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Lake District Online: Studies in Book Ecology and Digital Migration

MARGARET LINLEY

I begin with some recent events in my hometown of Vancouver, Canada, a major port city located on the north coast of the Pacific Ocean. Anyone with even a slight familiarity with Vancouver and its temperate rainforest climate might think of that city as a “dark and stormy” place (to borrow Edward Bulwer Lytton’s much-parodied phrase [24]). But this summer, Vancouver experienced an unprecedented drought, the kind of freak of weird weather that, these days, seems increasingly ordinary. The sky that we woke up to on Sunday morning just before heading off to Hawaii for the NAVSA 2015 conference seemed straight out of science fiction, as the dawn broke in angry red slivers through an ominously dark and heavy haze, not of fog—which is what would be typical in overcast Vancouver—but rather smoke, caused by the record number of forest fires burning across British Columbia over the July Fourth weekend. The wildfires combined with peculiar wind conditions to result in a thick blanket of smog over the city, creating an eerie atmosphere of apparent environmental apocalypse.

ABSTRACT: This paper considers how an emergent nineteenth-century ecological framework, developed as an effect of global systems of interconnection, organized and localized space in a way that can help us understand digital culture today. Taking as a case study a corpus of Victorian travel books that migrated from the English Lake District to Vancouver, Canada, this paper explores the sense of and feeling for place in terms of “deterritorialization”—or dislocation and reorientation toward the planet—through the statistical, cartographic, and picturesque visualization techniques developed in the nineteenth century. These representational strategies, in turn, inform a second migration across media platforms and link the Victorian interest in ecology with contemporary environmental concerns.

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One of those wildfires happened within metro Vancouver city limits, on the Burnaby Mountain campus of Simon Fraser University. This is not the first time in recent memory that Burnaby Mountain has ignited in an environmental crisis. In fall 2014, protests challenged the proposed thousand kilometer Trans Mountain oil and gas pipeline that is slated to cut through Burnaby Mountain directly below the university campus. When work crews showed up to conduct preliminary tests, crowds including children, seniors, students, and university professors erupted in heated opposition, resulting in over 60 citizen arrests.

In a seemingly unrelated and much less politically volatile event, in 2012 a giant 155-year-old Grand fir tree growing in an arboretum in the Lake District—the conservation area and literary tourist destination that has come to be known as “Wordsworth country”—was named the tallest tree in England (“Standing Tall” 10). A collection of rare and exotic tree species, an arboretum is essentially an outdoor museum. While the discovery was celebrated by the British Tree Registry and arbor conservationists, this vintage Victorian example of a successful nonnative species represents precisely the sort of ecological disaster that William Wordsworth mourned in his critique of invasive foreign plant species in the Lake District. Given that fir trees are native to the Pacific Northwest of Canada, this Lake District transplant could have originated in colonial British Columbia: we might think of this as an ecological version of the empire writing back.

In discussing the loss of “timber trees,” especially the want of “*magnificent* ones near any of the lakes” and calling attention to the depletion of the “store of ancient trees, and the majesty and wildness of the native forest” (29), Wordsworth speculates in his *Guide Through the District of the Lakes* (1835) that “formerly the whole country must have been covered with wood to a great height up the mountains; where native Scotch firs must have grown in great profusion.” He adds in a footnote that the Scotch “species of fir is in character much superior to the American which has usurped its place” (28).

Wordsworth’s opposition to development in the remote region he helped popularize—specifically to the intrusions of railways, tourism, and what we would now call gentrification—is well-known, and his credentials as an influential early environmentalist are well told by, for example, Jonathan Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* and James Winter’s *Secure from Rash Assault*. However, as James C. McKusick points out, the idyllic Romantic stereotype of nature as “a place of vital sustenance and peaceful

coexistence is complemented by its nightmare vision of a world threatened by imminent environmental catastrophe” (29). Crucially, this convergence of ecological and global factors in Wordsworth’s calculus of loss—which is at the heart of his sense of place—reflects how he mobilizes sentiment in a political response to globalization’s environmental effects. Place is thus fundamentally provisional and historically contingent—a cultural or imaginative product of forces of empire and international commerce, and, literally, a labor of love. Ursula Heise explores this inherent dynamism and mobility through the rubric of “deterritorialization” (51), in which the sense of and feeling for a place can become dislocated and reoriented toward the planet. Through the imaginative and affective writing spaces of poetry and travel, this Wordsworthian ecological framework localizes space strategically, in terms of its unique expression as place, which is understood as an effect of systems of interconnection that shape the world. Furthermore, this interest in interconnection links the nineteenth century’s ecological concerns with contemporary environmental struggles in a place like Vancouver. Such a connection across centuries is foundational to the digital research project to which I will turn for the remainder of this paper.

