

# Speculative Reading

For your final essay in 429B, I'm asking you to experiment with a "speculative reading" of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Kindred*, *Mumbo Jumbo*, or *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Your essay should consist of 1000-1500 words (excluding references) in MLA format, submitted to me in print with your name on it, ideally by 31 March but no later than 4 April.

By "speculative reading," I mean an interpretation that actually changes the content of your primary source (i.e., the novel you are interpreting) to consider the consequences of that change. What if the text were written differently? How would we interpret it? To what effects on the significance of the original?

The point is to not only interpret in the style of speculative fiction we read this term but also focus your writing on the particulars of composition—on how fiction is written. From my perspective, this focus anchors critical essays in specific passages of a novel (to avoid covering too much ground in only 1000-1500 words), renders critical practice less intimidating (by letting you alter the original instead of only writing alongside it), affords unique perspectives that you will probably not find in academic journals, and gives you a chance to experiment with critical approaches in a survey course where you haven't had time to conduct much, if any, research with materials beyond the assigned readings. What's more, the procedure of altering a primary source highlights how play is quite serious. While modifying someone's work, you might wish to consider what they intended in the first place (even if you'll never know), why they may have intended it, what liberties you are taking, and how the process of alteration or recontextualization is intertwined with legacies of appropriation and commodification (e.g., consider our discussions about how both *Kindred* and *Mumbo Jumbo* engage questions of history and representation).

With these issues in mind, below are some example techniques for altering a primary text for literary criticism. You might select a sentence or two, or even a paragraph, and then change its:

- **Metaphor:** what if figurative or ironic language became quite literal or boring?
- **Collocation set:** what if a group or paradigm of words (e.g., about landscape, social relations, or history) gave a different, collective impression?
- **Pronouns:** what if, for example, "he" became "she," "it," or "they"?
- **Point of view:** what if, for example, first person became second or third person?
- **Precision or specificity:** what if the details (e.g., names, dates, or places) were rendered abstract or vague?
- **Punctuation:** what if, for example, commas became periods?
- **Mood:** what if, for example, the subjunctive or conditional became the indicative or imperative?

During pre-writing or drafting, you may wish to consider these steps toward interpretation:

- Once you've selected a novel, identify a passage that you consider especially important to its interpretation. Perhaps it's central to the style, the plot, or the assumptions the novel makes. Take a minute to write why you think it's so important.
- Strategically manipulate (think "find and replace" in a word processor) that passage using one of the above techniques or a technique you've created. The important thing is that the technique is clear. You should be able to explain exactly what it does to the original.
- Interpret the altered passage as if it were the original. "Insert" it into the novel, move back five or so pages, and then proceed to read ten or so pages of the text in its new state, with your changes inserted. This will give you a sense of context (i.e., how your altered sentence(s) or paragraph read in relation to the paragraphs before and after them).
- Articulate the consequences of altering the passage, with attention to the differences between the original and its alteration. How did the style change? How did the plot change? How do other aspects of signification change? How does the change highlight what makes the original interesting or persuasive in the first place?

- Communicate the relevance of your speculative reading to others interested in the fiction at hand (e.g., tell us what your alteration says about the novel's aesthetics and/or politics, or what you deem important about the novel).

As you write, please don't feel the need to compare your selected novel with other novels in 429B. You don't need to reference existing scholarship on your novel, either. Of course, comparing novels and building upon existing scholarship are important to literary criticism; however, you weren't given time in this survey to conduct such research. Also, you only have 1000-1500 words, which should focus on specific dimensions of the text at hand.

Let me know what questions or concerns you have. Feel free to run ideas by me, too.