



Literature & Data

ENGL-UA 735: Readings in Contemporary Literature

MTW 5:15 – 7:25 PM, Bobst LL146

New York University, Summer 2019

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An English Department offering in critical methods and contemporary literature, this course asks, what do we learn when we take literary texts as substrates for studying the practice and ethics of data? We'll focus on 21st-century North American fiction and poetics, especially as they represent the lived experiences of people of color, in order to better understand how the organization of "data" in turn organizes the ways in which we inhabit our nations and the world. This course is concerned with epistemologies rather than tools; while we'll look a bit at digital technologies that facilitate data management, our conversation will foreground the linkages between data structures we encounter daily and long, fraught histories of organizing information as a means of control. Finally, we'll apply our readings in order to consider how literature and its study can enable us to be more ethical, intentional, and just producers and consumers of data. No technical competency is expected.

Objectives

Due to this course's interdisciplinary nature, its learning objectives foreground the relationship between practices of data management and critical engagement with literary texts. This course seeks to:

- 1) provide students with foundational knowledge about data structures and types
- 2) expose students to contemporary debates in data authorship / production, storage, and deployment, especially in the context of data ethics in scholarship and the public sector
- 3) help students contextualize their own encounters with "data" through careful reading of primary and secondary materials that privilege feminist, black, queer, and indigenous methodologies
- 4) empower students to trace linkages between contemporary literature, contemporary imaginaries around "data," and long histories of violence and oppression in and around North America
- 5) support students as they develop the skills and methods to become more thoughtful, intentional, and justice-oriented consumers and producers of information

Texts

While course texts may change depending on the course's cadence and students' interests, we will plan on reading the following books, either in part or whole. You are encouraged to purchase physical copies of the texts (particularly the novels & poetry books), but **all texts will also be supplied in digital format**. In order of anticipated appearance:

'Raw Data' is an Oxymoron, edited by Lisa Gitelman (MIT Press, 2013)

Zong!, M. NourbeSe Philip (Mercury Press, 2008)

Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987)

Behold the Dreamers, Imbolo Mbue (Penguin Random House, 2016)*

Data Feminism, Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein (2019)

Severance, Ling Ma (FSG, 2018)*

Numbered Lives: Life and Death in Quantum Media, Jacqueline Wernimont (MIT Press, 2018)

Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999)

Head Off & Split, Nikky Finney (Northwestern University Press, 2011)*

Algorithms of Oppression, Safiya Noble (NYU Press, 2018)

Open City, Teju Cole (Random House, 2011)*

Short-form readings (e.g., articles and blog posts) will also be available for download from the course site.

* We'll be reading this text in full.

Course Requirements

Attendance, reading and participation (20%)

Summer classes are inherently small, making your attention and participation all the more important. This course is meant to be a collaborative, discussion-driven environment, and I hope you'll arrive ready to engage earnestly and productively. In addition to discussing course readings, we'll spend some time producing digital and physical data visualizations and exploring archival content.

Presentation & guided class discussion (30%)

On each Monday between weeks three (3) and five (5), one student will share with the class her examination of an archival collection of her choice through the lens of the given week's literary text. In other words, you'll be tasked with locating and exploring a historical archive and tracking resonances that elucidate the connections between data structures in the week's reading and those expressed in the historical materials. Your observations will help structure the second half of our class discussion (roughly an hour), which you'll be charged with moderating. Archives should feature material prior to 1900. We'll be modeling this assignment as a class in the second week.

Response activities (15%)

You'll be asked to engage with the material in a structured way twice in the course of the summer session. Activities are due in weeks 2 and 6. See the schedule below for details.

Final "paper" (35%)

In your final paper, you'll put one of the literary texts we've read (or another contemporary text of your choosing) into conversation with a pressing debate or issue in "data." By staging a close, analytic reading of one or two passages from the text, your paper should critique or respond to a question of data modeling, management, and/or deployment. You might choose to respond to a newspaper op-ed on data ethics, deconstruct and suggest alternatives for the metadata schema of an online database, or draft a letter to a city

agency about the structure of the data they've published to their online repository, guided by the implications of the passage(s) you're working with. Papers should be roughly **1500 words**, or 800–1000 words if paired with a visual element.