Lake District Online is based on the SFU Library’s Lake District Collection of over 260 illustrated rare travel books, including many maps and examples of ornate book bindings, illustrations, and photography. The collection spans 300 years (1709–2000), with a concentration in the Victorian period. The aim is to create a bibliographic database and full-text electronic archive of Lake District travel writing in order to analyze how three networked spaces and ecologies—bibliographical, geographical, and digital—link two distant and distinct places: the Canadian Pacific Northwest and the English Northwest that Wordsworth immortalized. Using new methodology, the project engages one of the most challenging problems currently facing Victorian studies, the question of migration and specifically of nonhuman migration. Why should we pay attention when entire collections of books travel—or disappear altogether, as Andrew Stauffer’s work on bibliographic extinction reminds us is possible? And what are the consequences of transforming the physical books and other cultural materials we study into digital objects?

Answering questions about the ecological evolution, migration, and adaptation of English Lake District cultural artifacts from a place like Vancouver is crucial. From here, we can attempt to answer current high stakes questions about cultural heritage, the environment, and

the globalization of space. This project is guided by two principal research questions drawn from these topics. In what ways does it matter that a historical collection of English Lake District travel literature has migrated to Vancouver—that a collection of domestic travel literature about a region that has long been an icon of local attachment to place has migrated to a distant, and formerly colonial, part of the world? And in what ways might the physical migration of the collection from the English Lake District to the Canadian Pacific inform a second migration across media platforms?

In the past decade, digitally assisted analysis of literary texts has become increasingly sophisticated and widespread, extending Roberto Busa's concordance experiments of the 1940s to stylometrics and authorial attribution studies. Yet even as the field of humanities computing recently transformed into the discipline of the digital humanities, as marked by the 2004 publication of the Blackwell *Companion to the Digital Humanities*, the majority of literary computing projects were still motivated by methodologies of close reading and textual editing, as represented by such classic projects as the *Rossetti Archive*, *Emily Dickinson Archive*, and *The William Blake Archive*. Until very recently, technology has made remarkably little difference to how literary scholars conduct their research, with the greatest change occurring at the level of the simple search. Within the past few years, however, the number crunching and large-scale data processing capacity of computers is beginning to change humanities research. This recent move toward big-data textual research is part of the quantitative branch of digital humanities associated with such popular buzzwords as “distant reading” (Moretti 1), “macroanalysis” (Jockers 24), “culturomics” (Michel 177), and “big Humanities” (Hedges, Blanke, and Marciano n. p.).

These innovative practices of investigating large-scale cultural and literary trends statistically and numerically are deeply rooted in the past, even though they are perceived in the popular press as the cutting edge of digital humanities research—a source of “new tools of discovery” for “a fresh look at culture” (Lohr n. p.). Today's practices of information visualization using statistical graphics, charts, and graphs were largely invented in the first decades of the nineteenth century and hinged on two main principles: reduction and spatialization (Manovich 38). Reduction of complex phenomena to simple elements and the rules of their interaction enabled Victorians to manipulate data by mapping components onto a topology, or theoretical space. This production of

space was tied to the often-noted relativization and compression of space and time in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹

The history of the Lake District is similarly both a response to and product of modernized perceptions of space and time wrought by rapid urbanization, industrialization, globalization, and technological change. George Alexander Cooke's dynamic table of computed distances in the *Topographical and Statistical Description of the County of Cumberland* (1800)—a book of detailed accounts, guides, lists, tables, and indexes—exemplifies the statistical theorization and graphical abstraction of place that persists in varying degrees throughout the entire Lake District Collection (fig. 1). The status of data is a constant source of tension, however. For instance, Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Lake Country* (1864) authenticates one of its descriptive tables (fig. 2) by citing the Ordnance Department, but the text cautions that the column of lake depths is derived from "local sources" and, therefore, "not to be fully relied on" (344). Information in the Lake District corpus is often repeated from one book to the next without question, allowing data corruption to go viral. Take attempts to produce accurate measurements of waterfalls: the statistics are "entirely incorrect; the Guides not agreeing among themselves and no information to be had yet from the Ordnance Surveyors" (345). Nineteenth-century statistical mapping and visualization techniques thus reveal the Lake District

INDEX OF COMPUTED DISTANCES FROM TOWN TO TOWN,
Within the County of Cumberland.

