

In Flux: Actor-Network Theory, Concrete Poetry, and Critical Making

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Abstract: The fluidity of literature aligns with Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which posits a greater focus on all facets of a network of associations, including non-human actants, and can assist in encouraging us all to consider broader relationships written into the poem, as well as those manifested by the relationships between the reader, writer, speaker and poem itself. By employing critical making to design and construct a video portrayal of the poetic elements and networks, we are able to see how they are constantly in flux, moving and evolving, and specified to any unique reader of a poem.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory, feminism, critical making, pedagogy, visualizations

“Literature was never only words, never merely immaterial verbal construction. Literary texts, like us, have bodies, an actuality necessitating that their materialities and meanings are deeply interwoven into each other.” —Katherine Hayles, 2002

“[Glitch] mobility is gorgeous, slippery, keyed up, catastrophic. It is the thing that keeps us blurry and unbound, pushing back against hegemony.” —Legacy Russell, 2020

Introduction

In literature courses, a pervasive task is unlearning the association and identification of the author as speaker—especially for poetic works. When readers exclusively read the poet as the speaker, or the “I” of the work, then symbolism, infused meaning, and illustrative images become dubbed as biographical markers—even when fictionalized. In decentering the author as speaker, students and readers are challenged to understand the text as an individual work in *addition to*, rather than a direct result of, the biographical context it may carry. As Zach Payne (2020) writes: “So, when you are reading a poem, your first question shouldn’t be *What is the poet saying?* Rather ask, *What is the speaker saying?* In adding that extra lens of nuance, there is a whole world of understanding” (2020). Similarly, Jason Miller identifies that a poem is what a moment feels like (2017). But what connections, memories, relationships, ideas are entangled and exasperated by that moment and that feeling? Further complicating this dynamism: texts are in flux. In engaging with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” through an arts-based approach with a community of non-experts, Chelsea Bihlmeyer writes: “I observed a relationship between text and context, author and audience in this specific discourse community, who demonstrated three arguments. First, a work is not singular and fixed. Second, meaning is not inherent to a work. And third, meaning is not singular and fixed” (74). As Bihlmeyer’s work emphasizes, we tend to associate literature as that which is stagnant; however, texts change because we do. The way and manner we read something, and what we learn from it, will be different in five, ten, and fifty years. Texts, their lessons and meanings, are in flux because we are.

The fluidity of literature, especially in relation to time, readers, and understanding, aligns with Actor-Network Theory (ANT) — as best conceptualized by Bruno Latour, John Law, and Rita Felski, all explored more fully below. ANT, which considers the interconnectivity and relationships

across various networks and systems, posits a greater focus on all facets of a network of associations, including non-human actants (such as trees, worms, clouds, and a feeling of joy) and can assist in encouraging students to consider broader relationships written into the poem, as well as those manifested by the relationship/s between the reader, writer, speaker and poem itself. Thus, this work contributes to the growing field of digital and experiential learning and falling at the nexus of theory and praxis for poetry pedagogy and digital humanities.

Similar to the work of Álvaro Seïça, John Cayley, and Jessica Pressman—this work lies at the nexus of the literary, the digital, and the process. While Pressman emphasizes a “model of how to ‘MAKE IT NEW’” with digital modernism and Seïça and Cayley explore the role of time with that which is digital and literary, I explore similar concepts through the lens of critical making. In utilizing and employing critical making, which relies on making, doing, and experience to learn, observe, and explore, I construct a video portrayal of the poetic elements and networks. Thus, we are able to see how they are constantly in flux, moving and evolving, and specific to any specific reader of a poem. All the more, the fluidity of networks, namely with ANT, juxtaposes the static-nature of poetic materiality. As such, ANT may lead students to also ask *What is the very page saying, and what is it saying to the speaker and to me? How are these different?* In exploring this argument, I studied “Morning Glories” by Mary Oliver to address: How can we study and learn from a poem by prioritizing ANT?

