Basic information

Date and time: Thursdays 2:00 to 4:45 p.m.
Location: Manning 303

Instructor information

Instructor: Melanie Feinberg
E-mail: mfeinber@unc.edu
Office: Manning 024
Student hours: Tuesdays 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. (in the office) or by appointment via Zoom

Introduction

This course approaches criticism as a practice: as a way to describe the expressive and functional qualities of human artifacts. Often, this critical practice involves the interpretive analysis (or "reading") of selected works with reference to the historical traditions from which those works emanated, using analytic vocabularies developed within those traditions. For instance, film critics may look at the "shot"—a continuous segment of film as captured from a single camera—and the "cut"—transitions from one shot to another—as one mechanism to understand how a film achieves particular artistic effects. When it comes to data, however, similar analytic vocabularies are not ready to hand. In this course, we will attempt to derive such an analytic vocabulary, so that we might "read" data with both power and precision. Together, we will attempt to understand what data criticism involves and how to do it.

Learning objectives

At the end of this course, you will be able to:
- Articulate the function and value of criticism, and situate criticism in relation to associated concepts such as "evaluation" and "theory."
- Apply techniques of critical interpretation to data.
- Envision a comprehensive practice of data criticism: what it involves, how it might be done, who does it, to what end.
- Identify and describe unanswered questions and research gaps related to the practice of data criticism.
- Engage in substantive discussions of wide-ranging scholarly material.
- Propose, pursue, and complete an independent project that constitutes an example of data criticism or argues for an approach to it.

Course structure

This is an in-person course, meeting once a week. It is a seminar-style class: a small group that explores a topic together. Our class sessions will consist of in-depth discussion of weekly readings, supplemented with practical exercises in critical interpretation.

For each class, you will arrive prepared to talk about the week's readings. For some classes, also, you will be asked to complete preparatory data work in advance, for us to discuss together.

This class will use the Canvas learning management system. Each week's readings and other materials will be available via its own module in Canvas.

The Semester Calendar (below) provides an overview of each week.

Requirements

To pass the course, you must:
- Complete an independent seminar project.
- Co-faciliate the discussion of readings for one class session.
- Satisfy participation requirements.

Seminar project

In the project, you will synthesize what we've learned in the seminar and apply it towards the creation of your own original work.

Some options for the project include:
1. *An example of data criticism.* Perform a critical reading of
   a. A small dataset or excerpt of a dataset.
   b. A component of data infrastructure (such as a controlled vocabulary of potential data values).
2. *An approach to data criticism.* Argue for what data criticism should be: its object and methods, what kind of expertise it requires, who should do it, its audience and significance, and so on.
3. *A critical intervention.* Design or redesign a dataset or component of data infrastructure as a mode of inquiry into what data can, should, or might be.

The form and substance of the project is flexible based on your goals and interests.

Complete instructions and success criteria will be available in Canvas.

Project milestones
In Week 8, we will discuss preliminary project ideas in class. Everyone will have up to 10 minutes to share initial brainstorming and invite suggestions from the seminar. (This will be very informal! It is just an opportunity to get you started thinking about what you'd like to do.)

In Week 9, you will submit a 1-2 paragraph project proposal—again, very informal! This is simply a way to get written feedback from me on your initial ideas.

Our class time in Weeks 13, 14, and 15 will feature 20-minute interim progress reports on your projects, where you will share your thinking so far and invite the seminar to help you in any way that would best facilitate your progress. Once again, this will be very informal—sharing with interested peers, not a "presentation."

Discussion facilitation

Pairs of students will lead the discussion of readings in Weeks 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12. You'll sign up for a facilitation slot in Week 3.

This is meant to be empowering, not stressful! The idea is to give everyone an opportunity to shape the direction of our conversation and to feel invested in the course.

We'll talk in class about facilitation strategies.

Participation

Attendance, preparation, and active engagement are necessary for a successful seminar.

Participation requirements
- Attend class regularly.
- Complete readings and any other preparatory work before class.