The names of the respective Towns are to be found on the top and side,
and the intersection of the lines gives the distance.

	Carlisle,	Distant from London,										Miles,	
Cockermouth,	25	Cockermouth,	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	303
Brampton,	8	33	Brampton,	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	314
Egremont,	37	15	48	Egremont,	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	289
Ireby,	15	9	24	24	Ireby,	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	303
Keswick,	22	12	31	18	10	Keswick,	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	291
Kirkoswold,	15	27	14	40	21	20	Kirkoswold,	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	292
Longtown,	8	30	11	45	20	29	22	Longtown,	. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .	311
Penrith,	18	26	20	34	18	15	7	26	Penrith,	. . . . .	. . . . .	284
Ravenglass,	42	23	51	11	28	26	40	48	34	Ravenglass,	. . . . .	277
Whitehaven,	37	13	45	5	20	18	38	39	33	15	Whitehaven,	295	
Wigton,	11	14	20	27	6	15	19	5	20	35	25	Wigton	304

Fig. 1. "Index of Computed Distances from Town to Town," from *Topographical and Statistical Description of the County of Cumberland* by George Alexander Cooke (London: Cooke, 1800): n.p.

TABLE OF MOUNTAINS, LAKES, AND WATERFALLS.

§ II—THE LAKES

LAKES	Length in miles		Width in miles		Depth in feet	Beach marks—Height above sea level
	M.	F.	M.	F.		
Windermere	10	5	1	0	240	140 on Road near Harrowslack.
Ulleswater	7	5	0	5 $\frac{1}{4}$	210	532 on Road at Sharrow Bay.
Coniston Water	5	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	0	4	160	496 Surface of House Holm Island.
Bassenthwaite Water	3	7	0	7	68	187 on Road near Coplands Barn.
Derwent Water	2	7 $\frac{1}{2}$	1	1 $\frac{3}{4}$	72	237 on Road near Smithy Green.
Crummock Water	2	4	0	4 $\frac{3}{4}$	132	272 on Road near the Hotel.
Wast Water	3	0 $\frac{1}{2}$	0	4	270	530 on Road opposite Buttermere Hawse.
Hawes Water	2	3 $\frac{1}{2}$	0	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	.....	208 on Road near Countess Beck.
Thirlmere	2	5	0	3	108	698 on Road near Annas Cross.
Ennerdale Water	2	3 $\frac{1}{4}$	0	7 $\frac{1}{2}$	80	536 on Road near Deergarth Bay.
Esthwaite Water	1	4 $\frac{1}{2}$	0	3	80	371 on Road near Smithy Beck.
Grasmere Lake	0	7 $\frac{1}{2}$	0	4 $\frac{1}{2}$	180	225 Contour at side of road opposite Lake Bank House.
Buttermere Lake	1	2 $\frac{1}{4}$	0	3	.....	246 Δ on Island.
Lowes Water	1	0 $\frac{3}{4}$	0	3	.....	398 on Road near Hassness.
Rydal Water	0	5 $\frac{3}{4}$	0	1 $\frac{3}{4}$	.....	407 on Road near centre of Lake.
Elter Water	0	4 $\frac{1}{2}$	0	2 $\frac{1}{4}$	.....	185 on Road near Nab Cottage.
Brothers Water	0	4 $\frac{1}{4}$	0	2 $\frac{1}{4}$	.....	200 Contour near the edge of Lake.
						539 on Road opposite centre of Lake.

Fig. 2. “Table of Mountains, Lakes, and Waterfalls,” from *The Lake Country* by Eliza Lynn Linton and W. J. Linton (London: Smith Elder, 1864): 423.

as a historically contingent social construct and emphasize the uneven results of efforts to homogenize and standardize it.

The history of the cartography of the region proceeds similarly. The first map for tourists was included in the third edition of Thomas West’s *A Guide to the Lakes* (1784), with the first pocket map published in 1800 (Bicknell 71), following which maps of the region became one of the most popular forms of its spatial visualization. Recording more than the main roads, lakes, and settlements, maps added detailed information about the “blank” spaces between well-known towns and villages while also thickening the dimensions of space through more and more measureable features (fig. 3), and multiplying thematic elements such as geologic data (fig. 4). Throughout the collection, information graphics and maps function in often contradictory, contested, and provisional ways to describe, analyze, produce, and perform space as a naturalized, familiar place—but one that is never wholly knowable.

