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Syria's Elegies (@SyriasElegies): Socio-Political Poetics of the World Wide Web

Written poems, legislative policies, and online posts are experiments to be tested and digested by computers and peoples. This essay is an experiment testing the nature of another experiment, *Syria's Elegies*, an epic poem produced through Twitter. First and foremost, I wish to propose a new way of envisioning and producing poetry—a type of poetry that will lend itself as an instrument to the digital tools for cultural critics and digital humanities scholars alike. This type of poetry, fusing verse, social media, and an archive of online journalism, urges the fact that the digital humanities should necessarily be a full partner of the humanities (Liu 492). There is no doubting that most texts today are imbued with digital technologies. Following a summary of the intentions behind the production of the epic via Twitter, I will conduct a computational text analysis on the articles comprising Part I of *Syria's Elegies* to show how this form of poetry freely lends itself to different modes of cultural and political analysis. Though I will be using methods that are employed to derive solutions, I, as a literary critic, will not be producing answers, but discovering and raising new questions along the way.

Writing the Poem: (Com)posting *Syria's Elegies*

Like the frenzied scene concluding Part I of *Syria's Elegies*, I created my Twitter account (@SyriasElegies) in the middle of the night. Several weeks prior, I had been trying to figure a way to merge three daunting interests: collecting news articles related to Syria, writing an epic poem, and joining the Twitter community. I wanted to create and I wanted to collect under normative terms, so I turned to Twitter, and the sociopolitical epic was born. As months have passed since that day, I have more deeply realized that my body, my culture, and its artifacts are "becoming increasingly intertwined with intelligent machines" (Hayles 214). I feel weight over me when I have not yet (com)posted a new stanza on Twitter each day. I have to consult with my MacBook, or else the burden will stay. At first it constrains, and then it liberates: old post, new post ...and so forth.

As welcoming as online mediums may seem, I cannot make the illusory claim that I am trying to "build a world unmediated by authorities and experts" (Dery 9). Noura and her epic are mediated and defined by authorities, nobodies, memories, and words, which are dying in more ways than one. Noura's development in *Syria's Elegies* reflects the nature of post-criticism as Gregory Ulmer defines it: "the saprophyte, growing among the roots of literature, feeding off the decay of tradition" (Foster 106). This is not to say that Noura and her story are parasites; rather, they are saprophytes: pedagogical mushrooms: mushroom teaching-machines. They absorb the bits of decay from around them in order to transfer the knowledge of cultural disciplines to a general audience. It is through these knowledges of cultures and politics that Noura's being is made. She is no player, no mirror; she is a transparent screen for all the networks of influence (Baudrillard 133). As each influence passes, *Noura* ascends with the poem, the reverse process for *Dante* in *Dante's Comedia*. Although *Dante* descends into *Inferno* in order to make his ascension through *Purgatorio* and into *Paradiso*, the words, lines, and stanzas are always descending on page—the past lines are above the present one and future ones. Conversely, the stanzas of *Syria's Elegies* in chronology are read from bottom to top. New (com)posts live on old ones still there, but mostly forgotten.

Syria's Elegies is written in what I have termed *twitza sira*. Like *terza rima*, *twitza sira* follows the structure of interlocking three-line stanzas; however, there is no set meter, and the first two lines have nine metrical beats, while the final line is in pentameter. This was due to the word restriction of Twitter; regardless, this restriction has managed to evoke a sense of rushed anxiety until the third full line in pentameter. As well, each stanza I (com)post is influenced by a news article concerning Syria that was published that day. These are the first three posts I composed on July 13, 14, and 15, 2013, respectively:

Biasantini sarracenati
 From bisantini, and, now, lira—
 “Asses to ashes,” showspoke the TV—
Prints of kings flip doubled seas, Noura
 dreamed, dazed from split-screens. She knew Israel
 watched fascists schism lands as Syria
 waits for U.S.Aid, the Russian heel,
 al-Qaeda car bombs, the Holy Ghost's
 return, or Fates spun in the Chinese wheel.

But this is not how it is read. Here, the first (com)post is on top the following ones that will supersede the (com)post they arose from. Twitter is my expressive vehicle, as the physique of the page was Dickinson's (McGann 63). To better emulate the reading process on Twitter, here are the final (com)posts of Part I (March 11, 10, and 9, 2014) as they appear on the webpage, ordered by Twitter:

Noura thanked God, then cursed God and cried
 for Syria, for all She had was God;
 silenced by despair, she turned to her side
 and slept in peace.

