

English 317
Winter 2019
TTH 10:00am – 11:30am, Mason 3437
Office number: (734) 647-2843

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Office: Angell Hall 4200
Office hours: TH 12:30pm-2:30pm
(and by appointment)

Global Posthumanism

This course will examine the modern history of an idea that is often taken for granted but only ambiguously definable—the idea of being “human.” This idea has encountered a variety of challenges in its modern global life. To understand both the history of being “human” and the objections raised by the idea’s critics, students in this course will encounter arguments from a wide variety of disciplines, including evolutionary biology, the history of technology, environmental studies, and critiques of Enlightenment political forms. Students will also study twentieth- and twenty-first-century fiction from around the world, experimental film, and post-apocalyptic narratives. Across the semester, we will ask the following questions: What are the values and distinctions associated with being “human”? When and why were those values formed? What peoples and realities are obscured by this idea? And what will be the future of human beings whose experience is increasingly characterized by ecological and political crises?

Attempts to answer these questions will come from Frantz Fanon, Franz Kafka, Hannah Arendt, J. M. Coetzee, and many other thinkers from the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Assignments will include two exams, one paper, and a group video essay to be published to YouTube.

Learning Outcomes:

- deploy forms of textual analysis with sophisticated theoretical goals
- interrogate the fundamental assumptions of the humanistic tradition
- situate texts and ideas within the terminology, genres, and movements of literary history
- hone the ability to discuss, debate, and reevaluate your ideas with peers and a faculty interlocutor

Course texts:

- Margaret Atwood, *Oryx & Crake* (ISBN 978-0-385-72167-7)
- J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (ISBN 978-0691070896)
- Amitav Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (ISBN 0-380-97585-8)
- Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon* (ISBN 978-1481440882)

(Additional readings will be posted online. I will also do my best to print copies for you. Kindle or other electronic versions of these texts are not allowed in the classroom. I strongly discourage you from buying digital copies of the course texts.)

Course Assignments	%	Due Date
Response to <i>The Lives of Animals</i> (approximately 2000 words)	20	Feb. 14
Object Lesson (groups of two)	10	TBD
Engagement	15	N/A
Midterm Exam	15	Feb. 28
Final Exam	20	April 23
YouTube video essay	20	April 9

A Note on Assignments:

Your submissions should be uploaded as a file to Canvas and also submitted in hard copy. Late assignments (including late arrivals to class) will be penalized by half a letter grade (~5 points). Late assignments of more than 48 hours will not be accepted. Of course, if there is a legitimate health-related emergency, please discuss your situation with me.

Attendance:

Attendance is mandatory. If you must miss class, let me know in advance. With few exceptions, I will deduct ten percent from your Participation grade for every absence after the second. So, if you miss three classes, the highest you could earn for your Participation grade would be 90%, four classes would be 80%, and so on. It would be wise to attend every class from the beginning of the semester in the event that emergencies arise or you need to be gone for college events.

Religious Accommodations for Students:

Please look carefully at the syllabus during the first week of class. If any of the assignments or course meetings conflict with a major religious holiday for your faith, please let me know. I will make every effort to make the necessary accommodations.

Other Accommodations:

If you have a disability and need an accommodation to participate in this class or to complete course requirements, please ask Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) to provide documentation of the accommodations that you need. Then, please share this documentation with me as soon as possible, preferably within the first few weeks of class.

Electronic technology:

Laptops, cell phones, smart phones, tablets, and all other electronic devices should not be used during regular class meetings. I will usually print readings not included in the four required texts. There should be no reason to read these on a tablet in class unless you have an accommodation documented by the university. If this policy creates hardship, please speak with me.

Engagement:

Your grade for “Engagement” will be determined according to the following criteria:

- Attendance (per Attendance Policy)
- Quality and quantity of contributions to class discussion. I want you to contribute each class meeting, but no cursory contributions.
- Active listening during lectures. Questions during my lectures are encouraged.