Today, Wordsworth is regarded as Ernest de Sélincourt imagined him in 1906, “not merely as the prophet of Lakeland, but almost as its first discoverer” (xii). Yet Wordsworth’s *Guide Through the District of the Lakes*, written over a 25-year period between 1810 and 1835, was preceded, as the foregoing examples indicate, by more than a half century

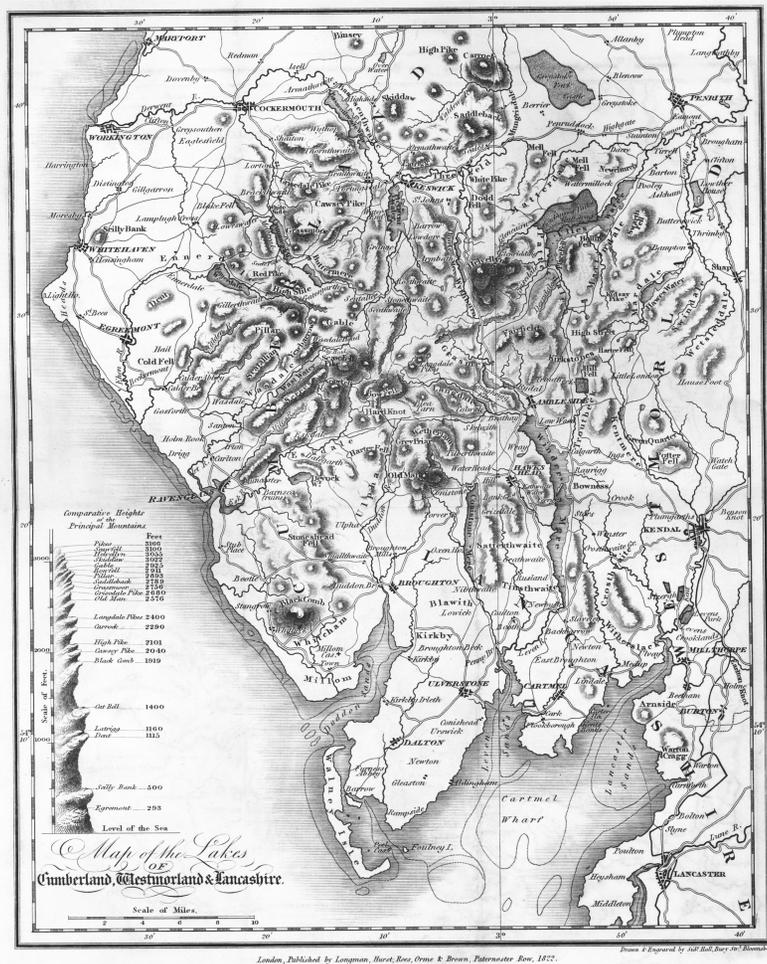


Fig. 3. Frontispiece map showing heights of mountains as well as distances, from *A Guide Through the District of the Lakes* by William Wordsworth (Kendal: Hudson, 1835).

of travel writing about the region. Since the 1750s, English Lakes scenery had inspired writers and artists and attracted legions of travelers and tourists. The picturesque rhetoric that accompanied this trend arguably parallels the statistical and cartographic mapping that made this region into a virtual playground (fig. 5). Literary associations with figures like Wordsworth, Harriet Martineau, John Ruskin, and Beatrix Potter are one result of this history, but the Lake District has also been the site of repeated conflicts over cultural heritage and environmental encroachment