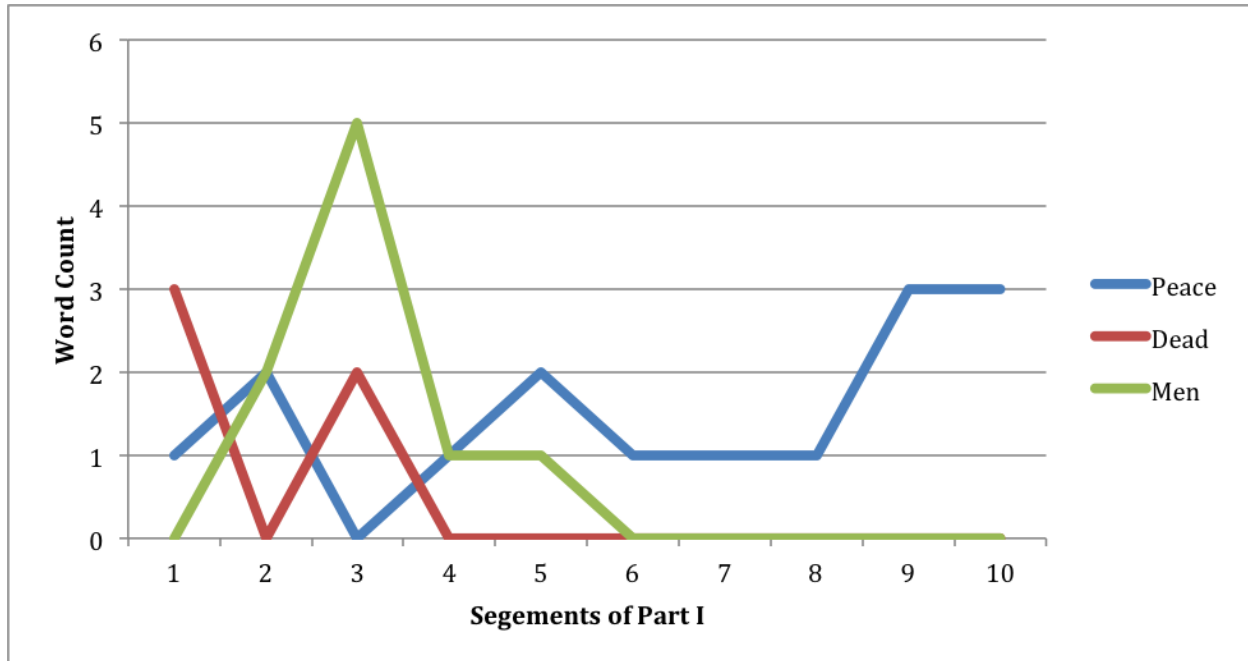
would stage the same mundane game: increase
 number of deceased, husbandless bride,
 starving children—all for the sake of peace.

Rise, so that fall is great, Noura prayed,
 trapped by the promise of a release
 that would never come. She knew the next day

Turning back a page, scrolling down, or opening a letter or scroll: reading involves the action of the will in its process of discovering meaning. In the case of *Syria's Elegies*, the meaning of the newest (com)post can only be reached by venturing down the page. Only at the bottom, the beginning of the story, can one rise and reach a deeper meaning. And the source of the languages and ideas used in (com)posting this world can be sensed by exploring the articles accompanying each (com)post.

A product of the Internet, the composition of *Syria's Elegies* is directly associated with what Deleuze and Guattari call a rhizome, “a nonhierarchical and noncentered network structure” connected to an unlimited number of nodes in a communicative process (Hardt and Negri 299). Every day, a three-line stanza is influenced by a unique news article, the literature I am reading, the previous (com)posts, and my direct surroundings. Produced by this nexus of influence, the chronology of Part I is as follows: Noura and her mother, Sarah, are watching the news before breaking their fast; after dinner, two religious fanatics ring the doorbell and Noura entertains them; after they leave, Noura and Sarah smoke hookah and eat olives; Noura goes to the bathroom, while Sarah prays; they have a small chat, then go upstairs to sleep; Noura is restless until she finally falls asleep. Using Voyant (a web-based text analysis program that allows users to analyze word frequencies of any plain text file) and Microsoft Excel, I produced this graph (Figure 1) of the frequencies of the words “peace,” “dead,” and “men” to see what I could find:

Figure 1: *Word frequencies of “peace,” “dead,” and “men” in Part I of Syria's Elegies*

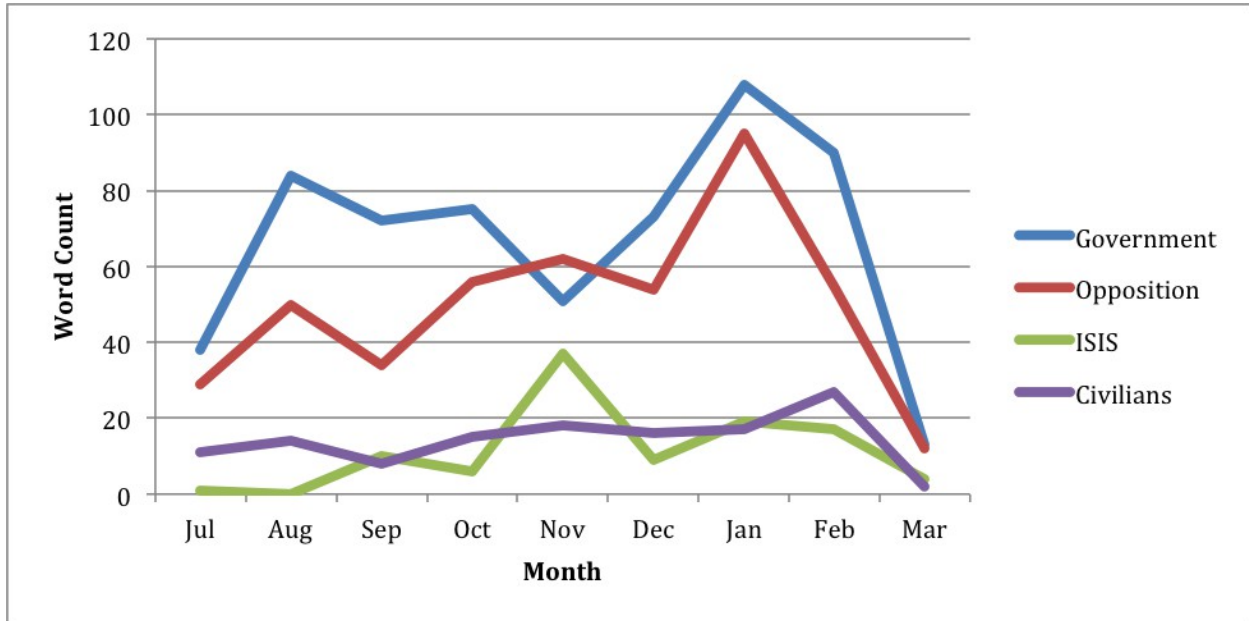


Coincidentally, the word frequencies correlate with the chronology of the story separated into ten even segments. In the beginning of Part I, Noura and Sarah are watching news covering Syria. The men ring the door soon after dinner. In the end, Noura tries to find peace as she is lying in bed. However, outside of this world, what correlation do these word frequencies have with the news articles that had inspired them? Why did the men appear during the third segment of Part I? In brief, the Ghouta chemical attack took place on 21 August 2013, and international dialogues concerning chemical attacks exploded. These religious fanatics stepped into these women’s lives in the same way that UN officials and other international experts were placing themselves in and around Syria to question the chemical attacks. Though much can be said about the poetic content of Part I, I will now focus on the corpus of 245 news articles that influenced each stanza.

Computational Text Analysis: Articles from Part I (July 2013 — March 2014)

As Stephen Ramsay suggests, computational text analysis “is easily the most quantitative approach to the study of literature” (2). However, this is not to prove that quantitative research “provides *data*, not interpretation,” as Franco Moretti claims (9). When applied to literary analysis, computational text analysis is the *most* quantitative approach, but is still dependent on interpreting something or someone else. As Edward Said states: “[N]o one writes simply for oneself. There is always an Other: and this Other willy-nilly turns interpretation into a social activity, albeit with unforeseen consequences, audiences, constituencies and so on” (137). This corpus of articles reveals the truth behind Said’s claim: writing about peripheral matters is a social activity with often unforeseen consequences. For instance, journalists reporting on the internal conflicts in Syria have hardly mentioned the existence of civilians (see Figure II).