The following will negatively affect your participation grade:

- Using a laptop, computer, phone, iPod, iPad, or any other electronic technology, unless allowed by the Learning Disability Act
- Talking while either the instructor or one of your peers is speaking
- Showing disrespect or indifference toward your peers
- Not reading an assignment in its entirety

Response to *The Lives of Animals*

J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* presents a variety of complex ideas about non-human animals. Following the fictional lectures by Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello, there are responses to

these ideas by four prominent scholars from different fields of academic study. We will take these responses as models for responding intelligently, generously, and creatively to Coetzee's lectures. As we will discuss in class, *The Lives of Animals* is difficult on several levels, and responding to Coetzee thoughtfully will be demanding.

Your assignment is to choose one aspect of *The Lives of Animals*—e.g., one of Costello's assumptions, a literary technique in the "narrative frame" surrounding Costello's lectures, or one of the counterarguments expressed by her critics. You will then voice a critical response to that focused aspect or idea. "Critical" does not necessarily mean that you point out the flaws in Costello's ideas, although of course you may choose to do so. Instead, criticism requires you to examine the complexities of a chosen aspect of *The Lives of Animals*—whether it's an intellectual question or problem that needs unpacking. Criticism also requires you to write in a focused, generous, and intelligent way. Finally, you are required to incorporate legitimate outside sources into your argument. **(A minimum of two sources is required.)**

You may follow the form, tone, and mode of argumentation modeled by any of the four responses to *The Lives of Animals*. (For example, you're welcome to write your own fictional narrative, much like Peter Singer's response.) Your response must be ~2000 words, and it will be due on February 14. I'll evaluate this response via the following criteria: legitimacy of outside sources (10%); use of outside sources (10%); critical thinking, depth, and sophistication (20%); textual analysis, evidence, and support for criticism (30%); prose (30%).

Those writing a creative response are still expected to draw on at least two outside sources. You may meet this requirement through allusion or artful but direct reference (e.g., quotation).

How to Format Your Essay:

In addition to the specific parameters for the essay, your paper on *The Lives of Animals* should conform to the following formatting (violation of which will be penalized at my discretion):

- Double-spaced
- Times or Times New Roman font only – 12-point in size
- 1-inch margins on all sides
- Last name and page number in the upper-right hand "Header" of every page
- Staple your paper in the upper left-hand corner
- To save paper, you may print on the front and back of the page
- In addition to your name, my name, and the course number, please also include **a word count at the top of the first page**

Midterm Exam:

The midterm exam will cover all assigned reading and material presented in class, including lectures, discussion, handouts, etc., between January 10 and February 26. **Anything I write on the board may appear on the exam, whether as a term to be defined or a short essay topic.** If you have questions about a concept or movement we discuss in class, please know that I'll be happy to clarify any confusion, but don't wait until the week of the midterm to visit my office. The midterm is closed-book, closed-notes, and timed for the duration of our course meeting. I will not offer make-up midterms or alternative times to take the exam, except under extreme circumstances. The midterm will be on February 28.

Final Exam:

The final exam will focus on the novels by Okorafor, Ghosh, and Atwood. You will be expected to apply the semester's concepts, lectures, and readings to these texts. The exam will take place in-class on Tuesday, April 23. I will discuss the format of the exam near the end of the semester.

Object Lessons:

Students will be responsible for leading class discussion once during the semester. This assignment must be completed in pairs. I encourage you to find a partner, although I am happy to help you pair up should you need assistance. You will sign up for this assignment on January 17, so please identify your partner and a few preferences as soon as possible.

For your object lesson, you will be responsible for starting discussion about the class period's assigned reading through an object you select and bring to class. Your object may challenge an aspect of the reading, illustrate a key concept, or apply a theory to present-day phenomena. Potential objects include film clips, images, and commodities. If you are unsure about whether an object counts, just ask me. You will be responsible for a minimum of twenty minutes of discussion. I will typically begin each course meeting with a brief overview of a theoretical problem or idea in the text and then students will offer their Object Lesson.

