

Reading Tactics

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What might a nineteenth-century U.S. literature course look like when it proceeds from something so obvious as to be overlooked? The something I have in mind is the “tissue” at the etymological root of *text*. “That which is woven, web, texture,” according to the *OED*. The hand is a longstanding metonym for authorship, and it is typically presumed to be holding a quill or a pen. But when we teach students that hands were also holding pins, styluses, needles, and scissors, a new set of authors emerge, and a new story about literature comes into view, one in which the abstract meaning that students expect to extract from a text is entirely inseparable from the tactility of the material itself. We might say, in a playful key à la [Marshall McLuhan](#), that the issue is the tissue.

Some backstory: In 2015 I researched raised (or embossed) print materials and wrote an essay about it [here](#). The turn-of-the-nineteenth-century invention of raised print, made for people with visual impairments, catalyzed a tactile rather than visual mode of literacy. The ensuing “war” over whether to use *line type* (raised alphabetic letters) like Samuel Gridley Howe’s “Boston line type” or use *point type* like Braille (raised dots) as the national print format involved heated debates about this new reading public. Spoiler alert: Braille won.

Because line type uses the same alphabet as that used by sighted readers it was viewed as a mechanism of assimilation, whereas point type was deemed a mechanism of segregation. Today, the critical conflation of ink print with print

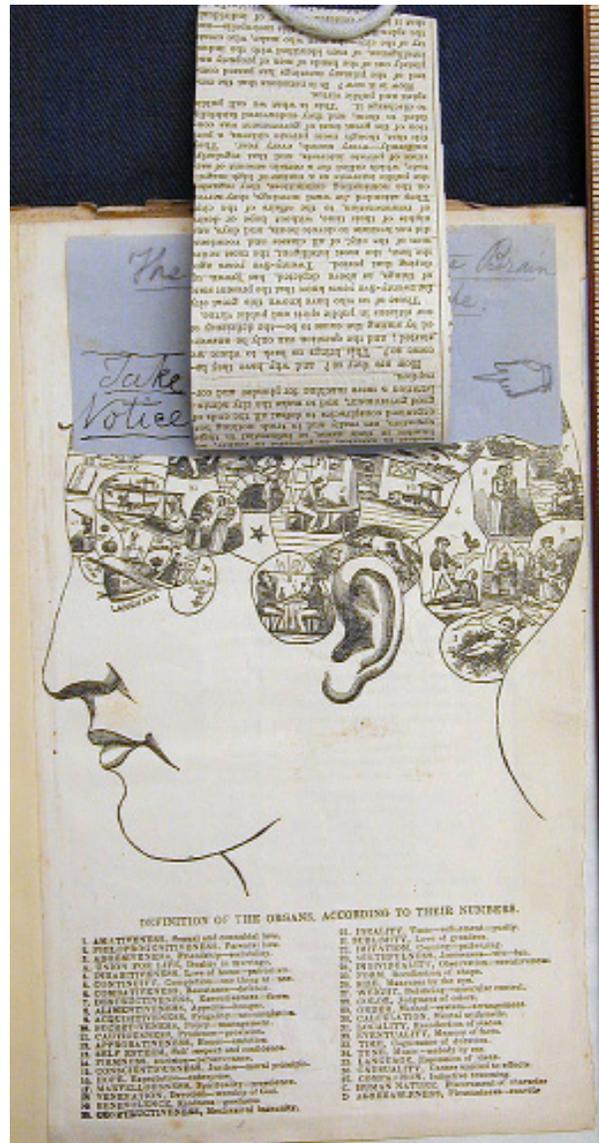
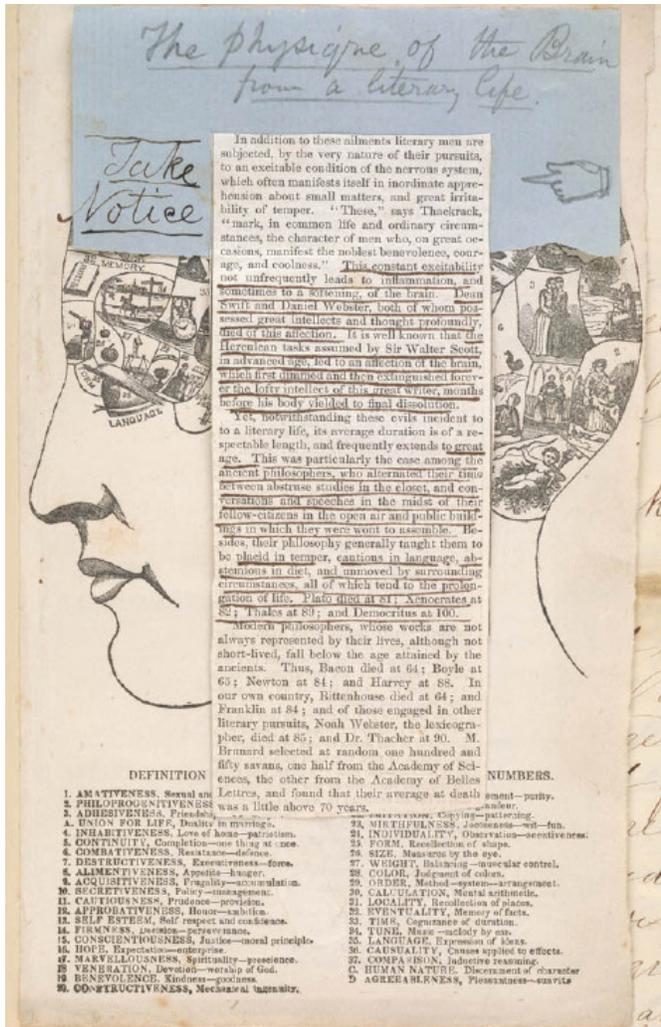
culture has yielded a lacuna in our literary history, which scholars such as Sari Altschuler and David Weimer are [helping to fill in](#). In the era of the screen – with reading now an activity that for most people involves scrolling index fingers and squinting eyes, (and, debatably, [horns](#)) what can a textured history of textual practices do for our students?