Policies

Absences:

Regular class attendance is expected; if you are unable to make it to class, please do your best to contact me beforehand. Three or more unexcused absences may result in a failing grade. Unexcused absences describe those due to reasons other than: acute (physical or mental) health concern; religious observance; mandatory, documented university activity; jury duty; other extenuating circumstances, on a case-by-case basis.

Late submissions:

Late assignments will not be accepted; no extensions will be given except in extreme and verifiable circumstances. If you feel you will be unable to meet course requirements, please contact me as soon as possible.

Technology:

You are welcome to read and reference texts and resources via phone, tablet, and/or computer. When we work with digital data visualization, you may be asked to bring a computer to class, if you have one. However, I ask that you grant your colleagues your full attention during discussion; in a small class, fruitful conversation depends on everyone's participation and engagement. If necessary, we'll revisit the technology policy as the course progresses to ensure we're all contributing to a productive, encouraging classroom environment.

Breaks & food:

While I welcome food and drink in my classes, we are subject to the space use guidelines outlined by Bobst Library. Please adhere to any food and drink restrictions posted in the classroom. We will aim to have a break midway through each class session, but you are welcome to step out as necessary (within reason).

Academic integrity:

All students are expected to adhere to [NYU's academic integrity policy](#). By taking this course, you agree to refrain from plagiarism, cheating, and other academic misconduct. While collaboration is encouraged, all work submitted must be your own. In synthesizing and expanding upon others' ideas, be sure to use appropriate citations. Please consult the guidelines for standard citation formats (preferably MLA or Chicago), ensuring that your assignments are internally consistent. If you need assistance with citations, or have any concerns, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Disability & accessibility:

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability or other health consideration that would benefit from accommodations, please consider registering with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities. You can begin an application with the Moses Center at <https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/students-with-disabilities.html>. Please note that the Moses Center will *not* disclose your specific disability to your instructors: we only receive notice of the accommodations for which you have been approved. If you have been granted accommodations but feel they are not being adequately provided, please let me know so I can make any necessary changes.

Community and diversity:

It is my intent that students of diverse backgrounds and perspectives be served well by this course, by me as an instructor, and by the classroom environment that we cultivate together. I hope that we can create a setting in which we are all able to respect and learn from one another. Guidelines for classroom discussion will be drafted collaboratively during the first session and will be posted to the course site; if necessary, we can revisit these

guidelines as the term progresses. As in any group setting, I ask that we be mindful of the space we create for others and take up ourselves. By extension, I ask that you hold me accountable and let me know if anything said or done in the classroom, or in class-related activities outside the classroom, by either myself or another student, is particularly troubling. While discomfort can be conducive to learning, it should never come at the expense of student well-being or an atmosphere of trust.

This course will directly explore questions of race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, and gender. I ask that all participants remain respectful of colleagues' experiences and perspectives, and that we recognize that it's often impossible to separate our experiences of "real life" from the theory and literature that we study. Because the critical power of literature lies precisely in its relevance to the practical, political, and experiential problems we face every day, I encourage you to draw those connections, permitted that your analytic work remains grounded in your key objects of study.

Students have the right to be addressed using the name and pronouns with which they identify.

Language:

NYU and the English Department welcome students from around the country and world. All of the readings for this course will be in English, and strong English proficiency will be assumed. If you require additional English language support, please feel free to reach out.

Land acknowledgment:

I want to acknowledge that we live and work on the traditional land of the Lenape people past and present. The Lenape in what is now New York City were dislocated by the Treaty of Easton in 1758. As we think about the effects of data and the organization of information, I hope that we can keep in mind the ways in which information practices have contributed — and continue to contribute — to the displacement, genocide, and cultural "forgetting" of Native peoples in the Americas.