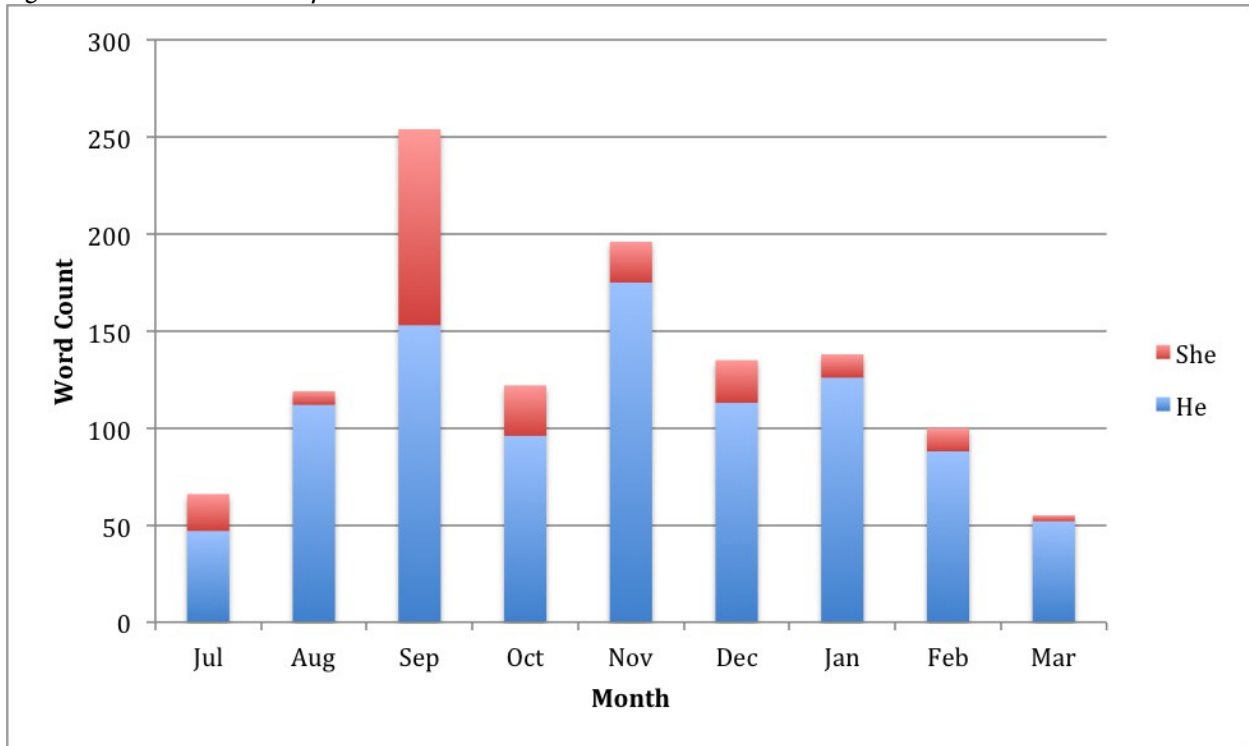
Figure II: *Local interests: word frequencies of “government,” “opposition,” “ISIS,” and “civilians”*



This figure also shows that the language surrounding the Syrian Civil War, or Syrian Uprising, during this time is more concerned with the conflict between the Assad regime and the opposition groups than any other group in Syria. Nevertheless, the sparse discussion of al-Qaeda-linked groups is telling, since al-Qaeda is the major concern threatening a political shift to a democratic state—if the regime falls, Islamist extremisms will run rampant. So, if ISIS is obstructing a democratic shift, why do discussions of ISIS never correlate with discussions concerning the regime? Why is ISIS always fighting with opposition groups? Claims that the CIA and NATO are funding these Islamists only make these questions hazier.

