

Fall 2016
ENGL-UA 973-001 (#17502)
Interdisciplinary Seminar
Topic: "Materiality"

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239 Greene St. #722
Office hours:
Wednesdays, noon

The study of literature typically directs our attention toward ideal constructs called literary *works*, not the manufactured, material *texts* through which those works are so generatively discerned, even as habits of reference ("Turn to page 63"), questions of format ("Kindle or paperback?"), and the demands of commerce ("That will be \$17.95, please") natter at this high-mindedness. How should we think about material texts in relation to literary works? We understand that it makes some sort of difference whether we read something on the page or off a screen, but do the media of literary production also make a difference? How might reading today be defined and delimited in new ways by varieties of not reading, including browsing, surfing, searching, and algorithmic analysis? In this seminar we will read and discuss recent literature and criticism that might aid us in approaching questions like these. Students will be asked to write one shorter essay on a work of their choosing, and then complete a research paper of 12-15 pp. Several note-taking assignments (fun ones, I promise) will help us generate additional material for class discussion.

As an advanced seminar, this course depends upon our committed, collective engagement with readings and activities that we pursue together. Your eventual articulation and pursuit of an original research topic is also of paramount importance, and you will have a lot of leeway to design a project that compels your interest. At the same time, since this is a course we're all working on together, there should be a register of coherence across projects, even if on wildly different topics.

Objectives

In this seminar our goals will be to:

- Analyze literary and literary-critical texts, considering their contexts in this age of ubiquitous information
- Grapple with the concept (the icky jargon) of "materiality" or material texts in relation to literary objects and literariness in general
- Engage media of cultural production broadly—and literary production more specifically—by reading, writing, discussing, and doing things together
- Inquire into the conditions of reading and—more particularly—not reading literature at the present time
- Produce a cluster of critical research essays reflecting the goals above

Course Requirements

(1) Readings and other assignments listed for a particular day must be completed before class. The prerequisite for high-quality discussion is that everyone reads material ahead of time. Come to class prepared to engage.

(2) Engaged participation. I will be looking for knowledge-building contributions that show not only that you are trying to engage the readings productively, but also that you can contribute to the intellectual life of the seminar. An obvious pre-requisite for active and intelligent participation in discussions is attendance. This is especially key in a

seminar that meets once a week. Plan on attending every class meeting this semester. If you need to miss a class meeting for purposes of religious observance or a serious illness please let me know as soon as you are able.

As a matter of common courtesy, please refrain from walking in and out of the room while class is in session, and please silence your phones. Don't be a distraction. We'll take a micro break if you need one.

(3) Essay Writing: You will be asked to craft one short essay or prospectus in the middle of term, and then produce a research paper at the end. These assignments are both opportunities to demonstrate engagement with the texts, themes, and methods of the course, but they are also moments for you to be creative. The classroom represents an ideal environment for honing your talents as a thinker, researcher, and writer, so we'll discuss the assignments in detail as the course proceeds.

It should go without saying that any plagiarism *no matter how accidental* will result in failure for the course. Remember, it is plagiarism if you use someone else's ideas without attribution or someone else's words without quotation. The university's Writing Center is a valuable resource should you wish to take advantage of it.

(4) Resources: Remember to contact the Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities if you are entitled to accommodations in light of a documented disability; please be proactive in making the relevant arrangements.

(5) Grading policy: Your grades will be calculated as follows:

- Attendance, preparation, and participation 25%
- Note-taking assignments (3) and related gusto 10%
- Shorter essay at midterm 20%
- Final paper 45%

Books and Other Resources

Bringing the assigned reading to class is a course requirement. Many readings will be available online via NYU Classes or links to the NYU Libraries as indicated below. (Log in to NYU Libraries to use these links, and let me know if you encounter dead ones.) You will need access to these additional books and resources, in this order:

1. Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing* (Harvard University Press, 2016). (Approx. \$20 via online sellers)
2. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (Grove Press, 2016). (\$10.83 via online sellers)
3. James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Award, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Harvard University Press, 2005). Note: This title is available for free via Bobst's "ebrary" license, if you can stand to read it that way. Otherwise it's \$26.50 from the publisher.
4. Sudden Oak, *Three Futures of Storytelling*, a bundle of 3 apps available (\$4.99) through the iTunes AppStore.
5. Amy Hungerford, *Making Literature Now* (Stanford University Press, 2016). (\$22.95 from the publisher)

6. *Best American Non-Required Reading 2016* (Mariner 2016). Note: This book is due out in October. It is available for preorder for approx. \$10 via online sellers. We can discuss substituting something else for this text, so wait before you buy.