Groundings

In calling for ANT considerations among the literary, Rita Felski notes: “What is an actor? For ANT, it is anything that makes a difference” (748). Felski’s framing of ANT parallels John Law’s emphasis the role of non-humans in the social: “networks are composed not only of people, but also of machines, animals, texts, money, architectures—any material you care to mention” (381–382). Similarly, Bruno Latour pointedly addresses that “An actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action” (373). In framing actants, any and all participants and forces of networked significance, Latour demonstrates the capacities of ANT as a method where “ANT is not about *traced* networks, but about a network-*tracing* activity” (378). Of the network, Felski explains that network, and networking, refers to “including as many actors as feasible in our research, the researcher included, and tracing the complexities of their interactions” (749). While we may immediately identify the network of a poem as exclusive to that which includes the reader, the poem, and the poet—we must actively consider all the actants involved.

Therefore, as we look to a poem on a page, digitally rendered, and mediated through artistic adaptation, Jürgen Schäfer reminds us that “Computer systems and networks are not mere channels for the transmission of messages” (26), and that the digital, the technical, and the electronic are elements needing great consideration in networks (55). The technologies that are increasingly taking footing in our every day and all moments are no longer (nor were they ever) simply passive, background-like entities that we cast our own shadows, stories, relationships, and connections unto. They are part of the greater networks that we too find ourselves in. Moreover, as Katherine Hayles writes: “[digital technologies] put into play dynamics that interrogate and reconfigure the relations between authors and readers, humans and intelligent machines, code and language” (186). Thus, the electronic systems that allow and permit our engagement with reading and experiencing literature, art, and community (including this article) deserve greater attention as complicit actants that contribute to the network as a whole.

All the more, concrete poetry, which prioritizes the *visual* as a rendering of the poem, serves as a valuable framework that this project falls in line with. Importantly, the Poetry Beyond Text project and research team emphasizes the role of the reader in concrete poetry: “Concrete poetry puts the reader centre-stage: it offers merely incentives, naked linguistic structures, mental play-areas, but it is up to the reader and his or her poetic imagination to fill in the blanks.” As this poetic form is reliant

on the recognition of associations brought in by the reader, we see strong correlations between concrete poetry and ANT.

In furthering considering and reframing who and what is part of the network, we see an intentional deconstruction of binaries (namely the human and the nonhuman). Significantly, this practice of challenging and even refuting binaries has long been evidenced by intersectional feminist methodologies—and is seen today with the principles of *Data Feminism*. As such, I draw upon D’Ignazio and Klein’s call to “embrace emotion and embodiment” as a facet of data feminism (77). They illustrate the harm of false binaries, such as of reason and emotion, which carries a lengthy gendered history, and how “Decorative elements...are associated with messy feelings—or, worse, represent stealthy...attempts at emotional persuasion. Data visualization has even been named as ‘the unempathetic art’ by designer Mushon Zer-Aviv because of its emphatic rejection of emotion” (77). Through this analysis, D’Ignazio and Klein press us to wonder: *What might emotional data look like?* and *What might a knowledge system that recognizes this form of data and knowledge sharing be like?* As such, I intentionally lean into emotion through this analysis, thus embracing Donna Haraway’s framing of situated knowledge as a “practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing” (585). In doing so, my critical making work pointedly engages in passionate construction and emotional data sharing.

And yet, I am cognizant of the fact that I am working with a published, existing, tangible, and material work—with actants and relationships I may never be fully aware of. As Bihlmeyer asks: “How does an audience understand and co-create meaning in an object after it has been offered for consumption?” (72). While I prioritize my own situated knowledge and embrace emotion to redesign and reimagine through artistic measure and play, I rely on critical making as my methodology to explore this published poetic work. Here, I look to two key understandings:

1. Garnet Hertz offers a foundational identification of critical making as a concept and methodology of *making*—prioritizing intentionality, critical analysis, and the opportunity to learn through experimentation and doing.
2. Simultaneously, I draw upon Legacy Russell’s *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* and the role of remixing: “The spirit of remixing is about finding ways to innovate with what’s been given, creating something new from something already there” (134).

Together, Hertz and Russell emphasize the practice, the capacity, and the necessity of work that employs critical making, remixing, remaking to explore the world around us. Neither solely prioritizes art (nor literature or any other discipline)—but both explore the capacity of doing, of making, and of creating. More importantly, as these scholars’ work illustrates, we need space and time to employ these methods to grapple, interrogate, and challenge the work around us as an opportunity for learning and innovating.

