

Making the absent present: Disability, textual silence and the (not) writing of sex in literature

Introduction

This research explores representations and omissions of sex in fiction across different literary genres, focussing on the practice of 'textual silence' as a mode of eliding sexual activities and experiences. I approach textual silence as a broad polythetic category that includes line breaks and textual gaps (Iser 1978), ellipses (Genette 1980) and blanks (Perry and Sternberg 1986), but also encompasses associated literary conventions such as euphemism, allusion and cliché as means of obscuring the narration of sex. In response, and extending Iser's (1978) argument that textual gaps invite reader participation, my aim is to interrogate textual silence by using gaps found within existing literary works as creative provocations and writing sex back into the gaps to make present what was formerly absent. Employing ludic practices of pastiche and parody as modes of creative-criticism, I will engage writers in a kind of literary intercourse, thereby testing the epistemological, linguistic, social, moral and political boundaries of sex-writing to (i) critically explore the possibilities and constraints of representation and (ii) develop new knowledge and understandings of how language is used to write about sex and the sexual body.

Additionally, the project will examine the presence and absence of certain bodies in sex writing from positionalities of disability, bodily difference and social exclusion, using the autoethnographic perspective of my own experience of living with multiple sclerosis, through co-creative research with other disabled persons and by drawing on crip theory to centre disabled experiences, embodiments and movements. Here Abbott's "gaps of discretion" (2013: 109) applies equally to the writing of sex as to the absence of disabled bodies and their sexuality within fiction, creating a double invisibility and reinforcing Abbot's argument about how line-breaks, established vocabularies and formulaic writing are used to 'hide the act'.

Research Themes

The proposed research themes and questions build directly on a literary conference I organised at UEA in 2019, *'I'll Show You Mine: A Sex-Writing Symposium'*, which brought

together academics, students and writers to debate contemporary sex-writing across form and genre.

- How can human sexual activity – ranging from the mundane to the transcendent – be best represented in literature?
- What new understandings might emerge by exploring the languages of sex and the sexual body from non-normative embodied experiences?
- When is textual silence not merely conventional or prudish but an appropriate response to writing sex and/or critical to narrative?
- What effect might ‘writing back in’ sex that was gestured towards but left out of narration have on the text and on the reader?
- What might we discover about form and language, and about the writing of sex, by engaging in creative-critical play such as pastiche and parody?

Detailed Project Description

This research project critically explores the relationship between the body and language in literature with regards to different modes of sexual experience ranging from the routine and mundane to the transgressive and transportive. Sex is simultaneously a corporeal, imaginative and expressive experience that encompasses shared but also different emotional, social, moral and political understandings across persons, groups and communities. It can be about intimacy, pleasure, self-exploration, power, transgression, deviance; at one moment ecstatic and in the next absurd (Foucault 1976). Like pain (Scarry 1988), sex can reduce people to inarticulate states of cries and moans, thereby bringing them to the limits of language or impelling the generation of new linguistic and expressive forms.

Narrative gaps – openings that require the reader to complete the text to generate understanding – are endemic in fiction and readers are frequently required to interpolate far more than what appears on the page (Abbott 2013). Though there are a wealth of writers who have engaged with the writing of sex – such as James Baldwin, John Berger, Sarah Hall, Alan Hollinghurst and Miranda July – historically bodily details of sexual experience fall within the realm of the “anti-narratable”, referring to what should not be told because of social or literary convention (Warhol 1994: 79), and much sex writing in literary fiction remains

formulaic, relying on shortcuts and established vocabulary to hide the act via “gaps of discretion” (Abbott 2013: 109).

Through close textual analysis (Lanham 2003) of both the writing and not-writing of sexual experience within fiction – from Kafka’s *The Trial*, the short fiction of Grace Paley and Philip K. Dick’s science fiction to contemporary writers such as Sally Rooney, Jenn Ashworth and Lydia Davis – the project will interrogate the different ways sexual experience is elided through absence, referenced through allusion and euphemism and/or brought to life through narrative. In contexts where gaps or negation offer a literary response to the un-narratability of an event, silence may have equal value as presence (c.f. Sartre 1996), or can offer fertile territory for imaginative re-expression.

In response, and extending Iser’s (1978) argument that textual gaps invite reader participation, my aim is to interrogate textual silence by using gaps found within existing literary works as creative provocations and writing sex back into the gaps to make present what was formerly absent. Employing the interrelated ludic practices of pastiche and parody as modes of creative-criticism (Riewald 1966), I will develop a ludic mode of criticism by, for example, taking a published work which omits sex via the use of a line-break and writing the sex back in in the style of the original¹ or by queering and disabling the said style or by rewriting an extract which omits or formulaically represents sex in the style of an author who has engaged with the writing of sex.

Moreover, following Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) assertion that language is grounded in specific experiences of the body, my creative and critical writing will be from my positionality as a disabled woman whose body occupies an ambiguous position in the borderland between the visible and invisible. As Drew Leder (1990) posits in *The Absent Body*, absence lies at the heart of the lived body, the body only seizing our attention when we experience it as the absence of a desired or ordinary state. This is especially relevant given that disability involves the loss or absence of normal bodied capacities and functions within social and medical classifications of normality, and impacts on autonomous existence, sexual relationships and the life imagined (Giesser 2011, p. 385). My aim is to disrupt typical or normative conventions and metaphors for writing sex and common conceptions of what it

¹ See my writing sample which fills the gap in Kafka’s ‘The Trial’ in the style of Kafka as translated by Idris Parry.

means to be a desiring or desired body (McRuer and Mollow 2012), including by making strange or making present certain kinds of sexual and bodily activity.

Timetable

Year One: research and assemble a body of key texts across different genres, forms and eras that avoid narrating sex, for example through line breaks, euphemism, and omission to provide source material for (i) critical analysis and (ii) creative provocation. I will also research authors who engage openly with sex, again across different genres and readerships.

Year Two: focus on a creative engagement with particular authors and texts identified in year one. As a writer primarily of the short form, I will write a short story cycle comprising twelve original stories, combining acts of writerly play and employing techniques learned through my research, alongside an accompanying theoretical and critical reflection. The second year will also draw on existing networks (such as the online social network for people with MS, Shift.ms) to offer sex-writing workshops (in person/online) for people living with chronic illness and/or disability. The workshops will offer an inclusive, ethically-grounded collaborative context through which interested participants will identify and explore key themes and questions concerning sex, desire and the body grounded in their and my experiences. This process of co-creation will generate new, mutually defined themes and materials for the research and representation of 'extra-ordinary bodies' (Garland-Thompson 1997) and offer a form of restorative praxis for a community of writers. At the end of the second year, I will hold a follow-up conference to '*I'll Show You Mine*' focusing on sex and disability in literature.

Year Three: will be dedicated to finalising the critical and creative outputs of the PhD, and the planning for a potential post-doctoral anthology of works by established and emerging writers invited to "write the sex back" into gaps alongside offering a critical reflection on the process.

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