



Experimental Writing:
“Weird Speculations”

Syllabus & Calendar

LTWR 115 Spring 2012

Instructor: Anna Joy Springer

Class _____

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Just as once Persian wizards read a sacred text on the bodies of tigers, I had, from that morning, entered into an exalted state from which I was never to entirely recover, expecting, no, demanding. Enchantment each time I opened a book.

Rikki Ducornet, *The Monstrous and the Marvelous*

And of course I haven't told you what I am trying to tell you about. No, not at all. I have just given you an example of it.

Samuel Delany, *Tales of Neveryon*

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

If I had written a work of fiction in 1988 speculating what the presidential election of 2008 might look like, and I wrote about the presidential and vice-presidential candidates who are actually running now, my story would have seemed like a crazy fantastical tale. If I had written the story in a language like text message short-hand, it would have seemed like a crazy experimental fantastical tale. If you read that old short story now, it might seem mundane and dated or scarily prophetic. If you read it in twenty years again, it might seem like romantic nostalgia. If I wrote it as a vampire story, a nuclear apocalypse, or as a fable with talking animal helpers, it would still fit into the category we now call “Speculative Fiction.” If I had made up my own language that people still had to learn as they read, the piece would be called “Experimental Speculative Writing,” which is a category that actually doesn’t exist except for the purposes of this class. We could just as well call it Weird Writing about the Weird. We could call it Writing Lovely Monstrosities or Monsterizing Lovely Writing.

The term “Speculative Fiction” is a newer term that covers many popular genres of literature – horror, fantasy, fabulism, futurist, utopian/dystopian, and historical fiction. These genres have been, until recently, considered “paraliteratures,” or lesser literatures. In a similar way “experimental writing” (which is a made-up term that doesn’t mean anything specific) is often maligned. Writing called “experimental” has few venues for publication, speculative writing has gained more respectability during the past 30 years of intensely rapid technological, environmental, and social change. The term Speculative Writing has come to resonate with progressive political and philosophical undertones. Speculative writers tend deal with large social problems, rather than individualistic ones. Even at it’s most far-out, speculative writing is meant to coerce readers to perceive acutely present-day social problems and to inspire a problem-solving mentality. Speculative fiction could be called “allegorical political fiction.”

Speculative literature requires writers to create works of conjecture rather than knowledge – to think experimentally – to imagine futuristic, fantastical, and even supernatural worlds and situations. But weird speculations pay equal attention to the ways language, structure, page performance, and method (of writing)

perform the ideas we're staging in our stories. While the books you'll read are written in prose form, you may also be reading and creating poetry, plays, and graphic texts.

Course Texts:

The Evolutionary Revolution by Lily Hoang

The Descent of Alette by Alice Notley

Event Factory by Renee Gladman

Riddley Walker by Russell Hoban

The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Mr. Punch by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean

GRADING:

Writing To Turn In :

Responses to readings 40% of Grade (5 pts. each; worth 2 points if late): Each week of the quarter you must complete an artistic or critical Response to the readings. To be accepted, they must come in during the week we are discussing the particular text. Please know that I will accept no more than two of these in a given week, so if you're late on more than one, your grade will be drastically reduced. You must do at least 2 of each type.

Literary Artistic Responses During the first part of the quarter, you have the option of turning in **literary writing** in response to the course texts. These are short **2-3 page** works that allow you to experiment based on an experiment you think the writer of a course text is conducting or based on the theories and comments of the accompanying essays. At the end of this piece please describe in a couple sentences your own experiment and how it relates to the formal or thought experiment you think the author of the published work was conducting.

OR

Critical Responses. You may also write a response to the week's literature and corresponding essay. Here I am looking to see that you **comprehend** the critical work and the literary work (you should look them up online or in the library to get a sense of context and thoughts about the works rather than just going on opinion and first impressions. Please also discuss how you might apply these understandings to your own writing experiments. Again, 2-3 pps.

WHAT TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOUR ARTISTIC RESPONSES AND TO INCLUDE IN THE CRITICAL RESPONSE.

1. **SUMMARY:** Summarize the plot or story or sequence of ideas – describe succinctly who, what, when, where, and why, so that someone who hasn't read the story sort of gets what's going on within the world of the piece. **AND/OR - Please describe one or two main points of the essay you're discussing in relation to a course text.**
2. **STYLE:** Describe the delivery of the piece, its style, voice, rhythm, genre, literary devices, architecture, figurative language, relationship to literary schools, etc. Describe also anything you discover in researching it about why its style or use of literary artistic techniques are the way they are. What format does it take, what's its narrative structure or poetic form, what sorts of diction and syntax does it deploy, are there lots of visual details or is it mostly blind ideas, etc. Just give a summary of what you notice about its style and structural aspects right away, and then what you understood after letting the piece sit with you for awhile and reading about it.