As these groundings collectively illuminate, there is much work illustrating the applicability of ANT in design and literary realms, yet this work pointedly aims to conjoin ANT, feminist strategies, and digital-based critical making to continue contributing to ANT’s methodological goals as a “network-tracing activity” (378).

Methods

In order to address how ANT can help students and readers better engage with poetry and further differentiate the author and the speaker, I look to Latour (17) and Law and their work with ANT to develop a visual-based moving depiction to study “Morning Glories” by Mary Oliver where I investigate how utilizing this theory and drawing it into poetry lessons can help decenter the role of the author as the “I,” help encourage students to consider non-human actants, and potentially provide richer, more dynamic readings. In doing so, I explored how ANT may permit the reader to create

distance from a text by tracing and identifying networks and patterns that they too are part of by identifying and mapping the different relationships, networks, and connections revealed in a poem.

As Hayles notes: “the [electronic literature] medium lends itself to experimental practice” (17). Thus, this work relied on great experimentation through creation. In using a standard Windows Video Editor, I generated a video-based collage of my personal network with “Morning Glories.” Before I read the poem, I thought briefly of how I could visually relay the experience of engaging with a poem and its corresponding network, and this continued to evolve as I read the poem, studied it, and tried to represent my readership in relationship to the written word. After generating the video rendition of the network, I also created three data visualizations that explore the same network and relations with data I compiled from the poem. Through this, I aimed to offer a supplement to the video, but also craft a juxtaposition between what is traditionally understood as indicative of data—and that which is not.

“Morning Glories”: Poem and Representations

MORNING GLORIES

Blue and dark blue
 rose and deepest rose
 white and pink they

are everywhere in the diligent
 cornfield rising and swaying
 in their reliable

finery in the little
 fling of their bodies their
 gear and tackle

all caught up in the cornstalks.
 The reaper’s story is the story
 of endless work of

work careful and heavy but the
 reaper cannot
 separate them out there they

are in the story of his life
 bright random useless
 year after year

taken with the serious tons
 weeds without value humorous
 beautiful weeds.

For the purpose of this description, I am focusing on four key facets: 1) me and Mary Oliver, 2) pacing and cutting of video and/or image, 3) the inclusion of audio, and 4) time.

The above video is deeply personal; rooted in me as a reader at this exact time, in this place, in this particular moment of living and being. The video opens with my hands flipping through my copy of Mary Oliver’s poetry collection, *Devotions*, emphasizing the identification of a reader. Yet, the absence of a reader’s face, my face, illustrates the ambiguity of my relationship with this poem, this poet, and my understanding. I, like this work, am in flux. Conversely, a singular image of Mary

Oliver demonstrates my limited knowledge of her, her work, and her life. The singularity of her representation illustrates how I currently know her.



Video Visuals - Visuals from Reading “Morning Glories” with ANT; a video portrayal

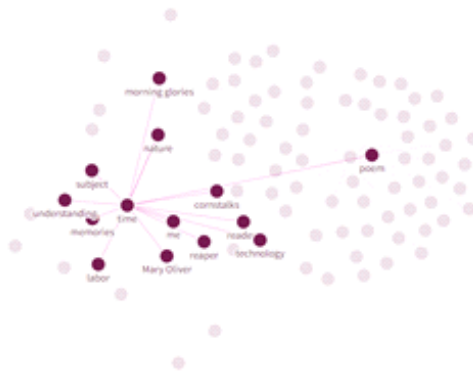
Quick cuts between each individual word of the poem deconstructs the whole into parts; echoing how we would read a poem out loud, word for word. Yet, as the video progresses, this linearity quickly crumbles, as the visualized reading relies on drawn connections and tracings that relays associations: colors, scenes, images. The audio provides another layer to this work. Firstly, my auditory reading of the poem does not follow the visual display of the poem. The disjointed sensory displays thus relay the poem in flux. Secondly, and simultaneously, the sound of birds can be heard—which I heard and recorded from my home as I read this poem for the first time.

The video itself relays a set time: after a few minutes, it ends. One can watch it again, or not. I see this as a limitation, yet also a great advantage. The finitude revels in the ending, cutting off the display of the networks—despite the reality of the networks, the associations, and the tracings not bound by this scope of time. Yet, this also illustrates how my reading of this poem, and my connections with and through this poem, may be different tomorrow. A new visualization, or an extended one, would be necessary to capture this. Conversely, the below visualizations serve as juxtaposing network displays.



