

(In)Tangible Violence: Poetry, Touch, and Critical Making

As part of my postdoctoral research, I've been making sharp objects out of poetry [SLIDE 2], experimenting with how to make tangible the violence against women's bodies inherent in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English sonnets.

My approach to this work is part close reading and feminist literary analysis, part computational text analysis, and part "critical making": a term increasingly used by people interested in thinking critically through material building.

These sharp objects are the result of those three methods working together. In addition to making tangible a long and deep history of violence against women's bodies that is otherwise intangible, these sharp objects offer a response to the often too easy equation of digital literary studies with computational text analysis. These objects are a creative repurposing of quantitative tools and data sets and, with these objects, I aim to demonstrate how critical making offers a way into more critically-attuned digital textual studies work.

For today's conversation, I'm borrowing Marisa Parham's idea of "digital pockets" to walk through my argument and methods—I have three "pockets" to share with you, with the caveat that this is all very much work-in-progress. So the pockets are meant to be provocations or idea fragments that will help you see how the different pieces of this work are coming together.

Pocket 1: Archival Absence

Studying violence against women's bodies in early modern England is an exercise in making intangible accounts more tangible.

We don't have a lot of evidence (and even less first-hand evidence) of violence against women from this historical period. This is largely due to the highly patriarchal nature of early modern English society: women's words often just simply didn't count. And if we think specifically about sexual violence and rape there are additional problems.

First, women's reputations depended on chastity, a virtue completely undermined by both the experience of rape and the reporting of it. Second, early modern English culture equated men's love and desire with coercion and violence; tangentially, "consent" in the way we think about it today was not a recognizable concept (rape doesn't start to become a question of consent until the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries). And, finally, it's important to note that rape is a crime that largely erases its own evidence (then and now). When early modern accounts do exist, they often note simply that the woman's hair was disheveled, her dress was torn. These external signs stand in for the internal act and wound of rape—perhaps the most famous early modern literary example of this is Lavinia in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*.

All of these factors contribute to the lack of primary source evidence regarding violence against women’s bodies. This is an “intangible” archive, and I’m very deliberately using this word (“intangible”) because of its relation to touch [SLIDE 4]. Eve Sedgwick reminds us that words like “touch” and “feel” have both physical and affective connotations. The long history of violence against women’s bodies deserves attention on both of these registers. Even as we attend to the absence of physical materials, we must recognize the presence of feelings. The gaps in our historical record become marks of irrecoverable trauma.

This is a kind of archival absence readily familiar to digital humanities work. We can think of Kim Gallon’s ideas about the “technology of recovery,” Jessica Marie Johnson’s work on Black Code Studies, the work of the #transformDH collective, and Lauren Klein’s use of data visualization to make archival absence visible.

The absence of a social or legislative archive of violence against women’s bodies in early modern England, however, rubs up against an archive that is highly present. Early modern poetry (16th and 17th-century sonnet sequences in particular) records the violent treatment of women’s bodies as a cultural practice. This poetic tradition, largely informed by Petrarch’s 14th-century *Canzoniere*, provided an aesthetic model for the equation of love and desire with coercion and violence because the entire premise of the early modern sonnet sequence is the male poet’s desire for an unattainable female beloved.

You’re likely familiar, for instance, with the blazon technique, which became widely popular at this historical moment. The blazon is a poetic mode in which the male poet catalogues his female beloved’s body parts for the benefit of his reader, dissecting and exposing her body in order to assert his authority. Feminist literary scholars have thoroughly outlined the violence both implicit and explicit in such conventions, with some going so far as to describe the blazon as a “rhetorical rape” (Jocelyn Catty).

A key thing to note about these sonnet sequences: they portray violation of the female body not just as a consequence of the male poet’s desire, but also in the service of aesthetics. These poems often include thematic depictions of sexual violence wrapped within the economy of aesthetic value associated with these sonnet sequences in the period.

I’ll offer one quick example. I’m sure this poetry is familiar to many of you, but just to briefly demonstrate this point. Sonnet 63 of Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, written early 1580’s, turns coercion into poetic wit. This is a sonnet to “grammar rules.” The poet begins, “O grammar rules...now your virtues show” (1). He goes on to explain: “I craved the thing, which ever she denies: / She...lest once should not be heard, twice said, “No, no” (6-8). So the poet is telling us about a time when he voiced his desire to Stella, and here she responds with “no, no.” Then here are the poem’s final lines [SLIDE 5]:

But grammar’s force with sweet success confirm.
For grammar says (O this, dear Stella, weigh),
For grammar says (to grammar who says nay?)
That in one speech two negatives affirm. (11-14)

Consent becomes rhetorical play, foregrounded by the cheeky structure of these final lines: Sidney repeats “for grammar says” and delays the final reveal that “two negatives affirm” through both that anaphoric repetition and the parenthetical clauses.