3. **MEANING:** Say what you think is the heart of the piece – a MAGIC IDEA or THE PHILOSOPHY or THE INNEFABLE TRUTH or THE BIG QUESTION or, if you must, “THE THEME” or “THESIS”- what the piece says or asks about the world outside of the piece (about people, about literature, about thinking, about being, about story, about science, about justice, about war, about love) – you get what I mean.
4. Home in on a.) **one aspect** of the STYLE and b.) one aspect of the STORY to support your theory about what the MEANING of the piece is. Everyone may come up with different “meanings,” and these have nothing to do with authorial intention – they have to do with reader analysis.
5. Please also describe the relationship between a point in the corresponding essay and the aspect of the literature that interests you. You may agree, disagree, have different ideas, but please ground your arguments in the text and, if necessary for you to understand the text, outside research. You may also or instead discuss both works in relation to something you are writing, want to write, or have already written.

Reading Quizzes – 20% Four 5-point quizzes asking general information about the books and essays to help you stay on top of reading assignments.

Final Project – 10% A collection of 3 of your favorite prompts with an introduction on the kinds of experiments and speculations you are making with your writing at this time, and why. You must compare your work to the experiments made by authors we have read, including those in your peer group, plus theoretical concerns of essayists.

Interaction & Attendance – 30% of your final grade – This category can make the difference between an A- & C+ grade. Points given for preparation and thoughtful comment on course texts and peer projects in small group. I will collect comments from peer group members on the kind of feedback you give and the depth of your analysis and generosity with your group’s work. Points reduced for lack of preparation or editorial advice-giving in Project Attention. Even if you are shy, please be willing to share your thoughts in class, and if you are garrulous, please be sensitive so that everyone gets the opportunity to interact.

Also, because this course relies heavily on student-run presentations and peer interaction, **if you miss more than TWO classes, for any reason at all, you will not receive a passing grade.**

CALENDAR

Week 1. Weird Tales

4/2 – Introduction, syllabus, Read instructions on Project Attention – discuss do we read Project Attention Piece before or just read them in group, oldschool workshop style.

*Read *Mr. Punch* by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean; come up with potential prompts. Discuss *Mr. Punch* – childhood memory, trauma writing as fantastical writing.

Homework (you do this to prep for Week 2. Homework is always to be done in preparation for following Monday).

*Read “Art as Technique” by Viktor Shklovsky: <http://www.vahidnab.com/defam.htm>

*Read first half of *Riddley Walker* by Russel Hobin

Defamiliarization Artistic Prompt #1: Considering *Mr. Punch* and ostreneneye or defamiliarization as described by Shklovsky in “Art as Technique,” create a piece of literature about a moment of betrayal or unpleasant awakening using techniques of defamiliarization – either through allegory or a skewing of the language or pacing, etc.

Week 2. A Better Wor(l)d?

4/9 – Talk Shklovsky “Art as Technique” and Modernist Avant Garde Project; Read Prompts; Determine Project Attention small groups and dates. Describe palimpsest.

Homework

*Finish reading *Riddley Walker*

***Read:** The St. Eustace Legend as Palimpsest in Hoban's "Riddley Walker" Author(s): Martin L. Warren Reviewed work(s): Source: Science Fiction Studies, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Mar., 2007), pp. 158-163 Published by: [SF-TH Inc](#); Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4241511>

Riddley Walker Artistic Prompt #1: Write a very short piece in an English-related language that a group from a future or parallel world speaks in, but make it legible to us now – the language should evolve from the circumstances and the concerns of the people – can be use a form of slang or dialect from a subculture from a different world. If you use TextMessage language, make sure to really go out on a limb rather than using LOL, etc.

***Riddley Walker Prompt #2:** Find legend – Legend of King Arthur; Legend of Billy the Kid; Legend of Joan of Arc. Buddha. President Nixon, someone like that. Make Palimpsest. Misinterpret and skew it to fit current narrative needs/ideas. Over write it again to tell the newly sense-making story, within a context.

Week 3. Puppet Show Analysis

4/16 Riddley Walker and palimpsest discussion with readings of Riddley Walker prompts. Get in Small Groups A-E – determine how to get work to each other in advance or to just bring copies to next class. Discuss Project Attention vs. conventional workshop methodology.

Homework

*Begin to read *The Descent of Alette* by Alice Notley

*Read Essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” by Helene Cixous – take notes and look this one up online for guidance, bc it’s dated, and of its time, but still interesting – you need to be able to read it through a historical lens, but also perhaps apply some of its concepts to state of writing today.