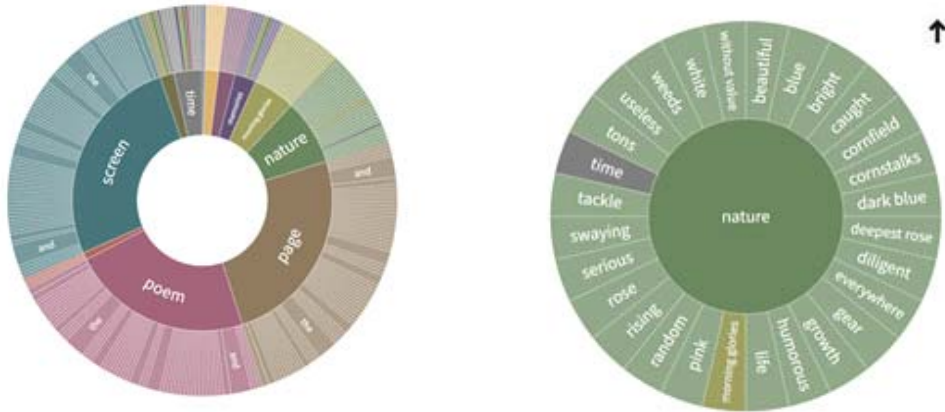
Still from Visual 1 - Reading “Morning Glories” with ANT; a datified portrayal made with DataSketch

This visualization relays the quantified points of the network—allowing certain relationships to be highlighted and emphasized. Created with [Data Sketch](#), I aimed for this visualization to mirror the shape of a morning glory: a circular bloom. In doing so, I looked to nature in striving to relay data—as also seen in the coloring of the visual that mirrors the rose and deep rose of Mary Oliver’s morning glories. Yet, this visual is limited due to its narrow capacity for interactivity and engagement—which I explore more fully below.



Stills from Visual 2 - Reading “Morning Glories” with ANT; a datified portrayal made with Flourish

Unlike the circular display, this web-based visualization constructed with [Flourish](#) prioritizes user-interactivity and exploration. Only when the user clicks on the dots are the words and their connections made clear. Additionally, there is great user autonomy in that the visual can be modified, moved, and completely rearranged—corresponding with Law and Latour’s understandings of ANT as an action to be performed and explored (Law 389; Latour 378). Yet, we once more see the coloring of morning glories carried into the poetic representations and mappings.



Stills from Visual 3 - Reading “Morning Glories” with ANT; a datified portrayal made with Flourish

The final visualization is a circular hierarchy art, also made with Flourish. Like the initial circular visualization, the shape of the focal flowers is once more represented with earth tones, yet greater interactivity is incorporated to display the numerical weight of words, images, and associations. Also important here is the display of weight: nature carries a heavier weight, or more space in the visual, than time or memories. Additionally, from this visual it is clear that the words “the” and “and” are mentioned the most from this visual, but it also illustrates how the speaker (I) experienced the poem as mediated by the page and the computer screen.

In further considering the role of interactivity across all these depictions, the interactivity found in varying in degrees with these charts speaks to that which is elicited by this very website: to read and to learn, a user must scroll and engage. Thus, the reader (you before the screen), are brought into the experience of tracing and exploring networks—just as ANT calls for, engaging us all in the never-ending continuum of relational being. As such, one cannot separate themselves from the networks we are un/cognizantly a part of, much like how “the/reaper cannot/separate” (13-15). Moreover, this embracement and emphasis on multimodality, from the website and the static poem to the video and visualizations, seeks to illuminate the capacity of networks that exist through and within technologies.

Collectively, all these products relay similar data across their various styles and modalities, and their unified positioning here demonstrates the difference between that which we readily accepted as data (such as the above charts) and that which is not (such as the above video). All the more, they all display a differentiated understanding of this poem, as well as a differentiated manner and method of understanding this work.

Comparative Reflection

Of great note—this poem does not actually invoke the “I”—rather there is an omniscient narrator and speaker, which perhaps furthers my emphasis on divorcing the author from the speaker (with no specificity with the “I” or speaker, we can assess that the speaker could be anyone/everyone/no one). And while I initially came to this poem and broader project wanting to decenter the “I,” the speaker of the poem, away from the poet, but rather, in prioritizing ANT, I realized how much we, as readers, bring to a poem and how fully we can saturate ourselves within the networks that this text is a part of.