In addition to selecting an object and leading class discussion for at least 20 minutes, students are also responsible for (1) meeting with the professor at least 24 hours prior to the class meeting to discuss your plan of action; (2) submitting a brief write-up of your Object Lesson, due on the date you present; and (3) engaging your peers in a substantive discussion of the assigned readings, preferably through a mixture of small-group work and class-wide discussion. The write-up of your Object Lesson should explain the connections between your chosen object and the class period's assigned readings in approximately 100-150 words. The write-up should also provide an outline of your "plan of action" for leading discussion.

I will evaluate your Object Lessons based on the relevance and quality of the chosen object (20%); the creativity of the object's application to the assigned readings (10%), the accuracy and grasp of the assigned readings by the presenters (25%); the depth and breadth of the assigned readings covered through the object lesson (15%), the clarity of the teaching (15%), and the quality of thought provoked among your peers during the class meeting (15%).

YouTube Video Essay:

By the end of the semester, we will have examined a variety of ideas about being human. In response to this semester's work, several intellectual problems hopefully will have seized your interests. I want you to focus on one problem and address it in a collaborative and critical way that also gives you an opportunity to practice professional humanities work. For this assignment, you will work in **groups of three or four people** to produce YouTube video essays. These video essays should (a) clearly pose a focused intellectual problem and (b) begin to address answers to that problem in an engaging way. Your video essay should either bring our course's readings together in a critical reflection on a focused problem (see examples 1 through 3 below) or by applying those readings to the analysis of a social phenomenon (see examples 4 and 5 below). You may use one of your group members' Object Lessons as a starting point for this project.

Students will design this video essay in consultation with the professor, the resources of BlueCorps (the university's Technology Assistance team), and potentially the library archives. To prepare you for this assignment, we will have a session in the Library on Feb. 26 and an instructional session on the relevant media on March 12. These sessions will introduce you to on-campus resources for this assignment. **Your group must also meet with me to show drafts of your project during week 11 or 12.**

Students must form groups independently and **propose their topics by February 26**. On this date, you will submit a brief "Group Proposal," which should list the group members, the intellectual problem in the form of a question, and a concise proposal (2-3 sentences) of how your group plans to explore this question. To get the conversation started in your group, I've included a list of possible "umbrella" topics, although you're welcome to explore topics represented in the course readings but not listed below. Your proposals must formulate a specific question or problem; you should not simply identify an "umbrella" topic.

The video essay will be due on April 9. Please upload a document to Canvas that includes a list of the group members and a brief description of each student's responsibilities in producing the assignment (lists and bullet points are fine). **You should also send me the video file of your group's video by 8:00am on April 9.** I will upload it to YouTube and restrict access according to students' wishes. We will watch the videos in class on April 9.

Students will need to "anchor" their project in one of the assigned readings. Students should also **cite a minimum of three legitimate sources** as part of their video essay. Citations of sources should be in small titles within the video itself. I will evaluate this assignment based on the following criteria: legitimacy of secondary sources (5%); use of secondary sources (including accuracy and clarity) (10%); use and understanding of primary material (20%); sophistication of analysis and application (15%); creativity of analysis / application (20%); rhetoric and audience-awareness (10%); video and production elements (10%); delivery of verbal content (10%).

Examples of video essays may be found here:

1. *Why Socrates Hated Democracy* (<https://youtu.be/fLJBzhcSWTk>)
2. *How Is Your Phone Changing You?* (<https://youtu.be/W6CBb3yX9Zs>)
3. *Introduction to Karl Marx* (https://youtu.be/fSQgCy_iIcc)
4. *The Seven Commandments of Fake News* (<https://nyti.ms/2Dk4Kfn>)
5. *Gerrymandering: Is Geometry Silencing Your Vote?* (<https://youtu.be/ieB3ukWB3tQ>)

Sample Umbrella Topics for YouTube Essays:

1. Migrants and the political borders of humanity
2. Evolutionary biology and the "species" category
3. Humanistic philosophy and the modern category of race
4. Language (or reason/free will/immortality/empathy) as a distinction between humans and animals
5. Natural histories of gender and sexuality
6. Industrial meat production and unexamined ideas about the human
7. Digital mediation of human sociality, individual identity, or embodied experience

Day-by-Day Schedule:

