 1977, 142) Her insights, fluid ideas, and meditations are always merged with and patched up by other ready-made quotations. Opposed to an "image of literature […] tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions," (Barthes 1977, 143) Dillard's self-centered echolalia offers the reader the oxymoron of an autobiography mostly narrated by external texts that are oftentimes explicitly referenced. More significantly, Dillard's very own self is constantly portrayed as entertaining dialogues with other written texts:

> "Nature," said Thoreau in his journal, "is mythical and mystical always, and spends her whole genius on the least work." The creator, *I would add* [emphasis added], churns out the intricate

texture of least works that is the world with a spendthrift genius and an extravagance of care,
This is the point [emphasis added]. (1974, 28)

Rather than a self-contained self, Dillard's "I" is often little more than a formal grammar landmark in a textual comprehensive meditative motion. As we read in the *Afterword*, the whole piece of writing is actually born out of a preliminary activity of "filling out five-by-seven index cards with notes from years of reading" (Dillard 1974, 279). In highlighting crucial differences between reading books and hypertexts, Nicholas Burbules points out that, obviously, "any page, any volume [...] can refer to other texts, but accessing those involves activities such as reaching to a shelf, purchasing the book, going to a library and so on; activities that are not themselves *reading*" (1997, 103). Annie Dillard and Joan Didion's books, instead, virtually erase such difference by making related texts available 'in' their texts. In so doing, both Didion and Dillard bring reading astonishingly near to the experience of hyper-reading as well as onto the verge of the uncharted territories of distant-reading.[12] From the point of view of the latter practice, the blending of various different authorial texts is likely to make the reduction of literary language into undifferentiated textual *data* quite problematic. References in these writings are, in fact, both constitutive parts of the text itself and at the same time unqualified items of their narrative textual corpora. In Didion's *The White Album*, for instance, texts are frequently used as body of evidence on which the author's confused psyche can often rely to maintain some sort of identity coherence. Poetry verses, excerpts from testimonies, lyrics, bestseller's opening lines, protest chants: all these different kinds of texts concur in assembling Didion's specific narrative of the self. She introduces in her writings even ordinary lists of chores and errands that get then analyzed in third person narration mode:

TO CARRY:

mohair throw
typewriter
2 legal pads and pens
files
house key

[…]

Notice the deliberate anonymity […] Notice the mohair throw […] Notice the bourbon […] Notice the typewriter […].
It should be clear that this was a list made by someone who prized control, yearned after momentum, someone determined to play her role as if she had the script, heard her cues, knew the narrative. (Didion 1990, 35)

By means of such morpho-syntactic literary twists, Didion represents herself as a woman in search of her own disaggregated self, an observer who is interested in comprehensively reading (and mapping) her self as much as the reader is. Interestingly enough, she is often looking for her own self precisely in the synergy of the variegated texts she produces as attachments, namely texts that are outside the main narrative but nonetheless connected to it. The proto-hypertextual fragmentation of these heterogeneous external references both disperses the single self of the author and concurs in constructing its written image at the same time. By using branches of attachments and personal documents as simultaneously in and out of her narrative, Didion anticipates the redefinition of textual hierarchies typical of hypertextual environments as much as she hints at attempting different visualizations of chosen phenomena for close analysis. The absence of any recognizable difference between main text and external reference is, as a matter of fact, a characteristic feature of hypertexts. As Landow points out, "in hypertext, the main text is that which one is presently reading. So one has a double revaluation: with the dissolution of this hierarchy, any attached text

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[12] See Franco Moretti. *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History.* London, UK: Verso, 2005.

gains an importance it might not have had before" (2006, 22). A comparable dynamic occurs in many a form of data visualizations in digital humanities analyses once we frame textual visualization within Johanna Drucker's treatment of data as *capta*. As Drucker remarks, the data in computer-based data sets visualizations are not to be intended as observer-independent "descriptions of a priori conditions" (Drucker 2001) but are always observer-codependent and constructed by the interpreter. Their prominence is therefore not (quantitatively) self-evident and self-identical but always (qualitatively) reconfigurable as far as the interpretive status of visualized textual items is concerned. All texts included in *The White Album* become then, in Didion's narrative strategy, intermediate passages between her own subjective qualitative observation of these 'data' and the reader's specific one – a qualitative and, today, possibly quantitative one. They are points of both arrival and departure at the same time just like any *lexia* characterized by multiple links in a hypertextual electronic environment. Again, as a printed text, *The White Album* allows its readers only the option of following links in a uni-linear way. In hypertextual works, following a link can conversely lead the reader either to a subsequent portion of the same text or to a different type of text. Strikingly, Didion creatively exploits such linking transitions possibilities precisely between texts ideally characterized by different status. It is sufficient to consider the following passage as an example of her rhetorical experiments.

