

[The Ethics of Close Reading?](#)

Discussion published by E. L. McCallum on Sunday, January 29, 2023

Type:

Call for Papers

Date:

April 15, 2023

Location:

Pennsylvania, United States

[CFP // The Ethics of Close Reading? // Oct 19-20, 2023](#)

The practice known as close reading has been for decades one of the central methodological commitments of literary studies. Consolidated, articulated, and promulgated as part of the professionalization of the field during the New Critical era, close reading survived the theory wars (gaining traction, even, thanks to deconstruction). It continues to be a major focus of teaching at the college and K-12 levels (where, since 2009, it has been an explicit part of the Common Core standards). Close reading's importance to literature can be measured by the list of its various antagonists—distant reading, surface reading, even, for a while, the new historicism—as well as its many promoters; it remains, both in the breach and the observance, a fulcrum of the disciplines that promulgate, define, and practice it.

From its earliest moments the claims made for close reading as a method were not merely epistemological but also ethical. Close reading was a way to democratize the classroom; it was a way to attend to the reality of a singular text; it was a way to encounter the kinds of difference and unexpectedness that characterize new knowledge; it was, at its best, a practice that, in foreclosing projection and epistemological dominance, opened one's eyes to the complex realities of others. Critiques of close reading have been likewise focused on its ethical dimensions: its tacit whiteness, its roots in Southern Agrarianism, its construction of an exclusionary, normative reader.

Penn State's Center for Humanities and Information invites proposals for papers that address the ethics of close reading: papers that question those ethics; papers that champion them; papers that consider the rhetorical, pedagogical, or social value of these claims; papers that reject those claims, or mark the ways they privilege modes of racial, gendered, or sexual dominance; papers that locate close reading in a history of the disciplines or in a broader history of epistemology; papers that consider close reading in relation to power, to the construction of racialized,

classed, gendered, or “ideal” readers, to the idea of textuality, to the history of the disciplines; and so on.

Send an abstract (up to 500 words) for a 20-25 minute paper, along with a short bio, to infocenter@psu.edu by April 15, 2023.

Accepted papers will be presented at a 12-person workshop, to be held Oct 19-20, 2023, on the campus of Penn State University. The Center will cover travel and lodging costs for all speakers.

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