

## Sewing (for) Sylvia Likens

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What I am presenting today is a meditation on the methodology for my dissertation – both this meditation and my dissertation are works in progress. I started working on my dissertation (unofficially) in 2015, and in 2017, I got a fellowship at Aalborg University. Inspired by Jack Halberstam's 'Brandon Teena Archive,' as explained in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), my dissertation, the title of which is "'We Wet Your Wounds with Kisses and Tears': (Un)Making Sylvia Likens," gathers into an 'archive' texts based on or inspired by the 1965 torture-murder of sixteen-year-old Sylvia Marie Likens in Indianapolis, Indiana. The first book, *House of Evil: The Indiana Torture Slaying*, published in 1966, is a true crime account written by John Dean, a reporter who covered the court case in 1966, and the latest text is the essay "Scapegoat" in Siri Hustvedt's 2021 collection, *Mothers, Fathers, and Others: New Essays*. I wanted to examine why this murdered (white) girl has become a U.S. cultural phenomenon/obsession and why people are still invested in and writing about the case. Halberstam explains that the narratives based on or inspired by the 1993 murder of Brandon Teena in Humboldt, Nebraska, have created a 'new Brandon,' who is far removed from the real-life Brandon. In the same manner, the Sylvia Likens texts have created a new Sylvia (or Sylvias), and in the process, she has been divested of her narrative and her agency. This phenomenon is often referred to as a 'second death,' for instance in connection with femicides (i.e. murders motivated by misogyny) and often involves the slut-shaming and/or victim-blaming of murdered girls and women. Drawing on Elaine Scarry's 1985 study, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, I pose that artists, through the creation of Sylvia Likens narratives, mimic the torturers' breaking down of Sylvia's mind and body.

Initially, I wanted to focus on how the various producers of Sylvia Likens narratives narrated or, rather, *avoided* narrating, the death scene, and then I intended to write my own Sylvia Likens death scene, by employing the method of Fiction-Based Research. I struggled with this task, however, probably because I was worried that I might be adding to the violence directed at Sylvia by claiming her voice as my own. As a result, I could not get 'Sylvia' to 'talk' to me, through my writing (However, after a detour, which I talk about in this paper, I found a way to write fictional texts about her). Instead, I took a break from Sylvia for a while and focused on a trope I refer to as the Beautiful Dead White Girl/Woman. I dove into Whiteness Studies and came to the conclusion that Sylvia's whiteness is an essential part of why people are still interested in her story; white female victims who adhere to Eurocentric beauty standards and are cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied are more likely to be depicted as grievable (i.e. worthy of mourning), and their stories are given more attention by the police, the media, and artists.

While I was examining Sylvia Likens through the lens of Whiteness Studies, however, life happened, and my dissertation was suddenly pulled in an unexpected direction. Consequently, my personal life and my study became entangled, and both inspired and transformed the other. When my estranged mother died of cancer in April 2019, I went on sick leave for three months to process the grief I felt (primarily because she had neglected me as a child). (I explore this experience in my 2019 article, "Mourning My Mother: An Exploration of the Complex Emotions Elicited by the Terminal Illness of an Estranged Parent") A fellow academic advised me against going on sick leave and thereby postponing the deadline for my dissertation, but I could not just 'power through'; I had to take time to take care of myself and to experience these emotions fully. As Ann Cvetkovich writes in *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), a book that has become instrumental to me in my healing process, sometimes, "resting in sadness" is important (14). I started embroidering again (I had not embroidered since my teens) before my

mother died, but I got really invested in it after her death, and it became an integral part of my grieving process. Cvetkovich writes about the restorative quality of needlework and how soothing the act of repetition can be, as it sort of lulls the artist into a meditative state: "knit, purl, knit, purl, over and over again, becomes a creative act" (189). Similarly, in *Threads of Life: A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle* (2019), Clare Hunter explains that "[n]eedlework takes time.... The needle lingers and the stitcher is forced to pause from time to time to re-thread the needle, pick out and cut a new piece of thread, decide what to do next, what color or stitch to use. It allows space for reminiscing, for remembering" (162).