> Another flash cut:
>
> *"In June of this year patient experienced an attack of vertigo, nausea, and a feeling that she was going to pass out. […] In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitably to conflict and failure…"*
>
> The patient to whom this psychiatric report refers is me. (Didion 1990, 14-15)

In this passage Didion operates a reversal of what we would today call a *typed link* in an electronic hypertext. Rather than being suggested before the reader's arrival to the linked document, the nature of the text in italics is explained *after* the reader has already experienced it as different from the main narrative. In an ideal hypertextual version of Didion's *The White Album* the anchor signaling the presence of a link would probably be placed upon the string "psychiatric report." The mere presence of an explanation reveals anyway Didion's strenuous effort to maintain some kind of rational sequence in assembling her textual *collage*, of trying to select texts functionally, namely in a way that can make her own distant reading of herself as reliable as possible. Didion can be considered a detective trying to find her own self dispersed in (and dispersed *by*) the various different texts floating around her during the late sixties. But, as any good detective does, she seems to firmly believe in deduction processes. As she seems to repeat herself as much as to the reader, "to understand what the Royal is now you must first understand what it was, from 1927 through the Thirties […]" (1990, 137), a comment conspicuously similar to her remarks about Huey Newton's political behaviour: "To understand how that had happened you must first consider Huey Newton, who he was." (1990, 27) Several passages in the book suggest the image of someone who, despite suffering psychic disorientation caused by the clashing of innumerable different narratives, still tries to believe in linear causality. Commenting on *The White Album*'s opening statement about the necessity to "tell ourselves stories in order to live" (Didion 2009, 11), Katherine Hayles observes that "what these accounts make clear is that narrative has an explanatory force that literally makes the world make sense" (Hayles 1999, 9) Didion's collage of images and texts mainly represents therefore a difficulty – but certainly not a lack of willingness – in establishing causal links for subsequent both empirical and speculative analysis. As she writes towards the end of the book: "Of the time I spent in Bogotá I remember mainly images, indelible but difficult to connect." (Didion 1990, 193) Though more and more suffering from a disjointed condition (as hypertext works and technologies often instantiate), her self does not recoil from the difficulty of the task of monitoring possible intelligible configurations (as computer-assisted visualizations of textual *corpora* regularly encourage).

4. The Self as a Multi-Centered Text
As outlined above, Didion's attitude can be seen as consistent with the mindset of a literary environment able to conceive narrative mainly within the theoretical frame provided by the technology of the printed book. A

journalist writing during the sixties, Didion belongs to a society rather unaccustomed to experience literature on devices built in ways that might encourage multilinear readings. Though Didion frequently refers to episodes that "suggest the extent to which the narrative on which many of us grew up no longer applies" (Didion 1990, 205), her psychological and emotional concerns remain inscribed within the paradigm of causality. On a structural level, linear causality is conversely often absent in a narrative such as Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*. Compared to Didion's unusual kind of social (auto-)biography – she might be said to be mainly engaged in writing-as-reading a self which is exemplarily disrupted in trying societal/sociable interactions – Suleri's *Meatless Days* unfolds by means of an elegiac process of remembering that regularly inscribes historical events in the specificity of her personal history of growing up in Pakistan during the 1960s and 1970s and her family diaspora. Her individualized story, as represented in the book, deals with a fundamental tension between her attention to characters and her concern for life's general picture and existence's ungraspable *plot*. Rather than issues of plot causality, Suleri noticeably privileges the attempt to portray single characters as narrative units already in themselves. For Suleri, any person *is* a book as well as a ready-made web of narratives form the very outset. Descriptions of members of her family prove metaphorically suggestive in this respect: her mother's face wears "like the binding of a book" (1989, 151) and her sister Ifat is "is just a repository of anecdotes for me, something I carry around without noticing" (1989, 42). Moreover, she significantly refers to books titled with a proper name, like *Tom Jones* or *Madame Bovary*, as the less troubling among the ones in her mother's library. What she remembers most passionately is her mother's peremptory advice: "daughter, unplot yourself, let be." Suleri's narrative can be therefore understood as a continual effort to downplay the prominence of general schemes in favour of primarily sticking to the task of portraying single characters. Narrative strands in *Meatless Days* thus inevitably radiate out of such relatively self-contained portraits, portrayals that implicitly create webs of relations among what can be regarded as distinct nodes (her father, mother, sister, and even youth friends or acquaintances). As she overtly points out, stepping for a moment out of her memories,