Astrophel’s violation of Stella—his transformation of her non-consent into consent—becomes wrapped up in, even enacted through, the poem’s rhetorical prowess. This is a different kind of archival absence: a coded (and highly valued) language of violence within the works that comprise some of our most prominent and most accessible literary archives.

Pocket 2: Early Prototyping

Last fall I mounted an interactive exhibit, “Specters of Sexual Violence” that prompted participants to explore the relationship between violent language and physical violence, specifically in relation to women’s bodies. As a starting point, I used my research on the violent treatment of women’s bodies in early modern poetry and constructed these wood and nail board poems [SLIDE 7], very simply fixing a poem to each board and driving nails through the back to mark what I read as violent language. These were objects aimed to make the reading experience a bit more perilous.

Participants handled and explored these poetic objects and then I asked them to create their own version. I scraped Twitter responses from a March 2018 Twitter challenge posed by Whitney Reynolds, a feminist writer and podcast host: the challenge was “describe yourself like a male author would.” When Reynolds posted this challenge, it immediately went viral, responses poured in, and some familiar patterns started to emerge. Here are some of the responses: “She has a transparent quality about her. Pale skin, pale hair, pale eyes. Breasts that could rival Aphrodite’s.” “Her hands were freckled with age spots and her jawline lacked definition, but her hair shone like burnished silver.” “Her hair was the color of sunshine, and her eyes were as dark as her soul.”

This is the language of the blazon, which, of course, continues to be an aesthetic convention, a through-line from the early modern period into our contemporary moment. In the “Specters of Sexual Violence” exhibit, I had stacks of cards with these responses printed on them, and [SLIDE 8] participants could either choose one of these prompts to create their own paper and thumbtack version of my wood and nail poems, or they could write their own description of themselves using Reynolds’ challenge.

My questions for thought as participants made their paper and tack objects were: How do we feel violent language? What does violent language feel like to you? What is the relationship between violent language and physical violence? [SLIDE 9] By the end of the night, we had constructed these tack boards—accumulations of our tactile engagement with violent language. And the interactive exhibit prompted conversations about the complex relationship between violence and language, about gender and sexuality-based discrimination, and even about the #MeToo Movement.

I learned a lot from this early prototype and from my conversations with the exhibit participants, and there are a few things in particular I’m thinking about as I move forward with this project:

1) Everyone chose different words, which seems an obvious observation but it was really useful to watch those choices unfold and recognize (in real-time) that the paper and tack objects were documenting what kinds of words felt violent to different people. Here’s where the conversation starts to come back around to DH. We are increasingly aware of the many layers of bias and discrimination that shape digital environments and quantitative practices—see the recent, excellent work of Safiya Noble, Joy Buolamwini, Roopika Risam, and Jacque Wernimont. If I want to scale this project up and think about a much larger archive of early modern poetry than just a handful of poems, I have to choose a select, focused group of “signal words” that I can sort for in a text mining program—and those words are going to stand in as markers of violence against the female body. How do I choose those words? And, more crucially, how do I foreground those highly subjective choices and make the selection process a transparent part of the project?

2) The exhibit space became a kind of forum for public dialogue about discourse surrounding women’s bodies, but those conversations were prompted and shaped by the critical making work. Creating these simple objects invited participations to consider a much more complex idea: the relationship between language and physical violence. Because the violence became tangible as the participants made their objects, the making process gave us a starting point for conversations about physical and affective feeling. Critical making made space and time for critical reflection and exploration.

Pocket 3: Feeling Violation

The next phase of the work requires a lot more preparation in order to get to the object-making stage. Right now, I’m still working on what we could call “data collecting.” I selected female pronouns—she, her, hers—and proper names as linguistic markers of violence against the female body. I’ve been talking about Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, for example. In that case I’m cataloguing every instance of *she*, *her*, or *hers*, along with every reference to Stella’s name, which occurs many times throughout the sonnet sequence.