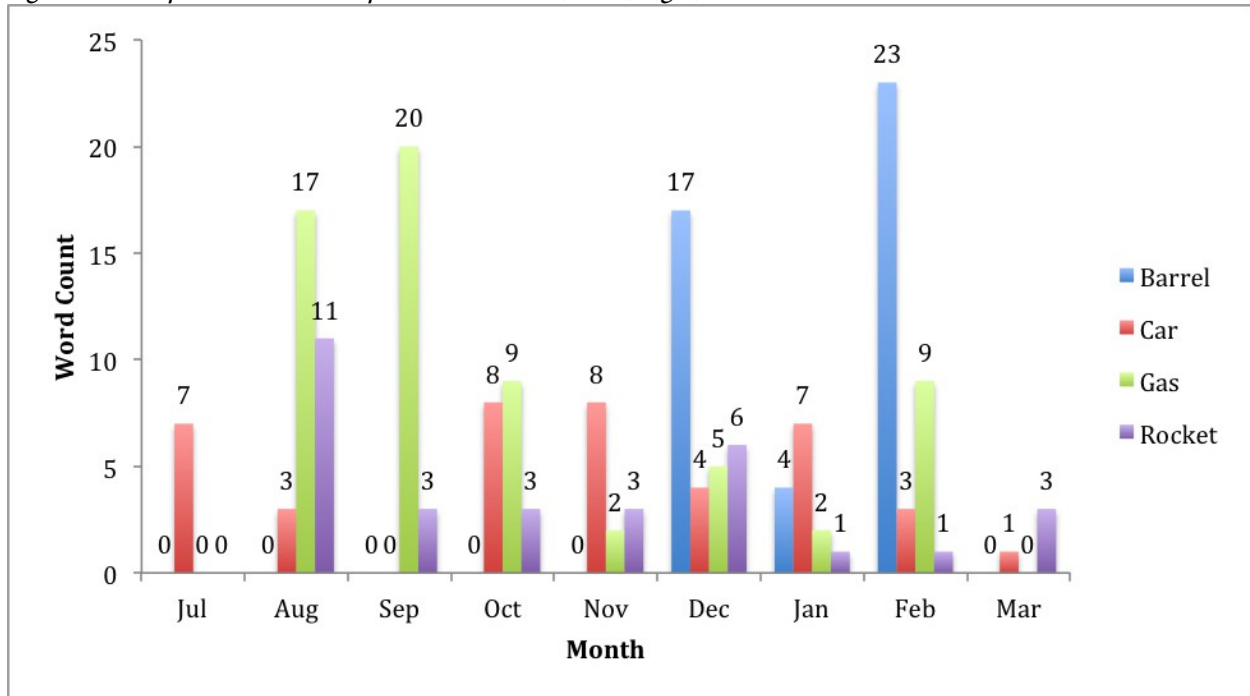
Another group silenced from the dialogues concerning Syria's war are women. In this figure, the unbalanced word frequencies of "he" and "she" are quite extreme:

Figure III: Gender: word frequencies of "he" and "she"



Yes, this is a man's war, like any other, but where is the woman's voice outside of the dialogue concerning the chemical attacks? A peer asked me who these women were, if they were the victims in Syria. I was taken aback by the question, since I knew that victims' accounts did not exist in mainstream media. Their voices are never translated and are regularly left unrecognized by the Western ear and eye. Nevertheless, it is interesting to consider the possible reasons for such an upsurge in "she" surrounding the chemical attacks. What we see from this graph and the question raised above is that "[s]uch behavior is terrorist," as Lyotard puts it, in the sense that terrorism is "eliminating [...] a player from the language game one shares with him" (63).