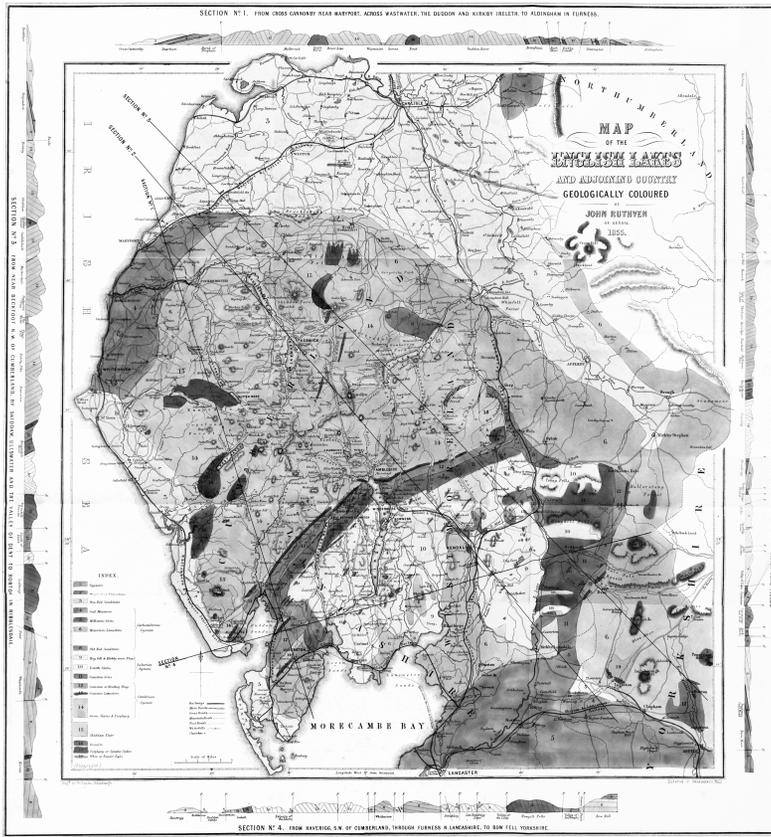


Fig. 4. Coloured Geologic Map [1855], from *Description of the English Lakes* by Harriet Martineau (London: Simpkin, 1858): opp. p. 167.

(Ritvo 7–35). In the late nineteenth century, the district came under the stewardship of the National Trust; in 1951, it became a national park; to-day, a bid is underway for its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site (Walton 31–48).

Wordsworth’s nature-based and place-oriented literary politics—exemplified when he refers to the Lake District as “a sort of national property in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy” (88)—suggest ways of imagining space ecologically and topographically. Wordsworth’s vision draws on the nineteenth-century quantifying and visualizing trends that were reconceptualizing space and also anticipates German zoologist Ernst Haeckel’s 1866 coinage of the word “oecology.” Haeckel defined the concept as

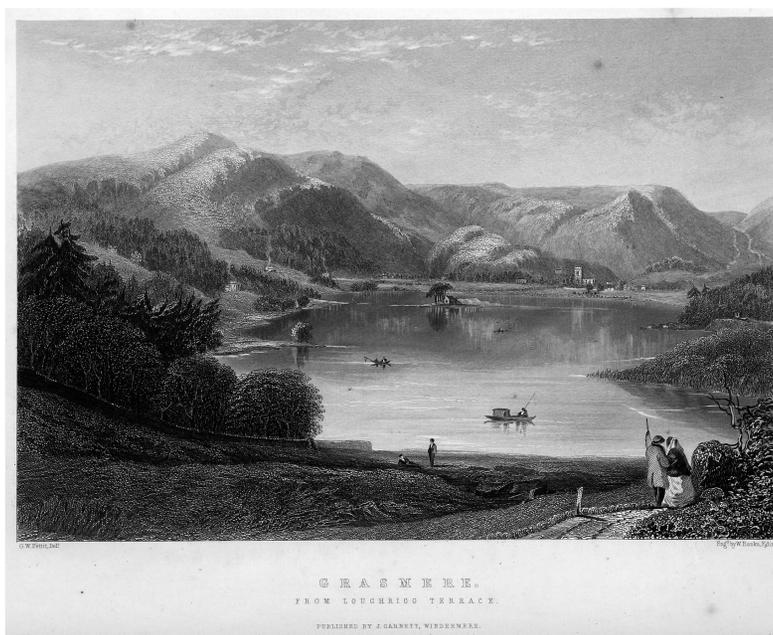


Fig. 5. “Grasmere, from Loughrigg Terrace,” from *Description of the English Lakes* by Harriet Martineau (London: Simpkin, 1858): opp. p. 47.