	Monday	Wednesday
Week 1 <i>Intro</i>	January 8	January 10 Syllabus, introductions, etc.
Week 2 <i>The Origin Stories of Humanism</i>	January 15 Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?” (Canvas); Franz Kafka, “Report to an Academy” (Canvas) Focus on pp.58-61 in Kant’s essay. The remainder of the essay is recommended but not required. Please read Kafka’s story <i>after</i> Kant’s essay and be prepared to compare the two texts.	January 17 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (Canvas); Charles Darwin, Introduction to <i>On the Origin of Species</i> (Canvas)
Week 3 <i>The Origin Stories of Humanism</i>	January 22 Oreskes and Conway, ch. 3 from <i>The Collapse of Western Civilization</i> (Canvas) In-class reading: selections from René Descartes and John Locke	January 24 Hannah Arendt, from <i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i> , section on “The Perplexities of the Right of Man” (Canvas); Sarah Lotz, “Home Affairs” (Canvas)
Week 4 <i>Humans and Animals</i>	January 29 No Class – Prof. Mangrum traveling <u>Optional:</u> In preparation for class on Jan. 31, you may wish to watch the following video on industrial meat production: https://youtu.be/eIY6zm_DVWU	January 31 Coetzee, “The Philosophers and the Animals,” <i>The Lives of Animals</i> (pp.15-45)
Week 5 <i>Humans and Animals continued</i>	February 5 Coetzee, “The Poets and the Animals” (pp.47-69) <u>Optional:</u> Rilke, “The Panther,” Hughes “The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar” (Canvas)	February 7 Responses by Garber, Singer, Doniger, and Smuts (pp.73-84, 85-91; 93-106, 107-120) Potential video to be screened in class: https://youtu.be/NMCly_u7zwo
Week 6 <i>The Search for Form</i>	February 12 In-class writing workshop	February 14 Lives of Animals paper due; in-class viewing of Henri-Georges Clouzot’s <i>Inferno</i>
Week 7 <i>The Search for Form continued</i>	February 19 Paul Bowles, “A Distant Episode” (Canvas); Frantz Fanon, from <i>The Wretched of the Earth</i> (Canvas)	February 21 Manju Kapur, “The Necklace” (Canvas); Farrukh Dhondy, “Bollox” (Canvas)
Week 8	February 26 Library Day – Shapiro Undergraduate Library, Instructional Lab 4041 (4 th floor) Video Essay Group Proposals due	February 28 In-class Midterm Exam
Winter Break	March 5 No class	March 7 No class

Week 9	March 12 Media Training Day Media Center Mac Lab (2001B) in Modern Languages Building	March 14 Alan Turing, on “The Imitation Game” (Canvas); N. Katherine Hayles, from <i>How We Became Posthuman</i> (Canvas)
Week 10	March 19 Amitav Ghosh, <i>The Calcutta Chromosome</i> , chs. 1-16 (pp.3-114)	March 21 Ghosh, <i>The Calcutta Chromosome</i> , chs. 17-29 (pp.115-201)
Week 11	March 26 Ghosh, <i>The Calcutta Chromosome</i> , chs. 30-45 (pp.202-311)	March 28 Danez Smith, “dear white america,” from <i>Don’t Call Us Dead</i> (Canvas); Okorafor, <i>Lagoon</i> , Prologue-ch.16 (pp.3-85).
Week 12	April 2 Okorafor, <i>Lagoon</i> , chs.17-42 (pp.86-218)	April 4 Okorafor, <i>Lagoon</i> , Prologue to Act III-ch.57 (pp.223-292) and “Postchapter” (pp.301-304).
Week 13	April 9 Video Essays Due Final exam discussion	April 11 Donna Haraway, “Chicken” (Canvas); Atwood, <i>Oryx & Crake</i> , chs. 1-5 (pp.3-110)
Week 14	April 16 Atwood, <i>Oryx & Crake</i> , chs. 6-9 (pp.113-238)	April 18 Atwood, <i>Oryx & Crake</i> , chs. 10-15 (pp.241-374)
Week 15	April 23 Final Exam	