- Strive to say at least one thing per class session.
- Contribute actively to discussions:
  - Initiate conversations.
  - Volunteer your thoughts, feelings, impressions, and examples.
  - Where appropriate, support your opinions and claims with evidence.
  - Speak up when you are confused or uncertain.
  - Retain focus on matters germane to the course.
  - Maintain confidence that your contributions are valuable, no matter your background or level of previous knowledge or expertise.
  - If you refer to something that we have not read in the seminar, be sure to explain and contextualize your reference. Do not assume that anyone else knows what you are talking about.
- Listen carefully and respond thoughtfully.
  - Maintain respect and compassion for your classmates.
  - Demonstrate that you value others' contributions.
  - If someone else's perspective is different from yours, attempt to understand it rather than dismiss it.
  - Disagree constructively.
  - Be attentive to the flow of a conversation and help to manage transitions from one topic to another.
- Monitor group dynamics, and adopt the Step Up/Step Back principle:
  - *Step back* if you've been talking more than your share.
  - *Step up* if you haven't been contributing as much.

Remember: the goal of a seminar is to learn through discussion. Don't be afraid to speak because you don't have it all figured out! We're all learning together. Also remember: describing what you **don't** understand is an **excellent** form of participation.

Attendance requirements
Everyone is entitled to one unexcused absence per semester.

If you need to be absent from class and you haven't already used your unexcused absence, you don't need to inform me or do anything at all.

If you need to be absent from class and you have already used your unexcused absence, you will need to inform me of the reason for your absence via e-mail (before the absence if possible). Examples of acceptable reasons include:
- Ill health (physical or mental).
- Family emergencies.
- Accidents and unanticipated disasters (your apartment floods, your car is stolen, etc).
- Religious holidays.

Assessment

During Week 6 and Week 13, you will review your own participation by providing a concise self-assessment of your performance, including a set of goals to achieve in the next section of the course. I will respond to these self-assessments with brief written feedback.

You'll also receive short written feedback after your discussion facilitation.

Semester projects will likewise receive written comments. My review of the project will focus on the documented criteria for success (available in the Assignments area of Canvas).

Should a project be incomplete or significantly misaligned with the documented criteria, you will be invited to revise and resubmit the project. (What I'm saying here is merely that, should there be some misunderstanding where what you submit isn't what I consider to be passable work, I'll tell you what the problem is and ask you to fix it.)

Grading

All graduate students who complete the three requirements will receive a P. (Undergraduates will need to consult with me.)

Due dates

Participation assessments	*Due date*
Participation interim assessment #1	**Thursday, February 15**
Participation interim assessment #2	**Thursday, April 4**

Seminar project milestones	*Due date*
Share project ideas in class	**Thursday, February 29**
Submit written project proposal	**Thursday, March 7**
Interim project discussion in class	**April 11, 18, or 25 (signups in class)**
Seminar project	**Friday, May 3, at noon** (per UNC policy, projects are due at the date and time of the scheduled final exam)

All assignments should be submitted as a PDF document via Canvas.

Late work

There are no penalties for late work. However, because UNC has strict deadlines for final grade submission, late seminar projects may necessitate that you receive an IN (Incomplete) grade.

Semester Calendar

This calendar is subject to modification as the semester proceeds.

All readings and preparatory data work are to be completed before that week's class.

All readings will be available in Canvas.

Week 1, January 11 *Introduction—a critical imaginary*	
Readings • Syllabus	
Week 2, January 18 *What is criticism? Overview*	
Readings • Scott, 2016 (p. 1-42, 167-268) • A few reviews by Scott and others	*Preparatory data work* • What is this dataset describing?
Week 3. January 25 *What is data?*	
Readings • Furner, 2016 • Drucker, 2011 • Rosenberg, 2013 • Martin and Lynch, 2009	*Preparatory data work* • Describe 5-10 everyday things in a spreadsheet.
Week 4, February 1 *What is criticism? Example 1: art*	
Readings and video • Houston, 2013 (p. 1-22, 82-148) • Esplund, 2018 (section 1, p. 21-105) • Berger, 1972 (two 30-minute episodes)	*Preparatory data work* • Describe a dataset's "internal evidence."
Week 5, February 8 *What is criticism? Example 2: wine*	
Readings and video • Shapin, 2012 • Lanchester, 2008 • Kramer, 2009 • Noble et al, 1987 • Robinson, 1996 (one 26-minute episode)	*Preparatory data work* • Describe and interpret a dataset.
Week 6, February 15 *What is criticism? Example 3: human-computer interaction*	
Readings • Bardzell, 2011 • Lowgren and Stolterman, 2004 (p. 15-42)	*Preparatory data work* • Describe and interpret two datasets created by your classmates