Schedule of Readings & Assignments

Unit 1: What we talk about when we talk about data

T	May 28	in class	Introductions, classroom guidelines, syllabus review Key terms & intro to data structures “Missing Datasets” by Mimi Onuoha Selection from <i>The Intimacies of Four Continents</i> by Lisa Lowe
W	May 29	in class	Attend “Data & Ethics: In the Public Sector for the Public Good?” Note: Please go straight to the event, beginning at 5:30 p.m. at Hemmerdinger Hall in the Silver Center. Registration available here .
M	June 3	reading	“Data before the Fact” by Daniel Rosenberg, from ‘ <i>Raw Data</i> ’ is an Oxymoron “Critical Questions for Big Data” by danah boyd & Kate Crawford
		in class	Discussion: How is data a function of rhetoric? Where can the practice of “data” intersect with the practice of literary study? What are some of the key critical debates we’ll be thinking about?
		due	Activity #1: Event Response Based on your experience at last Wednesday’s panel on data transparency in the public sector, please write a response of approximately 400 words that considers the following questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What is the word “data” being used to describe in this conversation?2. In what ways can literature and/or literary study help us think about this question, or the other questions posed in the panel? How are you, as a budding scholar of literature, uniquely positioned to respond to questions of data ethics in the public sector? Please bring a printed copy of your response to class.

Unit 2: Tabulation / who what why counts

T	June 4	reading	<i>Zong!</i> by M. NourbeSe Philip “Notanda” (pp. 189–209), “Gregson v. Gilbert” (pp. 210–211), and two poems of your choosing
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	in class	<p>Discussion & in-class exercise:</p> <p>What do the methodology and content of <i>Zong!</i> reveal about tabulation practices and their legacies? In addition to Gregson v. Gilbert, we'll explore <i>Zong!</i> in relation to 18th-century archival material pertaining to New York City history. Be prepared to share and discuss the two poems you've selected.</p> <p>Note: This in-class exercise will provide a model for your independent presentation.</p>
W June 5	reading	<p><i>Borderlands / La Frontera</i> by Gloria Anzaldúa</p> <p>Chapter 1: The Homeland, Aztlán (pp. 23–35) and “Interface” (pp. 170–174)</p>
	in class	<p>Discussion:</p> <p>How does Anzaldúa's work continue or complicate the conversation we've been having about <i>Zong!</i>? What problems or solutions does a borderlands approach to data organization and management present? Returning to the Onuoha piece we read in our first class and ideas about recuperative vs. non-recuperative data research, in what ways do this week's texts offer us a data ethics and/or praxis?</p>
M June 10	reading	<p><i>Behold the Dreamers</i> by Imbolo Mbue</p>
	in class	<p>Discussion & first student presentation:</p> <p>Where do we see “data” at work in <i>Behold the Dreamers</i>? What data structures are being represented, and to what ends? What do we find when we put this text into conversation with a historical archive?</p>
	due	<p>First student presentation</p>
T June 11	reading	<p>“Lehman Bros. used accounting trick amid financial crisis – and earlier” (CSM)</p> <p>Excerpt from “Digital Identity in the Migration & Refugee Context” (D&S)</p>
	in class	<p>Discussion:</p> <p>What are the relationships between inventory / tabulation-driven modes of data modeling and power? Continuing with <i>Behold the Dreamers</i>, we'll examine how data is differentially organized, managed, and retrieved in contexts of (a) migration and (b) capital.</p>
W June 12	reading	<p><i>Data Feminism</i> by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein</p> <p>Chapter 1: Bring Back the Bodies (in draft online)</p>

in class

Discussion:

Using *Borderlands / La Frontera* and *Behold the Dreamers* as our guiding texts, we'll think through questions of embodiment and how bodies are (or aren't) represented in the creation of data. We'll examine "labor" both as it pertains to women's bodies and experiences of childrearing *and* to the contingency of gig economy work in a tech-controlled labor landscape.

M June 17

reading

Severance by Ling Ma

in class

Discussion & second student presentation:

Where do we see "data" at work in *Severance*? What data structures are being represented, and to what ends? What do we find when we put this text into conversation with a historical archive?

due

Second student presentation

T June 18

reading

Numbered Lives: Life and Death in Quantum Media by Jacqueline Wernimont
Chapter 2: Counting the Dead (pp. 19–49, or as much as you can get to)

in class

Discussion:

Bringing Jacqueline Wernimont's monograph into dialogue with *Data Feminism*, we'll ask how the bureaucratic bloat, death / crisis reportage, and tabular technologies represented in *Severance* participate in histories of counting bodies. How does Ling Ma's text scaffold a critical theory with which we can approach news media, accounting, and the spectacles of tragedy in our current moment? How are "body counts" in news headlines part of the same rhetorical mesh we've looked at in our previous literary texts?