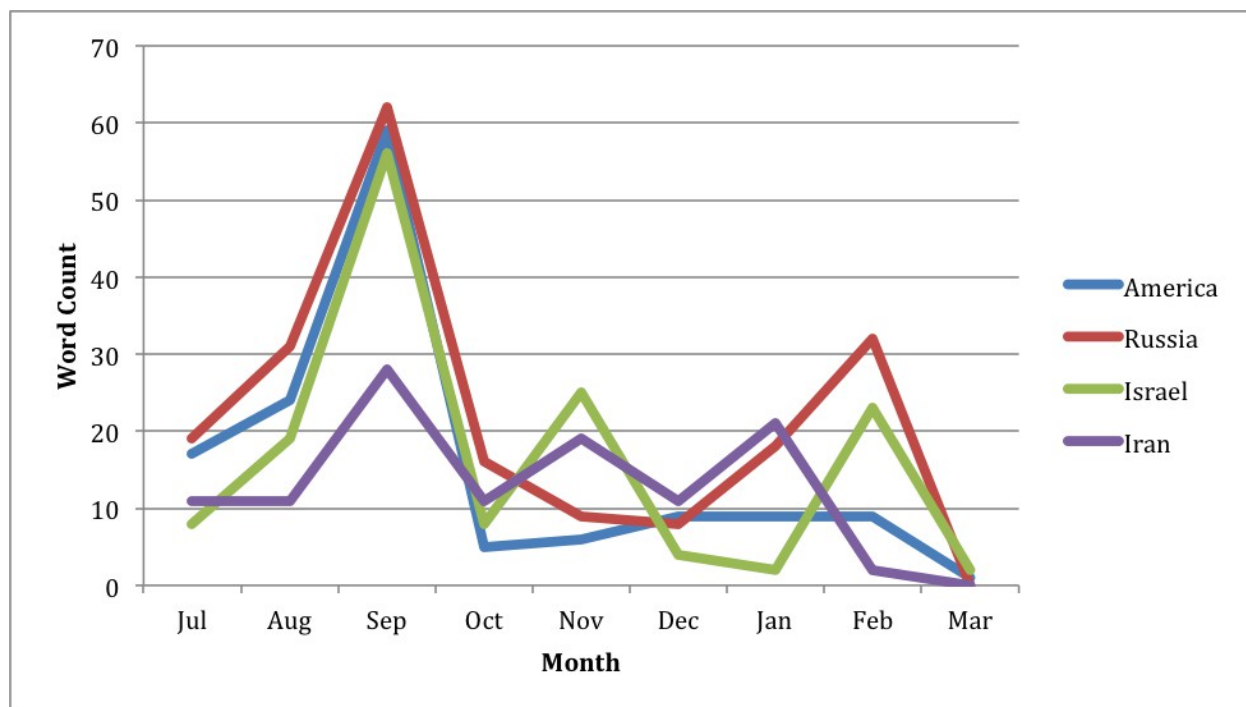
Since I have repeatedly referred to the chemical attacks, I suppose it is necessary for me to reveal the representation of word frequency data surrounding weapon use during these nine months: Figure IV: *Weapon use: word frequencies of "barrel," "car," "gas," and "rocket"*



As the sarin gas attacks took place in late August and debates concerning the attacks followed, this figure clearly reflects these events. Subsequent to international interests criticizing the attacks and the UN ruling that Assad must remove and destroy the weapons he had in stock, the usage of barrel bombs skyrocketed, as articulated by the articles between December and January. Such a fact is valuable for cultural and political critics interested in questioning the effectiveness of the removal of sarin gas. Will the removal of sarin gas end death and destruction? If anything, the gas prevented the destruction of infrastructure. How is dropping barrels packed with explosives more ethical than using a nerve agent? Why is sarin gas outlawed, while other weapons of mass destruction are not, and how was Assad in possession of a Schedule 1 substance in the first place? Looking back at this data, it is quite outrageous that Bashar al-Assad stated in a recent interview that he has never used barrel bombs during this four-year conflict.

Finally, I have rendered the word frequencies of the four most common foreign interests involved in the dialogues around Syria's war:

Figure V: *Foreign interests: word frequencies of "America," "Russia," "Israel," and "Iran"*