Before my mother's death, I had also started doing textile research and stumbled upon a quote attributed to French-American artist Louise Bourgeois, which has become central to my dissertation: "The act of sewing is a process of emotional repair." When I read this quote, I felt as if I suddenly knew how everything in my study was connected, interwoven. However, the image was still vague, and I could not will the structure of my dissertation to reveal itself to me; I had to 'trust the process' and let things unfold in their own time.

The process of my dissertation seems to have resisted linearity. Instead, I have been moving in circles, slowly approaching Sylvia Likens from different angles and through the use of various methods. I interweave more traditional academic modes of research, such as literary analysis, with Fiction-Based Research, in the form of short fictional texts, and Arts-Based Research, in the form of a burial shroud I am embroidering for Sylvia Likens as an act grounded in care and in an attempt to counter the neglect, carelessness, and violence her tormentors subjected her to. Arts-Based Research is art used as a method of inquiry. As explained by Patricia Leavy in *Handbook of Arts-Based Research* (2017), it is "a process-oriented view of research in which a research topic is considered comprehensively, the different phases of the research project are explicitly linked, and theory and practice are married" (9) – it is a sensory, often physical way of engaging with a topic and being honest about the emotional attachment and/or obsession the

scholar has with their subject. Similarly, Cvetkovich writes that "affective investment can be a starting point for theoretical insight" (10). My dissertation has taught me the value and fruitfulness of "detouring and getting lost" along the way (24), as Halberstam writes in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Halberstam argues that "[u]nder certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2-3). When I decided to trust my own process, which led to my missing my deadline, and, in a sense, meant that I had 'failed' as an academic, I was able to arrive at reflections and decisions that could not be rushed or forced. I have also been encouraged by textile artist Hannah Lamb, who comments in *Poetic Cloth: Creating Meaning in Textile Art* (2019) that her "stitches are seldom entirely even or regular. I don't aim for perfection, looking instead for my stitches to sit organically as part of an evolving cloth story" (34). The mistakes I make (my small 'failures') become part of the narrative. As artist Elaine Reichek writes in *When This You See* (2000), an embroidered artifact is made up of "the countless insignificant stitches that together add up to a whole." I try to think of experimentation as one of the main goals of my dissertation, and this somewhat prevents me from being afraid of making mistakes.

Needlework was essential to the process of putting myself back together again during my sick leave; embroidering helped me find my way or circle back to my dissertation. This 'slow period' of my life opened up my study to me in unexpected ways and reshaped my scholarship. The reassembling of myself through embroidery made me realize how I could attempt to do something similar for Sylvia by creating a burial shroud for her.

The shroud represents a safe space, a cocoon, a place to rest, an embrace, and a contrast to how Sylvia Likens, after her death, was displayed on a dirty mattress. Her tormentors (thirty-seven-year-old mother of seven Gertrude Baniszewski (who was paid to take care of Sylvia and her sister, Jenny, while their parents traveled with and worked at a carnival during the summer),

the older Baniszewski children, and up to twenty-five children/youngsters from the neighborhood) had washed Sylvia's body and put clean clothes on her, most likely in order to cover up their crime, not as an act of care. According to Susan M. Stabile in *Memory's Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America* (2004), the shroud is a "memorial text" (202), which "[l]iterally and figuratively enclo[ses] the body [and] binds the corpse and mourner together" (203). Cloth is affected by the people who handle it – when we interact with cloth, we leave our mark on it, in the form of scent, skin cells, stains, etc. In *Threads of Life*, Hunter poses that "[s]ewing is our way to mark our existence on cloth" (298), and Lamb, in *Poetic Cloth*, suggests that "[m]aterials speak to us if we choose to listen. They speak of touch, memory and place" (6). Thus, interacting with the shroud and creating an artifact for Sylvia Likens somehow binds me and the subject of my study together.