Week 7, February 22 *Techniques: close reading*	
Readings • Smith, 2016 • Poirier, 2021 • Wickett, 2022 • Loukissas, 2017	*Preparatory data work* • Examine the DPLA (based on Loukissas, 2017)
Week 8, February 29 *Student project ideas*	
Week 9, March 7 *Techniques: "theory"-informed reading*	
A theoretically informed reading of an element of data infrastructure: • Delgado and Stefancic, 2017 (p. 1-43) • Furner, 2007 • Beall, 2009 *A theoretically informed definition of a data object:* • Lawrence, 2021	*Preparatory data work* • Use Lawrence's understanding of diverse books to describe and interpret the Diverse Book Finder
Week 10, March 14	
Spring break	
Week 11, March 21 *Techniques: critical design*	
Readings about critical design in human-computer interaction • Bardzell and Bardzell, 2013 • Bardzell, Bardzell, and Stolterman, 2014 *Examples of data-oriented critical design projects (read at least one)* • Desjardins and Biggs, 2022 • Tsaknaki et al, 2022 • Clarke and Schoonmaker, 2020 • Fox et al, 2019	
Week 12, March 28	
University well-being day; no classes scheduled	
Week 13, April 4 *Techniques: critical technical discourse analysis*	
An example of the technique and its more general explication • Brock, 2012 • Brock, 2018 *Background readings* • Day, 2007 • Gates, 1988 (introduction) • Agre, 1997	

Week 14, April 11 *Provocations and inspirations/workshopping projects 1*	
Readings • Latour, 2004	
Week 15, April 18 *Provocations and inspirations/workshopping projects 2*	
Readings • Love, 2013	
Week 16, April 25 *Provocations and inspirations/workshopping projects 3*	
Readings • McKittrick, 2021 (p. 1-34, 168-185)	

Course policies

COVID-19 and mask use
As specified by current UNC community standards, everyone at UNC is encouraged to be fully vaccinated and to receive any eligible boosters.

Mask use is optional in university buildings.

Please do not come to class if you are sick. Any illness is always an excused absence. Although this class does not offer a remote option, class materials will be posted to Canvas so that you will have access to them, even if you are ill.

Respectful class environment
Learning requires an atmosphere of respect, care, and empathy for each other. This does not mean that we can't disagree; understanding the nature of our disagreements can help us all grow. **But disrespect for any person or their identity will not be tolerated.**

Asking for help
Should you encounter barriers to your learning—whether it's something that I'm doing or not doing, or challenges in your personal circumstances—I am here to help. Please set up an appointment so that we can work together towards your success.

It is normal to feel confused or lost sometimes! **Asking for help is not a sign of weakness or failure.**

No busy work
No one wants to do boring things for no reason, including me! From my perspective, everything that we do in this class has a purpose that requires thinking. If anything seems like busy work, I probably haven't articulated the purpose well. Be sure to ask for help, so that I can better explain what the task is supposed to achieve.

Instructor communication
For specific, concrete questions, e-mail is the most reliable means of contact for me. If you do not receive a response after a few days, please follow up. It is always helpful if your e-mail includes a targeted subject line that begins with "INLS 776."

For more complicated questions or help, come to student hours (no appointment necessary) or make an appointment to talk with me at a different time.

You are welcome to call me by my first name ("Melanie"). However, you may also use "Dr. Feinberg" or "Professor Feinberg" if that is more comfortable for you.

Student hours
During student hours, I am available to talk with students about anything, without an appointment.

You can use student hours to ask questions, seek help, consult about project work, obtain more information about course topics, or just say hello. You're not bothering me if you attend student hours! I've dedicated this time to talk with students.

During student hours, my office door will be open; simply come in! (If I'm talking with someone else, make sure that I know you're outside waiting.)