***Reading Response - Literary Prompt:** Create a literary arts prompt based on Cixous’ call to “write the body”. What is the body, now that we can communicate with people on the other side of the world at any time? What is the body, now that we can alter the appearance of our gender or age? How do you know where the body ends and the rest of the world begins? What literary experience can you create that will give you or your reader an experience of the “voice” of the body? What’s the difference between “The Body” and your actual body? Or, as always, you may choose to do a more essay-like critical response.

Week 4. Body and Breath

4/23 – Writing the body: Discuss “Laugh of the Medusa” by reading and discussing reading responses. Body, breath, and Metta writing exercise. Project Attention Small Groups – AJ with **A Group**.

Homework

*Finish reading *The Descent of Alette*

*Read Review: Alice Notley's Epic Entry: "An Ecstasy of Finding Another Way of Being" Author(s): Susan McCabe Reviewed work(s): Source: The Antioch Review, Vol. 56, No. 3 – on JSTOR

***Descent of Alette Prompt** - Myths of rebirth – find a myth of death and rebirth. Rewrite it using some sort of punctuation or other coding device to indicate breath, rhythm, pacing, spacing, or some other temporal-spatial architecture.

***Alternative Descent of Alette Prompt**– Experimental Memoir - mythologize a time you pretty much died and went to hell (in your heart or spirit or mind) in order to get stronger or learn compassion – 1-3 pages. Now, rewrite by **doing some new grammatical or punctuation tactic or syntactical experiment that dramatizes the utter hellishness of this experience**. It could end up being a list. Or a page of punctuation. Describe, at the end your experiment and its relationship to this week’s texts.

Week 5. Myths of Descent

4/30 Discuss *Descent of Alette*. Project Attention Small Groups – AJ with **B Group**.

Homework

*Read essay by Margaret Atwood “Dire Cartographies” – on TED

*Read *The Event Factory* by Renee Gladman

Recommended: read interview by her book's publisher on experimental writing now:

<http://htmlgiant.com/random/what-is-experimental-literature-five-questions-danielle-dutton/>

Prompt: Write story, poem, or other literature in the form a travel journal to an unknown place, off the map.

Perhaps make a map for it. Maybe it's not in regular dimensions of time and space? Maybe it's a conceptual space/place. Are there people? How does one communicate? How do you get there? How do you get away? Etc.

Week 6. Some(w)here Else

5/7 *The Event Factory* and “Dire Cartographies” discussion. Defamiliarized Ethnography. Project Attention Small Groups – AJ with C Group.

Homework

*Read “The Monstrous and the Marvelous” by Rikki Ducornet

*look at “Man After Man” images by Dougal Dixon <http://monsterbrains.blogspot.com/2010/12/dougal-dixon-man-after-man-1990.html>

* **Monstrous and Marvelous Prompt:** Write a story (can be in verse form) with a strange scientific creature, being, or biological material (such as blind glowing fish or cancer cell) as the viewpoint character. Can also be your character from the monster exercise. Have it describe its world, its fears and hopes, its memories, and its vision of its future or the end of its world in its voice. Or do something else with it, as main character/ narrator. Avoid a cartoonish voice or overly obvious humor. (**Can use refrains, new language, figurative language, or multiple voices**) Treat this character as a **very interesting and complicated** creature. Revise to under 3 pps. - very tight, good flow, precise, lovely-monstrous.

Week 7 Cabinets of Curiosity and the Power in Archiving Oddities.

5/14 Discuss Monstrous and Marvelous Literature; look at cabinets of curiosity – writing exercise. Project Attention Small Groups – AJ with D Group.

Homework

*Read *The Evolutionary Revolution* by Lily Hoang

* **Evolutionary Revolution Prompt** :“Tiny pieces” writing assignment: create a story that is made up of tiny pieces or braided chapters, or collaged parts, imagining that there is a system of roots or a forcefield under the surface of the entire story, seen or unseen but connecting these pieces somehow, according to some new kind of logic. Undermine old kinds of narrative and characterological logic.

Week 8. Fabulism

5/21 Talk on Fabulism and the Grotesque. AJ to read a “forest” from her book *Girlesque?* Project Attention – AJ with E Group

Homework- Gather, revise, and write critically of your collected works for your final portfolio. Revise your favorite piece down to **1 page super-reduction**. Write comments on each member of your small group's participation in group including skills with insightful analysis of your piece and ability to relate it to the essays and books and issues we are discussing in this class, versus just being able to give unfounded opinions.

Week 9 – Break

5/28 Memorial Day – no classes

Week 10 – Turn in revised final portfolio. Reading of 1-page reduction revisions. Turn in commentaries on skills participation of members of your Project Attention Group.

6/4 Pair reading of final projects with editorial feedback and potential experiments allowed.