“Embossed print is a historical archive, but the sensory modality it solicits – touch – is a transportable heuristic that invites students to reconsider their assumptions about what literature is and does.”

My pedagogical approach to textured reading draws energy from disability studies scholars who have argued that disability, more than a social construction, is a mode of embodiment that produces new meanings and socialities in the world. Embossed print is a historical archive, but the sensory modality it solicits – touch – is a transportable heuristic that invites students to reconsider their assumptions about what literature is and does. As disability scholar, activist, and artist Petra Kuppers [argues](#), touch is a “way of thinking through different positions and bringing them in contact with one another.”

While most of our students are already learning how to contextualize the meanings of any given text, touch extends this work by inviting them to track the movements of meaning along a continuum of materiality. Here again, disability studies is at the forefront by redesigning the classroom around the productive possibilities of “complex embodiment,” from Georgina Kleege’s use of [audio description as a pedagogical tool](#) and Susan Schweik’s claim that ekphrasis reconfigures the relation between art and assistance to the “[curricular cripistemologies](#),” following David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, that take seriously embodied experiences.

I regard tactile or non-print literatures as uniquely positioned to make embodied immediacy integral to what “counts” as literature. These texts not only acquaint



Figures 1-2. "The physique of the Brain,' some of Whitman's notes on phrenology." Trent Collection of Whitmaniana, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University. Images feature the different aspects of Whitman's annotation of phrenological materials, including a cranial map of phrenological traits above an enumeration of those traits, paired with short descriptions of each. As noted by Matt Cohen in his discussion of Whitman's annotations and marginalia on WhitmanArchive.org, "the front clipping is pasted on only at its top: Whitman has positioned it so that it can be lifted and the emblematic map of the human brain underneath accessed."

students with counter-histories and new interpretive possibilities but also draw their own bodies into the drama of meaning-making. When your fingers are moving over raised dots, you too are part of the story. I am describing something like a pedagogical [curb-cut effect](#): touch opens students up to unfamiliar stories and, at the same time, offers new points of entry into more familiar ones.