“the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment . . . ecology is the study of those complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the conditions of the struggle for existence” (qtd. in McIntosh 7–8). As the quotation suggests, Haeckel was inspired by Charles Darwin’s focus, in the *Origin of Species* (1859), on nature’s “web of complex relations” (156): the intricately networked interdependence of individual organisms and species. Given the overproduction of life and limited resources, this web of complex relations is governed by a logic of competition, modification, and adaptation. Accordingly, ecological sustainability after Darwin emphasizes the fitness of the organism in order to survive. But the organicist tendency of Haeckel’s definition (which continues to influence environmentalism today) also retrospectively endorses pre-Darwinian Romantic ecology, which associated nature with holistic and harmonious interaction. Both orientations (Darwinian and Romantic) are increasingly imbricated in the nineteenth century in larger, global networks, rendering Lake District writing today an important site for thinking about migration, mobility, and detachment in relation to locality and landscape.

ecology and organizes a given discursive field. My approach experiments with the computational text analysis method used by Andrew Piper and Mark Algee-Hewitt in their analysis of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's writings. Piper and Algee-Hewitt's work pays attention to how clusters of words repeat over time in complex webs of relations, allowing us to create new ways of apprehending the specter of one text in another, or to see how the text spawns new cultural patterns and is generated by prior ones. This distant reading project considers the extent to which Lake District ecology is determined and shaped by Wordsworth's writing, or whether it is more the sum of a prior set of literary and linguistic properties: that is to say, this project seeks to determine the extent to which Wordsworth's *Guide* is itself already an effect or outcome of a new kind of literate and mobile culture. The project seeks to push past the traditional models of linear genealogy and textual inheritance by using new modes of understanding literary relations through spatial dispersion and dimensionality. We will think about language organically and locally—as Wordsworth himself would have—as being animated by a spirit or life force with deep attachments to place. However, we will also look at organicism textually and genetically, and thus globally. In a process analogous to bioinformatics, which, for example, understands the human genome in textual terms, we will identify codes of cultural textuality and consider sets of instructions and repetitions of those codes as the condition for producing enormous degrees of variation (Piper 396).

To conclude, *Lake District Online* may act as a necessary foundation for subsequent explorations in the field precisely because it offers a unique knowledge base of carefully researched and curated metadata combined with the most comprehensive, unified corpus of digitized texts of its kind. Because of its size, genre, geographical identity, historical time span, and cultural value, it is ideally suited for exploring and testing newly emerging digital humanities methods in computational text analysis and visualization. As Jarom McDonald and Paul Westover suggest in the new digital edition of Wordsworth's *Guide*, “today's cloud-based mapping tools provide a significant framework for informing our readings of Wordsworth's textual, geographical mappings” (n. p.). *Lake District Online* uses digital humanities tools to localize space, and explores the potential of spatial and quantitative humanities to supplement, indeed transform, the way we “place” our texts ecologically. At the same time, however, we are discovering how digital representations of space, rather than stabilizing their object of interpretation, can only

invite further critique in an ongoing process of ecocritical spatial inquiry. The aspiration here is to push past purely quantitative methods to understand the extent to which Wordsworth's political geography—and that of Lake District travel writing generally—is “fundamentally relational,” as Lisa Ottum observes, and to situate “the Lakes within an imaginary network of global natures” (168).

Lake District Online aims to address what's at stake when the Victorian memorializing view of natural space, inherited from Wordsworth and more than a century of domestic travel writing, itself begins to travel—not only between geographic locations but also between print and digital media. Charting and analyzing a rare book collection, one that is as fundamental to the archives of colonial memory as it is to today's environmental and cultural heritage practices, as an ecology, the project contributes to our understanding of the mobile book networks linking the local to the global, from a remote region in the Northwest of imperial England to the postcolonial Pacific Northwest. At the same time, this research project offers an opportunity to consider what's at stake in the systemic presence of ecological metaphors in digital culture today.³ From digging, mining, and mapping data to the border zone interchanges enabled by interfaces, at both its depths and surfaces ecology functions at the very nexus of the digital humanities. Ecological metaphors help us grasp the expansiveness and complexity of digital ecologies and provide a crucial epistemological grounding. Ecological awareness, as Bethany Nowwiskie put it in a discussion of the place of digital humanities in the geological era of the Anthropocene, brings home our “common ground and shared fate” (2). At the same time, these functional, often inspirational metaphors may also raise the limits of our comprehension as well as our sense of responsibility and responsiveness to the increasing dynamism—including experiences of loss, crisis, and doom—that lies at the heart of human experience in the digital age.

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NOTES

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1. Schivelbusch (33–44) provides an important context here; see also Harvey on space-time compression (260–83) and Lefebvre on the social construction of space (68–168).
2. For further information see *Lake District Online*, <<https://lakedistrictonline.ca/>>.
3. For an in-depth exploration of the relationship between the ecological and the digital, see my “Ecological Entanglements of DH.”

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