> Think how much a voice gives way to plot when it learns to utter the names of the people that it loves: picture looking at Peter and saying, "Peter"; picture picking up the telephone to Anita's voice and crying out, "Nina!" How can syntax hold around a name? (Suleri 1989, 155)

Plot, meant as narrative syntax, is for Suleri beside the point in autobiographical writing. Character, on the other hand, is a self-sufficient story. Conceived in this way, Suleri's self-representation becomes the result of an actual network of selves. Rather than dispersed and searched for in the variety of an epoch's textual production as Didion's or represented as the dissolution of the subject into blocks of pure language as Dillard's, Suleri's self is naturally and organically multi-centred, namely distributed among the nodes represented by the persons she once related with in meaningful ways. Her autobiographical self can therefore only remain at a germinal stage, always barely sketched, and always waiting to be constructed into a whole by the reader. Suleri's self-representation remains, in other words, still to be *written* by our process of reading-as-writing the family mosaic of *Meatless Days*.

Relationality has, of course, always played a key role in narratives of the self and the feature becomes even more evident in postmodern times in which the notion of the author is no longer explainable only in terms of a coherent entity identified by concrete biographical data. The "general rejection of biographicist criticism" (Burke 1995, 65) and the progressive disentanglement of our concept of the author from the self-contained unit of the autonomous liberal self carried on by poststructuralist theories have made us perfectly acquainted with the fluidity of interexchange among subjectivity nodes. As Nancy Miller remarks in *But Enough About Me*,

> the genre of the memoir is not about terminal "moi-ism" […] it takes two to perform an autobiographical act – in reading as in writing. […] in postmodern culture the writing autobiographical subject – female or male – almost always requires a partner in crime – and often that partner is the reader. (2002, 2)

The reader's role in actively creating the meaning of a literary work is, similarly, nothing really new in literary theory. Reader-response critics like Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss or Stanley Fish have all foregrounded

in their theoretical approaches the reader's agency in experiencing a literary text. However, by de-centering her self as an entity distributed in her various relations to other subjects and by leaving the task of connecting such relations in the hands of the reader, Suleri establishes the perfect metaphor for the conjunction between self-representation and new technologies of both writing and *reading*. As Linda Hutcheon notoriously reminds us, "to decentre is not to deny," (1988, 159) and *Meatless Days*'s readers precisely undergo the experience described by Landow when he illustrates the multi-linear experience of electronic hypertexts.

> As readers move through a web or network of texts, they continually shift the center – and hence the focus or organizing principle – of their investigation and experience. Hypertext, in other words, provides an infinitely recenterable system whose provisional point of focus depends on the reader, who becomes a truly active reader in yet another sense. One of the fundamental characteristics of hypertext is that it is composed of bodies of linked texts that have no primary axis of organization. (2006, 56)

The absence of any primary axis of organization in *Meatless Days* can be visualized by means of a particular example, namely the recurrence of identical lines of texts in different parts of the book. Representing both the spoken and the unspeakable on the symbolic level, the traumatic event of the death of Suleri's mother is mentioned in an indirect way, namely through the report of a specific comment made by her sister Ifat. This comment is nonetheless linked to two different narrative threads. We first encounter Ifat's words in the first chapter, the one dedicated to her grandmother Dadi, when Suleri tells about Dadi's inappropriate behaviour during Mairi's funeral.

> When I returned to Pakistan, I was too peeved with Dadi to find out how she was. Instead I listened to Ifat tell me about standing there in the hospital, watching the doctors suddenly pump on my mother's heart – "I'd seen it on television," she gravely said, "I knew it was the end." (1989, 17)

We then encounter Ifat's comment a second time in the chapter devoted to Suleri's father. Here the author is reporting about his dad and how Ifat is assisting him after an eye operation he had undergone shortly before her wife's death.

> When I met Ifat later that summer, she solemnly told me all her tales: "When I saw the doctor pump upon her heart – it's the kind of thing you see on television – I knew it was the end." (Suleri 1989, 124)