Inclusive learning and accessibility

I want everyone to do well in this class. If there are aspects of this course that prevent you from learning or exclude you, please let me know. We'll work together on strategies to meet your needs and satisfy the requirements of the course.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill facilitates the implementation of reasonable accommodations, including resources and services, for students with disabilities, chronic medical conditions, a temporary disability or pregnancy complications resulting in barriers to fully accessing University courses, programs and activities.

Accommodations are determined through the Office of Accessibility Resources and Service (ARS) for individuals with documented qualifying disabilities in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. See the ARS Web site (ars.unc.edu) for details.

Mental health resources
All students have access to counseling and other resources through Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). CAPS is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body through timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services, whether for short or long-term needs. Go to caps.unc.edu or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health Services building.

If you are concerned about a fellow student's wellbeing, one option is to consult the Dean of Students: https://dos.unc.edu/urgent-concerns/

Basic needs
If you are navigating financial, health, or housing challenges that may have an impact on your ability to thrive at UNC, one resource is the Dean of Students, which also oversees the Dean's Emergency Fund: https://dos.unc.edu/student-support/student-emergency-funds/

If you are struggling with food insecurity, SILS has a food pantry in the student lounge on the second floor of Manning Hall; feel free to take what you need (or donate items for others). Carolina Cupboard is another on-campus food pantry: http://carolinacupboard.web.unc.edu/

Academic integrity
The UNC Honor Code states that:

It shall be the responsibility of every student enrolled at the University of North Carolina to support the principles of academic integrity and to refrain from all forms of academic dishonesty...

This includes prohibitions against the following:
- Plagiarism.
- Falsification, fabrication, or misrepresentation of data or citations.
- Unauthorized assistance or collaboration.
- Cheating.

All scholarship builds on previous work, and all scholarship is a form of collaboration, even when working independently. Incorporating the work of others, and collaborating with colleagues, is welcomed in academic work. However, the honor code clarifies that you must always acknowledge when you make use of the ideas, words, or assistance of others in your work. This is typically accomplished through practices of reference, quotation, and citation.

If you are not certain what constitutes proper procedures for acknowledging the work of others, please ask the instructor for assistance. It is your responsibility to ensure that the honor code is appropriately followed. (The UNC Office of Student Conduct provides a variety of honor code resources.)

The UNC Libraries has online tutorials on citation practices and plagiarism that you might find helpful.

Honor code violations can result in serious penalties, such as failing the course.

Use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT
You *may* use generative AI tools as a study aid, but you should be very careful regarding the responses that you might receive. ChatGPT, for instance, is quite apt to provide inaccurate or misleading information if you were to ask it, say, to summarize the findings and significance of the Cranfield tests. These responses typically sound quite reasonable, even when they are absolutely wrong. So beware!

In terms of assigned written work, you must submit a disclosure statement that documents *all* the different ways that you used generative AI tools. As part of your documentation, you should include links to *all* the conversations that you may have had with chat-based tools.

Additionally, if you
- Incorporate direct quotations from an AI tool
- Make use of ideas that an AI tool conveyed to you

you need to cite that material in the text of your essay, just as you would cite any other outside source.

Failure to abide by these rules will be considered a violation of the UNC Honor Code.

Bibliography

Phil Agre. 1997. Toward a critical technical practice: Lessons learned in trying to reform AI. In *Social science, technical systems, and cooperative work: Beyond the great divide.* Geoffrey Bowker, Susan Leigh Star, William Turner, and Les Gasser, eds. (pp. 131–157). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. (Available at: https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/agre/critical.html)

Jeffrey Bardzell. 2011. Interaction criticism: An introduction to the practice. *Interacting with Computers* 23(6): 604–621.

Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell. 2013. What is "critical" about critical design? In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '13)*, 3297–3306.

Jeffrey Bardzell, Shaowen Bardzell, and Erik Stolterman. 2014. Reading critical designs: supporting reasoned interpretations of critical design. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '14).* 1951–1960.

Julianne Beall. 2009. Racially mixed people, DDC Table 5 Ethnic and National Groups, and MARC 21 Bibliographic Format Field 083. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 47(7): 657-670.

