

Deformance Assignment

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Fall 2013

Also available here: <https://tuelit13.wordpress.com/deformation/>

Context

In an early page of *Galerie de Difformité*, Gretchen Henderson invites readers to read “crookedly (that is, correctly),” not only by skipping around but by writing in her novel, pasting and stapling in other materials, and reshuffling its pages at will. Relatedly, Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann advocate for defamiliarizing and revitalizing our ways of reading by moving “beyond conceptual analysis into the kinds of knowledge involved in performative operations” and unconventional approaches to reading, while Mark Sample both critiques and extends this model, arguing for an approach to the humanities based on breakage and undoing. How do deformation, distortion, and damage allow us to see literature anew? What stories do they reveal? What do they tell us about the book as a paper object in a world of digital reading, writing, and communication?

This project is a chance for you to take Henderson up on her invitation, to address these questions, and to engage these authors’ arguments through a performative operation of your own—to deform your copy of *Galerie* in some way that’s interpretive of, reflective of, and responsive to her thinking and work in the book, to Samuels and McGann’s and Sample’s theories of deformation, and to the larger concerns and themes of our discussions of literature in the digital age so far this semester.

The possibilities for how to deform your text are effectively limitless—put the book’s pages in a new order, white out every page and rewrite it, staple in your own writings, make origami out of its pages and scatter them across Philadelphia, encase it within another text, mail its pages to random people, scan it to Google Books and set the hard copy on fire—anything you can conceive of and carry out is fair game, *as long as you can rationalize it and offer a cogent theory for your deformation*. Don’t do something just for fun or because it seems cool, interesting, or pretty: think hard about how to respond to this materially oriented text through material action and what your material response says to and about this text. Take advantage of the opportunity this assignment offers to read and write in new ways, and be thoughtful, creative, and rigorous in thinking about what those new ways show you.

Procedure

Once you’ve decided how to deform your text, you should follow these steps:

- **Deform and document:** As you prepare for and carry out your deformation, document your process in whatever way makes sense: sketches, thoughtful notes and plans, photos and/or videos of the process, and any research materials are all useful possibilities. This will allow me and your classmates to get a sense of the larger work and action behind the final product of your deformed text. There’s no minimum quantity

or amount of material required here, but whatever you include should go a good way towards clearly illustrating and contextualizing your process.

- **Write a reflection and theory of deformation:** After completing your deformation, you should write a reflection of at least three pages that analyzes your work and sets it in the context of the larger issues of Henderson's text, this section of the course, and the course as a whole: What was at stake for you in deforming the text the way you did, and how did your deformation work to raise those issues and concerns? What are the ethical, aesthetic, and literary questions your deformation is meant to raise? How are you interpreting the text through your deformation, and what does interpreting the text this way (as opposed to through more traditional analysis) yield? What does a deformation—your deformation—of a print text tell us about writing in a digital moment? You should directly quote, cite, and engage Samuels & McGann and Sample in your reflection/theory. Think of this piece of writing not just as a paper on the novel that uses some critical material on the side but rather as an entry on behalf of your deformation into the textual conversation among these three thinkers and us, your fellow class members.
- **Present your deformation:** in class.