I want to be clear here: I’m not arguing that every time a male poet uses a female pronoun it points to an explicit instance of violent treatment. Rather, as I was cataloguing different features of the poetry, I was especially struck by the prominence of these words (over 450 instances of *she* in roughly 200 poems thus far, for example). In addition to their sheer volume within the project’s archive, female pronouns serve as synecdochic markers of a poetic mode intent on describing the female body. Description, in this case, as Nancy Vickers and others have argued about the Renaissance blazon convention, becomes doubly violent. The description of the female body serves as a heralding action, exposing and displaying the female beloved’s body for the benefit of others. And, simultaneously, the female body is so dispersed, or scattered, by the descriptive mode that the body being described is ultimately destroyed. *She*, *her*, and *hers* become a cluster of signifiers that points to the much more complex and violent social discourse surrounding the early modern female body.

In some ways, too, the pronouns become markers of the archival absence I discussed at the beginning of this talk—the absence of first-hand accounts and primary source evidence recording violence against women’s bodies in early modern England. The third-person pronouns in the sonnet sequences serve as constant reminders that I am tracing this archive of violence through the mouths of male poets, men talking about women.

For the next phase of object experiments, I’m playing with how to create a kind of physical map of the female pronouns over the course of an entire sonnet sequence, with the same tactile impact of the sharp objects I’ve prototyped thus far. I want the objects themselves to mimic the penetrative violence inflicted on the female bodies at the center of this poetic archive. I don’t have any mock-ups or objects to show just yet, but I can show you a project that’s been particularly influential as I design this next prototype. [SLIDE 11] This is a physical data sculpture from the 2012 *emoto* installation, designed and built by Moritz Stefaner, Drew Hemment, and Studio NAND. This is a physical installation of trending Twitter topics during the 2012 Olympic games and the sculpture also incorporates animation to demonstrate how those topics changed over the course of the Olympic event schedule.

The next objects I create—while maybe not quite so impressively CNC-milled—will similarly be a “physical-ization” of the data I’m tracking through these sonnet sequences. A physical data object that makes tangible the penetrative and destructive violence against the female body at the core of early modern sonnet sequences. Like the *emoto* model, I want to keep the relationship between the digital and the physical at the core of my project. This next stage, then, will move beyond the early wood and nail prototypes, which aren’t based in any kind of computational method. By scaling the project up and using text mining to catalogue a much larger number of texts, by using code to track the line and string index position of female pronouns, the next objects I make will use text mining and digital methods as the foundation for something tangible.

Luke Stark (one of Dartmouth’s own postdoctoral fellows) offers a helpful term here: the concept of “data visceralization.” Stark has been exploring how data can activate multiple senses. He calls for representations of information that activate our senses of touch, smell, and taste so that data can “simulate our feelings as well as our thoughts.” Stark’s stakes, though, are forward-thinking. For him, data visceralization prompts action—an increased (more embodied) understanding of information becomes a more persuasive argument for acting on the information we’ve learned.

When we use data visceralization to look backward, as my work with these historical texts aims to do, we can make a stronger case for how aesthetic traditions have shaped current social and cultural phenomena. To return to the language of my “Specters of Sexual Violence” exhibit, how do we feel violent language? How does violent language authorize physical violence over time? When we hold a physical, sharp poetic representation in our hands, we feel the weight of violence in these texts. We start to understand, through our bodies, that violence is not solely a thematic feature of this poetry, but rather a structural feature that becomes structurally integral to Western poetic traditions.

In Vincent Brown’s discussion of his digital project, *Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760-1761: A Cartographic Narrative*, he argues that archival work needs to move beyond recovery and into a space of “rigorous and responsible creativity” [SLIDE 12]. Brown invites us to expand our notion of what counts as an archive and urges us to include the creative and speculative work we do with digital tools as part of our archives. The early modern history of violence against women’s bodies that I’m tracing emerges through a combination of recovery and creativity. Building on Brown’s idea, I’m increasingly thinking about my work with these poems as an expansion and creative repurposing of our early modern literary archives. To use terms that align more closely with recent conversations in early modern literary studies: can the sharp objects I’m making function as alternative critical editions of these early modern sonnet sequences?

Critical editions, like computational approaches to text, were once touted for their neutrality. The goal of a critical edition was to produce the definitive version of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* or Mary Sidney’s psalm translations. We understand now the problems with such a goal. Critical editions (like digital humanities projects, like databases, like algorithms) are just as much an archive of the editor’s own perspectives, biases, training, ideology as any critical reading of the text. If the sharp objects I’ve been making out of early modern poetry are also a reading of these texts, they function like critical editions—critical editions that prompt an affective response from the reader and become a record of my own affective response to this archive.