The same event appears within different narrative paths, namely within distinct attempts to describe her relations with different people and gains therefore different levels of dramatic effect in the two contexts. Should we be reading a contemporary electronic hypertext, we would undoubtedly say that we have just bumped into the same *lexia*. This is actually a frequent phenomenon in the process of hyper-reading because the presence of various electronic links allows the reader to experience multiple reading paths often across a limited set of branches of digital text. It has been argued in hypertext theory that encountering an identical *lexia* while surfing a net of linked digital texts is not to be considered actual 're-reading.' The context in which readers now conceptually situate the already known information has, in fact, been enriched – possibly, even redefined – by the data they have in the meantime acquired after their first encounter with the identical passage. This is precisely what happens to Suleri's image in the course of the reading. In the passage from one 'anchor' to another – namely from the image of a woman constructed in relation to Dadi in the first chapter to that of a daughter constructed in relation to her father – the perspective of the reader has in the meantime been updated by all the intermediate passages. And here we can notice a clear relation with Didion. Didion's self is as much difficult to reconstruct as Suleri's because of the different *personae* created by each of the different essays of *The White Album*. As Didion writes in the section "In the Islands," "I tell you this not as aimless revelation but because I want you to know, as you read me, precisely who I am and

where I am and what is on my mind" (1990, 134). Every image of her self is therefore temporary and contingent. As Phillip Lopate notes

> Autobiographies and personal essays, for all their overlapping aspects, are fundamentally different […] The personal essayist […] cannot assume that the reader will ever have read anything by him or her before, and so must re-establish a persona each time and embed it in a context by providing sufficient autobiographical background. (1994, xxix)

As the author of a book located somewhere in between the genres of the personal essay collection and the autobiography, Dillard conversely does not feel the need to re-establish the features of her narrating persona in each of the thematic chapters. Her writing constantly incorporates, for example, ideas from many different religious systems in a way that neglects the issue of beliefs' consistency: from references to Christ and the Bible to Judaism, Buddhism, Sufism and so on. This aspect disentangles our concept of the author from the historical event of the existing persona and let the virtual presence of all the other texts (and authors) connected to the different philosophical systems be perceived in every single sentence of the main text. Given that, as Landow observes, "many features of hypermedia derive from its creating the virtual presence of all the authors who contribute to its materials" (2006, 135), Dillard's piece can be said to contain another element of proto-hypertextuality.

We have, up to this point, considered a number of examples of rhetorical devices exhibited by these works. All of these can be legitimately defined as proto-hypertextual: 'hyperbatic' structures, textual hierarchy redefinitions, text as a recentrable system and winding narrative paths. It is possible anyway to go one step further and to notice even features that seem engaged in grappling with the very same issues that hypertext theory has frequently dealt with. Whereas, for example, Didion reverses the 'typed link' condition in hypertext and Sara Suleri guides the reader to the identical portions of text by following different paths, Dillard often simply abolishes any indication concerning changes of intellectual direction. According to Landow, expressions like *in contrast*, *nevertheless*, *on the other hand*, *because* or *after* are language instruments to signal imminent textual turns. As he explains, in both print and oral communication, they are means, in other words, of preparing us for breaks in a linear stream of language" (Lanow 2006, 152). By rejecting any equivalent of such rhetorical devices, Dillard often puts distinct branches of texts side by side without any connection other than the blank space of the typographic page. The task of defining the type of link between the various bits of text within the specific passage is, in this way, completely left to the reader. Any critical re-reader interested in grasping the structural evolution of these connections would, however, find himself or herself at a loss. Consider for example the following extract:

> The snake whose skin I tossed away, whose homemade, personal skin is now tangled at the county dump – that snake in the woods by the quarry stirs now, quickens now, prodded under the leaf mold by sunlight, by the probing root of May apple, the bud of bloodroot. And where are you now?
>
> I stand. All the blood in my body crashes to my feet and instantly heaves to my head, so I blind and blush, as a tree blasts into leaf spouting water hurled up from roots. What happens to me? I stand before the sycamore dazed; I gaze at its giant trunk.
>
> Big trees stir memories. You stand in their dimness, where the very light is blue, staring unfocused at the thickest part of the trunk as though it were a long, dim tunnel–: the Squirrell Hill tunnel. You're gone. (Dillard 1979, 100)

This passage offers the reader webs of relations without actually signaling any explicit link. Whom might be asked the questions at the end of the first paragraph, for example? Is she referring to the snake or is she self-asking the question? In the former case the first paragraph might get linked to the third, while in the latter it would create a Q & A sequence with the second. The same goes for the analogy between life pulsing both in her and in the trees, an analogy that establishes relationships with the image of roots featuring in all the three paragraphs. This kind of indeterminacy brings up an issue that, as Landow notes, has been raised time