Teaching textured literature can take many forms. It could be a single-author class centered on their compositional methods. Even Walt Whitman, ink print author extraordinaire, got his hands sticky by gluing scraps together to make collages. Dear Reader, can one find a more fitting substance to materialize the ecstasies that Whitman found in phrenological adhesiveness? The reading of cranial bumps, too, doubly textures the phrenology collage. A textured literature course focused on a particular topic, say “the cartographic imagination,” might include [tactile maps](#) as well as astronomer Ellen Harding Baker’s [solar system quilt](#), or a course on a particular literary tradition could expand that genre to include haptic texts (such as the domestic novel and the decorative arts). And to be sure, a book history course would focus on embossed print and the para-literary canon it made; because embossed print was so expensive, tactile readers could read poems, short fiction, and essays but not novels. *A nineteenth century without the novel? Apostasy!*

Recently, I mixed the first two methods. Devoted to Emily Dickinson, and in the vein of Virginia Jackson’s groundbreaking work on [Dickinson](#), the course aimed to decenter the lyric by framing it as simply one form that her meditations took. It was first necessary to acquaint students with all the activities that Dickinson – who famously refused print publication – took up. And so the first half of the semester involved tracking Dickinson’s material engagements with botany, baking, gardening, and sewing, and the texts that emerged from them, from her Herbarium and hand-sewn fascicles to her recipes. Students learned up front that Dickinson’s hands were used not simply for writing but, like most nineteenth-century women, for sundry domestic activities. After all, well into the nineteenth century the tools that women used to tell their stories were the ones most readily on hand: rarely pen and paper, but quite often [thread and needle](#). The woman in white, with her sartorial manipulations of textiles and experiments with textual scraps, made the most of both (as did, among others, [Jane Austen](#)).

Laying this groundwork made it possible for the students to enter Dickinson’s oeuvre slantwise, as it were, as much through craft studies as through literary studies, and thereby acquire a more full-bodied grasp on the stakes of her

canonization. Thematic and literal stitch-work clarified for them the gender politics at play in distinguishing her highbrow “art” from her homely “craft.” In one class session, students read F681 (“Don’t put up my thread and needle”) with contemporary artist Jen Bervin’s *The Dickinson Composite Series*. The poem is about writing as a form of sewing, but really it is about how the work of women’s work is to appear as if it is no work at all. The best clothes are the ones with the seamless seams.

Taking a cue from Susan Stewart, I asked students to rewrite the poem by using only the symbols – and / to mark stressed and unstressed syllables, but dropping the words (the lexical text) themselves. It looked a lot like stitch work, moving in and out of cloth. One student observed that the marks recalled Dickinson’s signature punctuation mark, the em-dash – a “stitch” that appears artless and effortless but contains a tensile strength that holds entire poems together.

The mutually-sustaining meanings of the dash and the stitch refashioned our earlier analysis of Dickinson’s hand-sewn fascicles – how writing as needlework is not simply a conceit (in F681) but a concrete practice born out in her poetic project. (And as Clare Mullaney [points out](#), the binding of the fascicles is linked to her eyestrain.) This discussion laid the groundwork for students to consider the stakes of [Bervin’s artwork](#), which uses silk thread to embroider Dickinson’s iconic [variant marks](#) on enormous cotton sheets. Already acquainted with the problems that Dickinson’s writings have posed for conventional print formats, students were able to grasp how the retroactive construction of Dickinson as a lyric poet was predicated on hiding her domestic “craft.” One student distilled Bervin’s feminist refashioning of the editorial choices that have impacted Dickinson’s poems, exclaiming, “Bervin is showing us Dickinson’s seams!”