Unit 3: Taxonomies / black, feminist, queer, and indigenous critiques

W June 19

reading

Decolonizing Methodologies: Research & Indigenous Peoples by Linda Tuhiwai Smith
"On Being Human" (pp. 25–28), "Research Through Imperial Eyes" (p. 42 through p. 47) and "Colonizing the Disciplines" (pp. 65–68)

in class

Discussion:

We'll launch this new unit with an introduction to data taxonomies and hierarchies. We'll look at examples of semi-structured data that utilize hierarchical / nested formats, typically encoded using JSON or XML and often employed in library catalogs. Then, focusing on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's seminal work and the other texts we've read this week, we'll discuss the ways in which classification schemata have been deployed to enact violence and control populations.

M June 24

reading

Head Off & Split by Nikky Finney

in class

Discussion and third student presentation:
Where do we see “data” at work in *Head Off & Split*? What data structures are being represented, and to what ends? What do we find when we put this text into conversation with a historical archive?

due

Third student presentation

T June 25

reading

“Queering the Catalog” by Emily Drabinski
“Another Word for ‘Illegal Alien’ at the Library of Congress: Contentious” (NYT)

in class

Discussion and in-class exercise:
We’ll return to *Head Off & Split* with library classification systems in mind in order to examine the ways in which taxonomic data forcibly occludes and elides information along racialized and gendered lines. Invoking once more the concepts of recuperative and non-recuperative data research that we established on our first day, we’ll head off into the stacks upstairs to observe the implications of Library of Congress subject headings “IRL.” We’ll ask: What implications do Finney’s poetry and Drabinski’s criticism have for how we model information in cultural study? How can they help us imagine other ways of encoding hierarchical information?

W June 26

reading

Algorithms of Oppression by Safiya Umoja Noble
Introduction: The Power of Algorithms (pp. 1–14)

in class

Discussion:
Part of the power of classificatory schemata lies in their facilitation of information retrieval. How does *Head Off & Split*, or any of the texts we’ve read thus far, represent the very real repercussions of biased modes of retrieving information? We’ll take Safiya Noble’s vital piece of scholarship as a launchpad into contemporary questions of algorithmic equity, including debates around the Algorithmic Accountability Act of 2019. How, if at all, can Finney’s poetry help us understand the role poetics and literature can play in the development of regulatory data policies?

Unit 3: Maps & linkages

M July 1

reading

Open City by Teju Cole

in class

Discussion & in-class exercise:
After a brief primer on some of the structures that can underlie cartographic and networked data, we’ll discuss *Open City* as both a source and theory of data. In the second half of the class, we’ll use the data you’ve generated while

reading to explore the different epistemological possibilities opened up by mapped versus network graphed spatial data. We'll also read an article on "mess" in research data to help us think about how to format and model data we produce or use in our work.

due

Activity #2: Literary Data Set

As you read Teju Cole's *Open City*, keep a record of every geographical location that appears in the first 50 pages, along with its page number. Your catalog of places should be formatted as structured data (e.g., Excel file, Google Sheet, plain-text .csv). Please ensure that you have your file ready and accessible in class; if you have one available, please bring a laptop. Your file should look something like the following (but with lots more entries):

place	page
Columbia University	4
Morningside Heights	12
West 110th St. & Frederick Douglass Blvd.	13
African Burial Ground	13

T July 2

reading

Graphesis by Johanna Drucker

"Visualizing uncertainty and interpretative cartography" (pp. 125-137)

in class

Discussion & in-class exercise:

In this last formal class meeting, we'll spend the first half outside (weather permitting), applying and continuing our conversation on *Open City* by exploring unconventional modes of cartography. Later, we'll wrap up by reflecting on the lessons we've learned about data through a brief excerpt from Johanna Drucker's *Graphesis*, which uses maps as a way into humanistic approaches to data visualization. (We'll also do course evaluations.)

W July 3

No class. I will be available to discuss final papers.
Have a wonderful Fourth of July!

Su July 7

due

Final papers due by 3 p.m.