Andre Brock. 2018. Critical technical discourse analysis. *New Media and Society* 20(3): 1012-1030.

Andre Brock. 2012. From the blackhand side: Twitter as a cultural conversation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56(4): 529–549.

Rachel Ivy Clarke and Sayward Schoonmaker. 2020. The Critical Catalog: Library Information Systems, Tricksterism, and Social Justice. *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems,* 1–13.

Ron Day. 2007. Kling and the "critical": social informatics and critical informatics. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 58(4): 575–582.

Rafael Delgado and Jean Stefancic. 2017. *Critical race theory: an introduction.* 3rd ed. New York: New York University Press.

Audrey Desjardins and Heidi R. Biggs. 2021. Data epics: embarking on literary journeys of home Internet of Things data. *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '21).* https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3445241

Johanna Drucker. 2011. Humanities approaches to graphical display. *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 5(1). Available at: http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/5/1/000091/000091.html

Lance Esplund. 2018. *The art of looking: How to read modern and contemporary art.* New York: Basic Books.

Sarah Fox, Noura Howell, Richmond Wong, and Franchesca Spektor. 2019. Vivewell: Speculating Near-Future Menstrual Tracking through Current Data Practices. In *Proceedings of the 2019 on Designing Interactive Systems Conference (DIS '19),* 541–552.

Jonathan Furner. 2008. Dewey deracialized: A critical race-theoretic perspective. *Knowledge Organization* 34(3): 144-168.

Jonathan Furner. 2016. Data: the data. In *Information cultures in the digital age: A festschrift in honor of Rafael Capurro.* Matthew Kelly and Jared Bielby, eds. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. 1988. *The signifying monkey: A theory of Afro-American literary criticism.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Kerr Houston. 2013. *An introduction to art criticism: histories, strategies, voices.* Pearson.

Matt Kramer. 2008. The notion of terroir. In Fritz Allhoff (ed.), *Wine and Philosophy*. Blackwell. pp. 225--234

John Lanchester. 2008. Scents and sensibility. *The New Yorker,* March 3, 2008.

Bruno Latour. 2004. Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry* 30(2): 225-248.

E.E. Lawrence. 2021. The trouble with diverse books, part II: an informational pragmatic analysis. *Journal of Documentation* 77(1): 181-197.

Yanni Alexander Loukissas. 2017. Taking Big Data apart: local readings of composite media collections. *Information, Communication, and Society* 20(5): 651-654.

Heather Love. 2013. Close reading and thin description. Public Culture 25(3): 401-434.

Jonas Löwgren and Erik Stolterman. 2004. *Thoughtful interaction design: a design perspective on information technology.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Aryn Martin and Michael Lynch. 2009. Counting things and people: the practices and politics of counting. *Social Problems* 56(2): 243-266.

Katherine McKittrick. 2021. *Dear science and other stories.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ann Noble, R. A. Arnold, J. Buechsenstein, E.J. Leach, J.O. Schmidt, and P.M. Stern. 1987. Modification of a standardized system of wine aroma terminology. *American Journal of Enology and Viticulture* 38: 143-146.

Lindsay Poirier. 2021. Reading datasets: Strategies for interpreting the politics of data signification. *Big Data and Society* 8(2).

Daniel Rosenberg. 2013. Data before the fact. In *Raw data is not an oxymoron.* Lisa Gitelman, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

A.O. Scott. 2016. *Better living through criticism: How to think about art, pleasure, beauty, and truth.* New York: Penguin Press.

Steven Shapin. 2012. The tastes of wine: a cultural history. *Rivista di estetica* 51(3): 49-94.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith. 2016. What was close reading? A century of method in literary studies. *Minnesota Review* 87.

Vasiliki Tsaknaki, Pedro Sanches, Tom Jenkins, Noura Howell, Laurens Boer, and Afroditi Bitzouni. 2022. Fabulating biodata futures for living and knowing together. *Proceedings of the 2022 ACM Designing Interactive Systems Conference (DIS '22)*, 1878–1892. https://doi.org/10.1145/3532106.3533477

Karen Wickett. 2023. Critical data modeling and the basic representation model. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24745