and again in the field of hypertext research: "Can one have hypertext 'without links'?" (Landow 1990, 20) Can we have a digital text whose textual units might connect to others in the absence of visual road signs or warnings? Can we have, that is to say, a digital text able to work upon the principle of infinite granularity in signification?[13] The question is obviously an interesting one from both the theoretical and philosophical level and, again, gets remarkably addressed by these narratives through the frequent insertion of unmarked quotations. Didion's *The White Album* for example, proves illuminating from this point of view. Being offered to the reader in several forms, quotations show their inextricability and indissolubility from both language and writing. Didion intersperses quotations with surprising nonchalance: Jaycess "knew that this was a *brave new world* [emphasis added]," (1990, 94) bikers "defile the rose and the cross alike, *break on through to the other side* [emphasis added]," (1990, 100) and a chain of correspondences "*in the jingle-jangle morning* of that summer [...] made as much sense as anything else [emphasis added]" (1990, 44). Literature has made us accustomed to the fact that words and passages get quoted when they speak to a particular reader in a particular way but these three hidden, unmarked references to Aldous Huxley's famous novel, to the song "Break on Through" by The Doors, and to Bob Dylan's "Mr Tambourine Man" lyrics, makes the issue of difference between primary and secondary texts actually irrelevant. In an immense mass of data where 'text' and 'footnotes' regularly swap functions and roles and where textual hierarchies get completely erased by means of leaving to the reader the task of making the anchored link visible in a digital text, a reading device able to support computer-assisted reading can become *de facto* indispensable. The point would be, as Lev Manovich notices in a different context in his "Trending: The Promises and the Challenges of Big Social Data", not to substitute human critical expertise with some kind of computational-based one, but in making both serve a common goal by working in a complementary way. As Manovich remarks, "we can use computers to map the patterns in massive visual data sets and to select the objects that we then examine manually. [...] Ideally, we want to combine human ability to understand and interpret – which computers can't completely match yet – and computers' ability to analyze massive data sets using algorithms we create" (Manovich, 2011). Seen from this perspective, hypertext software represents an important node in the technological evolution of systems able to present and configure textual information in ways that can still foster heuristic research carried on by means of literary visualization. In an era of e-readers and tablets, hypertext visualizations interfaces are likely to feel less foreign to the average reader than digital humanities tools might be and can, at the same time, promote more insightful analysis than text visualized in *pdf* and similar formats can allow.

5. Conclusion

I have tried to show how it is mainly the task of the reader – especially the critical reader – to recognize and make visible in traditional printed texts a number of germinal technological features that had not obviously been envisioned or conceived of as such by their authors. The recent appearance of *blogs*, the constant profile-making/updating of social networking websites like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, or *Cyworld* should increase the attention of literary scholars to those proto-technological features that I discussed as already present in printed autobiographical works. These forms of (digital) nonfiction writing have, of course, also introduced new elements in the critical debate on contemporary American literary productions. Just as in multicultural societies people tend to look at themselves not only through their own eyes but also through the eyes of their neighbors,[14] authors of printed books in the current electronically-mediated literary environment are more

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[13] From this point of view, new practices of text mining recently implemented in digital humanities computational-assisted research, such as the one known as Topic Modeling *de facto* build on such an assumption. Topic Modeling can be defined as a method of unsupervised machinic treatment of large-scale textual data that allows us to discover the abstract "topics" that occur in a collection of documents. The Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) algorithm on which most Topic Modeling software is based can create various statistical models of clusters of co-occuring words depending on the parameters (number of topics, iteration frequency, and others) that we predefine in the software settings, before creating the actual model. The mere operational use of "scalable" parameters for topics' search cannot therefore work but from the implicit assumption that there is an infinite granularity of signification in any collection of documents, provided that we prepare the *corpus* according to our analytical goals.

[14] See Hans Bak, ed. *Multiculturalism and the Canon of American Culture*. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993.

and more taking into account the emergence of new cultural practices brought by technological changes.[15] For many American writers of the early 21st century, electronic authors and digital media artists are more and more becoming a sort of new neighbors. Jonathan Safran Foer's attempts to explore multimedia and interactive elements in his fictional *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* or Dave Eggers's promise to send his readers an interactive digital version of his autobiography *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* if they send back the paper copy ("NOTE: This offer is real." (Eggers 2001, xxv)) are only a couple of examples of the contemporary consciousness of being writers in the electronic era. In a literary world that becomes more and more digitally variegated, new definitions will soon be required and put side by side with categories like autobiography, personal essay, and, autobiographical nonfiction. More research on literary modes implemented *before* the advent of our electronic age but carried on with an eye on their proto-technological elements might culturally prepare us to critically deal both qualitatively (human reading) and quantitatively (computer-assisted reading) with future genres of autobiographical nonfiction not yet imagined.

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[15] See Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: the fate of reading in an electronic age.* New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1995.

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