Textured literature can be a class session or a course unto itself. As part of my contribution to the new volume [Timelines of American Literature](#), I developed a course meant to challenge students to reconsider the literary truths they take to be self-evident: text, read, write, author. An introductory unit draws students into early debates about disability and literacy, including Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* (he self-published it in raised print) and the journal entries of Laura Bridgman (celebrated as the first deaf and blind person to communicate in written language), and concludes with the century’s most famous embroiderer, Hester Prynne – an author-figure that Nathaniel Hawthorne [might have modeled on Bridgman](#), given that his wife had sculpted a clay bust of her.

Here, *The Scarlet Letter* proves a useful hinge to a second unit on the affordances of “handiwork,” including freewoman Mary D’Silver’s sampler, which features lines from Anna Letitia Barbauld’s “The Mouse’s Petition,” as well as Helen Keller’s autobiography *The Story of My Life*, which both dramatizes and thematizes finger-spelling. In addition to emphasizing commonality between women’s domestic labor and the manual labor of disability writing, this juxtaposition invites students to consider how textiles unspool the “yarn” of originality; D’Silver’s needlework heralds a kind of “patchwork” aesthetics born out in all the sampling that William Wells Brown later did in his novel *Clotel*.

At the same time, students can track how Keller’s memoir moves while materially moving out of sentimental scripts of disability. Researching the tools and methods available to disabled writers like Keller (via the [Perkins School for the Blind](#)) exposes students to the story of interdependence that undoes autobiography – “my” life – from within. A final unit, taking a cue from Mara Mills, focuses on the disability history of the typewriter and the audiobook (first called the Talking Book), with attention to its influence on style by way of Henry James’s dictated novel *The Ambassadors*. This concludes with a comparative ink-print and audio-reading of selections from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* – a text openly desiring to be held in hand – to discuss what happens to the book’s itinerant attachments when we encounter it sonically rather than visually.

As born out in embossed print materials and other textured texts, as my book project *Out of Print* explores, there is a long history of telling stories through bumps, pricks, pins, glue, and more. Building an entire course or a single class session around tactile literacies or, more broadly, around materials that decenter ink print as the primary medium of literary imagining attunes students to the circuits through which the material and the speculative transduce the creative energy of the other. What students got out of our discussion of Dickinson’s poetic and literal needlework, for instance, was access to a less exceptional but a richer Emily Dickinson, not a timeless poet but one very much of her time. They also learned that when touch becomes a “textual condition,” the conceit inheres in the concrete – and that what appear to be physical and social constraints are in fact artistic opportunities for thickening the web of meaning. Video killed the radio star in the twentieth century, but even with the dominance of ink-print in the nineteenth century people found ways to write and read against the grain.



Figure 3. “Full-length portrait showing a young man, seated, with a large sheet of paper in his lap. The man’s hands are placed at the end of the sheet and he looks slightly down. He wears a dark-colored suit adorned with a small bow at the end of his short, notched jacket lapels. Valentin Haüy developed the first successful raised printing for the blind in 1784 in Paris. By the mid-19th century, in the United States, line types resembling the Roman alphabet predominated. By the later 19th century, the dot systems New York Point and braille began to compete with line types in printing for the blind.”

“Cartes de Visite Portraits Collection, Print and Photograph Department,
cdv portraits - unid. photo - people with disabilities [P.2014.60.2]”
librarycompany.org

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Erica Fretwell is an assistant professor of English at the University of Albany, SUNY. Dr. Fretwell's research and teaching interests include nineteenth-century American literature and culture, theories of emotion, the history of science and technology, as well as race, gender, and disability studies. Her book *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics and the Aesthetics of Feeling* (Duke University Press) is forthcoming. She has edited a special issue of *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* on "Common Senses and Critical Sensibilities," and is part of the editorial collective for the *Palgrave Handbook of Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature and Science*. She has published essays in *American Literary History* and *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, and has contributed book chapters to *Timelines of American Literature* (Johns Hopkins UP), *The New Whitman Studies* (Cambridge UP), and the *Cambridge Companion to Food and Literature* (Cambridge UP). These publications can be accessed [here](#).

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