Digitally Mapping 20th-Century and Contemporary U.S. Literature
A Course in Speculative New Media
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In this course we will survey 20th-century and contemporary U.S. literature through speculative new media practices. To put the guiding question of this course simply and plainly: How might the Internet inform, affect, and shape the way we might learn about—and understand—modern and contemporary U.S. literature? The Internet, then, will serve as both a new media apparatus and anthology through which we will study this particular period and geographic range of literature—and we will explore the Internet's many speculative ways of producing and administering literary knowledge. I am using the word *speculative* to connote the various levels of risk, uncertainty, and controlled randomness that are inherent in acts of Internet navigation.

Instead of reading books, in this class we will read all texts electronically through the medium of the Internet, utilizing Google Books, Project Gutenberg, Amazon, and other miscellaneous online sources. (Where there are fissures or erasures, we will supplement accordingly—and discuss necessary material augmentations of the virtual world.) For this reason, our course will be comprised of an indeterminate constellation of texts: we will make up the readings for this course as we go, as a way to explore (if somewhat artificially) the possibility for the Internet to assemble a coherent survey course—if only visible in retrospect. Our aim in this course will be twofold: 1) to learn the canonical literary movements and themes of 20th-century U.S. culture, and 2) to engage and grapple with acts of literature in online contexts, in their presentation (form), their reception (interactive commentary), and their multimedia potentialities (aesthetics and spectacle value). We will also work to understand how history is told, when historical context is elided, and the place of temporality in a textual medium that neatly relegates "history" to its own virtual reservoir that can be emptied instantaneously.

This is an ambitious course, in that in addition to learning a series of texts and trends, we are taking a meta-critical approach to the study of what is commonly if problematically called "American literature." In other words, we are not merely setting out to understand important titles and famous authors—rather, we will struggle to grasp the very interpretive fabric through which one might access and learn about the nebulous, shifting category that is a century of literature in the United States from the perspective of the early 21st-century.

I wish to suspend the ordinary syllabus model of course readings in order to allow for the maximum dynamism in terms of charting a fragmented textual landscape with an eye toward something like coherent closure toward the end of the term. For instance, we might begin with the Wikipedia entry on "American Literature" and trace its network of texts and investigate its gaps and disconnects. Thus, rather than rely on books to articulate discrete fields, we will perform the active (if utterly banal) hypertextuality of online study in order to learn about—and critique—a skein of interactive, flexible topics around a nominally stable subject.

Throughout the course, we will ask questions concerning our speculative new media approach to a literary survey, such as: What does it mean to cull a list of texts from the Internet? (And where do we stop?) How do we decide what count as 'primary' and 'secondary' texts in a realm in which every text is, first and foremost, *virtual*? When do

images help with—and when do images distract from—reading literature? How might we account for (and write about) our online readings? How does one map an online search? How do computer screens allow for—or at times resist—careful reading practices? Might the common call for "close reading" be exchanged for what Nietzsche called "slow reading"? Can the Internet adequately 'map' the terrain of U.S. literature? How are chronologies constructed and represented online? (How is time for literature made online?) How might hyperlinks result in the unexpected annihilation of intertextuality?

Here are some experiments that I have in mind, with corresponding texts:

Kate Chopin's "Story of an Hour" and the use of narrative to pass time, versus being online and waiting (for disaster).

Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*: How does an iTunes ambient music play-list electronically enact the sort of objects/rooms/food montage that Stein explores through sheer words?

Ernest Hemingway's "After the Storm" to Hurricane Katrina: stream of consciousness fiction words versus Google Image search.

F. Scott Fitzgerald: "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," and the work of charting intersecting but opposite vectors of history and technology.

We could discuss the form of Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" on the page, and then turn to analyze the blandly flashy online miasma around this poem's electronic existence.

We will consider H.D.'s "Oread" on a blank white screen, and then use the Internet to analyze how vorticism is enhanced—or muted—around this poem's digital existence.

Flannery O'Connor and the cultural mythologies of American road trips: how long does it take to find a horrific true story that syncs up with "A Good Man is Hard to Find"?

We might take an hour in class to discuss the urban ecology of Lorna Dee Cervantes's "Freeway 280" as a poem, and then turn to the Internet to map the cultural geography of this text. (How do we translate flora and concrete into language and human migrations?)

We will take one of Annie Proulx's Wyoming stories on the page, and then embark on an Internet hunt to analyze how specific moments of the narrative allow digital mapping.

Lucy Corin's "My Favorite Dentist" as commentary on the Washington D.C. snipers. Can we discover real electronic intersections of the liberal subject position, intimate narration, and media saturation? How does fiction comment on such an arrangement?