I wanted to create a sort of temporal bridge between the present, where I am creating the shroud, and the time when Sylvia Likens was still alive, so I bought a box of vintage Pepperell linen sheets, produced in the U.S., from the 1950s online (unopened, never used). As I started sewing, it dawned on me how huge the shroud will be and how long it will take me to finish embroidering it. I accomplish little in one sewing session. I had two choices: I could either aim at filling out the white space on the shroud as quickly (and as sloppily) as possible, or I could focus on savoring the (slow) process and taking care with my stitches and then not deliver a finished product but instead an artifact that points towards the future and represents a continued (perhaps never-ending) commitment to caring for Sylvia Likens. I decided to focus on the process, which also entails pleasure – pleasure in sewing, pleasure in looking at and being pleased with my work. This idea of pleasure also counteracts how Sylvia's tormentors would not allow her to take pleasure in anything and how her whole existence became engulfed by pain through torture. Sometimes, I take long breaks from embroidering the shroud – I get bored with it and work on other projects. I do not want to feel forced to do it.

Circles – or circling – and repetition inform my dissertation on multiple levels. I have been unable to send chapters to my supervisors because I do not work in a linear manner. I improvise and structure along the way, and I work on all chapters at the same time, because my mind insists that I move from one element to another quite suddenly and because I work best when I switch between tasks (for instance between working with my hands (embroidering), analyzing, and doing creative writing). At one point, I wondered if I could somehow structure the dissertation as a circle, because the same patterns, images, and themes keep reappearing, but in the end, I decided that the idea was one of those 'shiny objects' that could enchant and distract my ADHD brain for too long. The circle is also important to my study in the sense that Sylvia Likens's story has been retold, recycled, over and over. In narratives, she is resurrected, for the purpose of being tortured and killed (again and again). In 2018, I went to Indianapolis to visit the places connected to Sylvia's murder. My friend Jennifer and I circled around a neighborhood on the south side of town, trying to find 3850 East New York Street, where the house Sylvia died in once stood. It is now a parking lot. This physical act of circling, of searching for Sylvia Likens, mirrored my research process, where I have searched for her in newspaper articles and novels, rereading (going in circles) the same texts, over and over. The circle is a motif I have picked up on, perhaps instinctually. When we drove around the block in Indianapolis, I heard the line "The girl's in circles and circles and circles again" from Tori Amos's song "Cloud on My Tongue" (1994), as I imagined Sylvia Likens walking to school in the summer of 1965, a few months before she died (on October 26).

The stitch I have chosen for the shroud, the chain stitch, also fits with the figure of the circle, although that was perhaps not intentional (the chain stitch just seemed easy to learn how to do). However, I do like that the stitch, which is basically a circle within a circle (the stiches enclose each other, touch each other) recalls the concept of repetition, which is fundamental to

embroidery (and to the Sylvia Likens phenomenon) and at the same time signifies monotony and pleasure, depending on the mood and motivation of the embroiderer.

The shroud is also meant to counteract what I view as one of the first Sylvia Likens narratives, namely the words her tormentors branded onto her stomach with a heated sewing needle: "I'M A PROSTITUTE AND PROUD OF IT!" Through doing Textile Research, I explored how crucial needlework has been to the social conditioning of girls and women, and how, historically speaking, lessons in (white) femininity, piety, and purity (of the mind and of the body) have been imparted through the teaching of various forms of needlework, and through the embroidery sampler, in particular. This research process, which also led me on a short research visit to Daughters of the American Revolution in Washington, D.C., which has a collection of U.S. embroidery samplers, as well as my own hands-on work with embroidery, allowed me to return to writing Sylvia Likens narratives, and these are dispersed throughout my dissertation (in one of them, I imagine that Sylvia Likens was given embroidery lessons by her grandmother). The title of my dissertation, 'We Wet Your Wounds with Kisses and Tears,' which I have also embroidered on the shroud, alludes to how the Sylvia Likens story has been approached. The kisses refer to how her body and her pain have been eroticized and how her story has been cannibalized and reproduced over and over, whereas the tears refer to how her traumatic story also encourages audiences to feel empathy. However, the kisses may also be read as the comforting gestures of a caregiver, who (re)mourns Sylvia's death, as she imagines wrapping her body in embroidered cloth in an attempt to ease the pain, post-mortem.