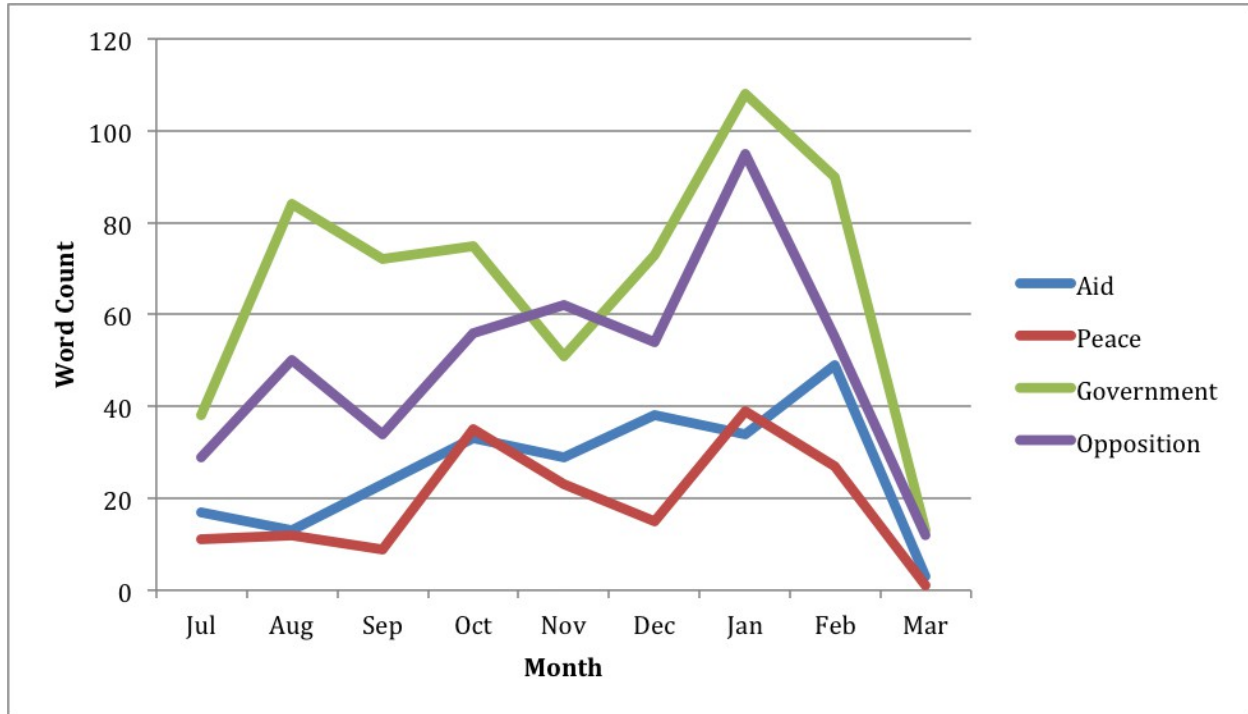


Here we see “vivid[ly] the sense of layer upon layer of interests” paid by international powers (*Orientalism* 192). Most clearly projected, dialogues between foreign powers boomed when the chemical attacks took place. Given the fact that close geographic proximity should affect the language of these articles (Jockers 148), Iran is not mentioned as much as it should be—Iranians have been increasingly purchasing lands and colonizing Syria since the revolution began. However, the dialogues following the chemical attacks and the omnipresence of Russia distract our attention from Iran. For most of this period, Iran is mentioned more than America and Israel. It is also important to wonder why the word frequencies of Russia and Israel simultaneously increase in February, when chemical weapons are being destroyed and barrel bombs are taking their place. Besides Russia supplying Assad with weapons, what else does Russia have at stake in this bloody conflict? What are the geopolitical circumstances threatening the security of the state of Israel?

Concluding Remarks

Poetry, society, and politics are interconnected under the same system—a system that is at first restricting, but can become liberating. While “[b]orders in modernity have played a constitutive role in the modes of production and organization of political subjectivity,” it is the role of the digital humanities critics to liberate imaginations from these infinite, political factions in order to reveal their fabricated nature and to open up the possibilities of new forms of political subjectivities (Mezzadra and Neilson xi). To see what kind of subjectivity should replace today’s, plagued by images of death, war, destruction, and debt, I ran a final test comparing the word frequencies of “government,” “opposition,” “peace,” and “aid”:

Figure VI: *Aid and peace: word frequencies of “aid,” “peace,” “government,” and “opposition”*



As this figure shows, discussions of peace and aid never exceed those concerned with Assad's regime and opposition groups. The main topics of discussion commonly involve war, terror, and a false sense of freedom, as Said avers: "Our political discourse is now choked with enormous, thought-stopping abstractions, from terrorism, Communism, Islamic fundamentalism, and instability, to moderation, freedom, stability and strategic alliances, all of them as unclear as they are both potent and unrefined in their appeal. [...] [N]otions like equality and welfare have simply been chased off the intellectual landscape" (136). This computational text analysis reflects such a claim, and it is through this type of poetic production and computational analysis that contrived borders may be toppled for the sake of a humanist politics and discourse.

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