I compare my reading and my understanding of the networking embedded within and through this poem as that which is cyclical and drill-like: the more time I engaged with the poem and considered how to aptly represent it, the more I felt tethered to the poem, to its symbols and images, and the more I identified my own personal and lived experience within the text. As the video illustrates, my understanding of this poem went from visual-symbolism to an eco-feminist reading (as relayed through the visuals focusing on leaves, grasses, and weeds that directly mirror the language of the text, pointedly the final line: “beautiful weeds”), and then ultimately to a deeper, far more personally-entangled reading — much like Oliver’s vines caught in cornstalks (line 10). More specifically, when I started to associate the “reaper” as a farmer, I sifted through digitized family photo albums to find relics of my family’s farm. Boldly apparent to me now is the fact the farm, carrying the family name, is called “Story’s Farm” —which begs strong alignment to the lines: “The reaper’s story is the story/of endless work... (lines 11-12) and “the story of his life” (line 16). Thus, the crux of the poem, and my understanding, transitioned from identifying the “beautiful weeds” (line 21) as resistant and enduring feminist symbols that resist and regrow, to experiencing this poem exploring that *and* the history of farmers toiling and tending to the earth, season after season, day after day—enveloping time, space, and my own memories. This meaning association and understanding does not have to be either or: it does not have to be an ecofeminist poem or a poem related to the personal recollection of my family. It can be both – and more. Such messy, dynamic multiplicity strongly speaks to Hayles’s claim that “Literary texts, like us, have bodies, an actuality necessitating that their materialities and meanings are deeply interwoven into each other” (107).

Following the interwoven nature of meaning, this project could never end; perhaps a more fully and authentic ANT practice would not end and fully embrace the fluidity of networks throughout time and space. Yet, for this limited and scoped work of tracing networks, as Law (389) and Latour (378) call for, I arrived at a more dynamic understanding of this poem that reflected my own complicity and attachment to the various actants relayed in the text through the process and practice of critical making via remixing and reconstructing. Moreover, the process in which I utilized to arrive at this fluid understanding illustrates a break from a fixed and stagnant interpretation of meaning—and favors one that can grow, change, and even diminish without me, beyond me, and with all variations of me. Poetry is meant to be read out loud, but it is also to be experienced—and this project aims to achieve a dynamic experience of reading/seeing the poem through an innovative digital approach.

Conclusion

In constructing ANT-based visualizations, namely a video-based display, that strived to trace various connections between, across, and through Mary Oliver’s “Morning Glories,” I explored how poetic elements and networks are constantly in flux, moving and evolving, and specified to the reader of a poem. By prioritizing ANT, I focused on all facets of a network of associations, including non-human actants to consider broader relationships written into the poem, as well as those manifested by the relationship/s between the reader, writer, speaker and poem itself. In doing so, this work illustrated how these connections, relationships, and alignments are much like Oliver’s beautiful weeds, for “they/are everywhere” (lines 3–4).

Moving forward, this standalone project could lead into a more interactive opportunity to invite all readers to engage with tracing networks with this poem. In the future, more research, spanning the ludic to the academic, should strive to construct and trace networks, such as I have illustrated here, to continue exploring the capacities of ANT, digital concrete poetry, and feminist methodologies in the realm of critical making.

Notes

1. In Flux: Actor–Network Theory, Poetry, and Critical Making : <https://kvdufresne.github.io/MorningGlories/>
2. Video – Reading “Morning Glories” with ANT; a video portrayal : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5r27xmKcPM>
3. Data compilation: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1WlqU0PQDT4svZrDBEr8MjhQgt002tUI70mg6h-hMKXA/edit?usp=sharing>
4. Visual 1 – Reading “Morning Glories” with ANT; a datified portrayal made with <https://kvdufresne.github.io/MorningGlories/>
5. Visual 2 – Reading “Morning Glories” with ANT; a datified portrayal made with Flourish: <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/5824719/>
6. Visual 3 – Reading “Morning Glories” with ANT; a datified portrayal made with Flourish: <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/5824692/>

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