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"Critical Computation: What's Next?"

Patterns of Violence: Critical Making and the She/Her/Hers of Early Modern Poetry

My comments today focus on this central question: what do we do with a data set that effaces its own violence? I have been working with an archive of 16th and 17th century sonnet sequences written by English poets: Shakespeare, Philip Sidney, and Edmund Spenser, among others (over 1,500 poems total). In compiling and studying this archive, I am principally interested in the cumulative treatment of the female body in early modern male-authored poetry. This is famously a period in English poetry heavily influenced by the Petrarchan tradition, with poetic conventions like the blazon at its core—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. Over the last few decades, feminist 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).

If we know that violent treatment of the female body is particularly pervasive in early modern poetry, then methods of computational text analysis (known variously as distant reading, text mining, and macroanalysis) should offer a useful way of tracking this violence. Above all, such methods promise to illuminate the thematic trends and rhetorical patterns in large archives of text. My curated poetic archive, however, is fast becoming a case study for the limitations of these methods.

I am tracking any and all references to the female body, as well as where these references are positioned in the text (poem and line numbers). References to women, in other words, become data points that I catalogue, count, categorize, and work to account for. Here you can see columns for the reference to the female body, line and poem numbers, author, title, and date. What becomes immediately evident for anyone familiar with these poems is the jarring disconnect between how the poems treat women and the seemingly innocuous language catalogued in the spreadsheet. For instance, here are the last six lines of one of Edmund Spenser's sonnets:

> Bring therefore all the forces that ye may,
>   and lay incessant battery to her heart,
>   plaints, prayers, vows, ruth, sorrow, and dismay,
>   those engines can the proudest love convert.
> And if those fail, fall down and die before her;
> So dying live, and living do adore her. (*Amoretti*, Sonnet 14)

Spenser employs a common metaphor—the male poet lays siege to the woman's fortified heart, and with enough "incessant battery" claims he can "convert" her love (essentially, gain her consent). The only references to the female beloved that we can collect from these lines are: *her*

heart, proudest love, her, and *her.* Divorced from the context of the battle metaphor, we lose track of the specifically penetrative violence evoked by these lines. And, in fact, as this small example illustrates, most references to the female body in these poems take the form of pronouns—*she, her, hers*—data points that effectively erase the violence we see at work in the poetry itself.

I want to insist, however, that this data set can and should prompt an affective response. These seemingly innocuous words are markers of the patterns of sexual violence that saturate early modern poetry. In order to make such an argument with this data set, we need to combine computational text analysis with experimental practices that make more explicit our interpretive goals. Critical making is one such practice, and alongside my cataloguing of this data set, I have been prototyping objects that force readers to notice and engage with the violence intrinsic to this poetic archive.

I only have one series of rough prototypes thus far. The goal here was to turn violent language into violent objects, objects that make the reading experience a bit more perilous. I made these wooden board poems for an interactive exhibit this past fall—I fixed one poem to each board and then drove nails through the back of the wood to mark references to the female body. As participants handled the poems, I asked them to consider this question: *how do we feel violent language*?

There are several problems with this version—the most glaring of which is that these objects don't yet rely on my computational work. So, the next step is to think about how I can generate objects based on the computational text analysis itself, rather than putting the language of the data set back into its original context.

Through my data set—particularly the large-scale accumulation of female pronouns (over 1,300 instances of *she* in roughly 500 poems thus far)—violent treatment of the female body emerges as a kind of algorithm at the core of this early modern poetic archive. So how do we make that central algorithm more visible, more *tangible* in our readings of these texts? How might I use the poem and line numbers I'm cataloguing, for instance, to create a physical heat map of violence across the early modern poetic archive?

I started with this question: what do we do with a data set that effaces its own violence? My response requires that we lay bare our critical investments in the practice of computation. Combining computational text analysis with critical making moves us away from a digital humanities practice that simply rereads old texts in new ways. The data set I'm compiling has ceased to be an end goal, a method of inquiry, or any kind of research tool. Instead, I'm treating it as a challenge—the starting point for a new kind of interpretive act.