Schedule of class meetings and assignments

(Please be alert for announcements of any changes. I'll make announcements via NYU Classes.)

Tuesdays 9:30-12:15 in 244 Greene St., room 105

Sept. 6 Introductions and A Baseline

Reading: Vendler, Johnson, and McGill, "One Poem, Three Readers" (available via Classes)

Sept. 13 Not Reading, An Introduction

Reading: Bayard, *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*

Note-taking assignment: You will be given a copy of Pierre Bayard's book. Please carry it around with you this week as you read it. Using the pen you are also given, please take notes for class. Three brief paragraphs will suffice: (a) comment on people's reactions to seeing you with this book; (b) main point of a key chapter, described while looking at that chapter; (c) main point of the "Encounters with Professors" chapter, described after reading the chapter but without looking at it again and completely in your own words.

Sept. 20 Material Texts and "Materiality," Formal v. Forensic

Readings: Darnton, "[The Importance of Being Bibliographical](#)"; McGann, "The Socialization of Texts"; and Masten, "Textual Deviance" (available via Classes)

Related but not required: de Grazia, "[The Essential Shakespeare and the Material Book](#)"; and De Grazia and Stallybrass, "[The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text](#)."

Sept. 27 Media of Literary Production

Reading: Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing*

Note-Taking assignment: Take some notes that you can use in class. Try to identify key moments in the text and any argument(s) you find interesting. Again, nothing too elaborate is required, but this time your notes must be typed on a typewriter. Be resourceful, or borrow mine.

Oct. 4 Media (continued): Programs and Programming

Readings: Egan, "[Black Box](#)"; Robles-Anderson and Svensson, "One Damn [Slide After Another](#)"; and Menand, "Show or Tell" (available via Classes)

Related but not required: McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction And the Rise of Creative Writing*; and Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*

Oct. 11 Midterm Regroup

Short essay due in class, details TBA
Class trip: letterpress printing studio, details TBA

Oct. 18 This Year's Pulitzer Prize Winning Novel!

Reading: Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*

Oct. 25 Literature and Cultural Economy

Reading: English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Award, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (at least pp. 1-27, 50-106, 187-246)

Related but not required: Ohmann, "A Case Study in Canon Formation: Reviewers, Critics, and *The Catcher in the Rye*" (available via Classes)

Nov. 1 Literature and Cultural Economy Online

Explore: *Three Futures of Storytelling* apps

Explore: Amazon customer reviews, [Bic Pen for Her](#)

Readings: Kriss, "The Language of God" (January 2015) and "Why You're Not Quitting Twitter" (March 2016) [blog posts](#); and the so-called [Flarf Files](#)

Related but not required: Bring something or a link to something that fits the related-not-required category for show and tell

Nov. 8 Not Reading, Take Two

Reading: Hungerford, *Making Literature Now* (at least pp. 1-70, 141-67)

Note-taking assignment: Try out at least one of the writing apps discussed in this [New York Times review](#). If you know of others, please share.

Related but not required: McGurl, "[The Institution of Nothing](#): David Foster Wallace in the Program"

Nov. 15 Eclectic mix #1

Readings: TBA. You will each be asked to assign a brief reading for discussion. Pick something literary or critical that points provocatively towards the topic of the final paper you want to write.

Nov. 22 Eclectic mix #2

Readings: Joshi, "Chetan Bhagat: Remaking the Novel in India" (available via Classes); Moretti, "[Style, Inc.: Reflections on Seven Thousand Titles](#)" and Trumpener's critical response, "[Paratext and Genre System](#)"

Nov. 29 The Literary Today

Reading: *Best American Non-Required Reading 2016* (excerpts)

Dec. 6 Conclusions and Discussion of Final Papers

Final Papers are due via email by 5 PM on Sunday, December 18. No exceptions.