Networked Selfhood and the Novel
ENGL B291
Spring 2019
English House III
MW 2:40 – 4:00

Professor Grant Wythoff
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Office Hours:
Wed 1–2:30
Garden Room 001

Resources and tutorials at course site:
https://gwijthoff.github.io/selfhood

Skip to the schedule...

Description

The luddites, the philosophers, even the tech evangelists all seem to be in agreement that living in a networked world has changed something about the way we understand ourselves as individuals. But where should we locate the shifting boundaries between the self and the publics we connect with today? On the one hand, networked selfhood involves conscious, authorial acts. We compose

sketches of our lives on social media for intimate strangers: high school class-mates, public figures, acquaintances we've met only once. On the other hand, our carefully curated online profiles pale in comparison to the portraits of our lives being assembled by data brokers, government agencies, and Silicon Valley companies.

In this course, we will turn to novels for lessons in how personhood has been configured differently. Novels allow the reader to see contradictions between the inner and outer person, the character shared with the reader as opposed to the "self" that the character projects to her social world. How have figurations of characters, persons, selves, and individuals changed throughout the history of the novel? How do contemporary novelists represent the new forms of self-fashioning emerging online today? How can we use novels to renegotiate the relationship between privacy—the ability to selectively reveal oneself to the world—and intimacy—when we find ourselves disclosing to others the most important aspects of our lives?

Our weekly readings will mix recent works of media theory examining the self and its relationship to networked others with novels that register shifts or offer models of historically situated selfhood through either narrative means or formal experimentation.

Required Books

- Louisa Hall, *Speak* (2015)
- Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005)
- Ann Petry, *The Street* (1946)
- Henry James, *In The Cage* (1898)

Projects

- (10p of logs) Institute a "digital sabbath" for Sundays this term—no lap-tops, tablets, or phones—while keeping a log of the affects that 24 hours of disconnection has on your memory, concentration, loneliness, creativity, etc. (10p of logs)

    - Build a NoPhone or Resistor Case

- (5p) Using an arbitrarily selected calendar date that the class will agree on as a group (i.e. Wednesday, March 9, 2016), reconstruct a narrative of that day based on traces you have willingly left behind: emails, Face-book likes, activity trackers, etc. Write a narrative of this day using your digitally-distributed memories. How was this information collected? With or without your willful actions?
- (8-10p final essay)

Exercises

In addition to our readings and class discussions, we will conduct exercises that allow us to regain a measure of authorship over the portraits of ourselves assembled by data brokers. Students will learn tactics for protecting against online harassment and trolling, as well as surveillance by government agencies who actively monitor the search results and social media activity of immigrants and citizens who speak with immigrants.

- Install Scroll-O-Meter plugin for Chrome to track your miles scrolled
- Install the "People You May Know Inspector" to keep track of how Facebook recommends "friendships" across your extended social networks, and read up on its unsuccessful attempts to kill this and other tools developed by journalists to investigate the platform.
- Conduct self-surveillance using ProPublica's "What Facebook Thinks You Like," and Cambridge's "Apply Magic Sauce" in order to see (and alter) how Facebook creates your psychological profile.
- Request your profile from Acxiom, a data broker, to see what has been unwittingly collected about you and block that information from being used or sold
- Secure your devices from search and seizure in preparation for any international travel using two-factor authentication, encryption, and by regularly logging out. See especially "A Guide to Getting Past Customs With Your Digital Privacy Intact"
- Use Keybase to set up encrypted messaging and file sharing for class communications
- Learn about anonymous web browsing using Firefox Focus, Tor, VPNs
- Complete one of the Electric Frontier Foundation's tutorials in *Surveillance Self-Defense*
- Complete one of FemTechNet's tutorials in *Locking Down Your Digital Identity*

Background Reading

Literary Criticism

- Michel Zink, *The Invention of Literary Subjectivity* (1985/1998)
- Joel Fineman: *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition: Essays toward the Release of Shakespeare's Will* (1991)
- Anne Enderwitz, "Literature, subjectivity and 'human nature': Evolution in literary studies"
- Adela Pinch, *Thinking about Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (2010)
- Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (2009)

Tech News

Media Theory

- visual culture / selfies

    - Jacob Burckhardt, famous cultural historian who wrote on the notion of "the individual" in the Renaissance
        * https://muse.jhu.edu/article/609780/pdf
        * https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/jul/10/jacob-burckhardt-civilization-renaissance-italy

- the user?

- death/memorialization?

- Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, *Everybody Lies: Big Data, New Data, and What the Internet Can Tell Us About Who We Really Are* (2017)

- Simanowski, *Facebook society: losing ourselves in sharing ourselves*

- Jacqueline Wernimont, *Numbered Lives: Life and Death in Quantum Media*

- Wendy Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (2016), Ch. 4, Reality/Truth, Conclusion, Selection of YouTube Comments, pp. 135-180

- Bratton, *The Stack* on the user as a fiction to "accommodate the cultural logics of human self identity" (345 et al)

- Kate Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (2017)

- This gorgeously produced book, maybe find in PDF or scan? http://www.sternberg-press.com/index.php?pageId=1803&l=en&print

- John Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data: Algorithms and The Making of Our Digital Selves*

- Jill Rettberg, *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology : How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves* (2014)

- Dawn Nafus and Jamie Sherman, "This One Does Not Go Up To 11: The Quantified Self Movement as an Alternative Big Data Practice," International Journal of Communication 8 (June 16, 2014): 1784–94.

- Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (2018)

- Mauss chapter on the self, sent from Christian

- Bernard Harcourt's event, The Statistical Subject in the Age of Data: https://mailchi.mp/columbia/event-of-note-universities-in-a-post-truth-world-with-professor-carol-gluck-436921

- "Illness Narratives, Networked Subjects, and Intimate Publics" https://catalystjournal.org/index.php/catalyst/article/view/29627

- "To Mourn, To Re-imagine Without Oneself: Death, Dying, and Social Media/tion" https://catalystjournal.org/index.php/catalyst/article/view/29632

Schedule

wk 1 | Jan 23 | intro

- Lauren Oyler, "Habitual User,", *The Baffler,* no. 41 (September 2018)

wk 2 | Jan 28, 30 | misc readings

Monday:

- Dominic Pettman, *Infinite Distraction* (Polity, 2015), Preface and Introduction: I Know Why the Caged Bird Tweets

Wednesday:

- Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, "A Literary Postscript: Characters, Persons, Selves, Individuals," in *The Identities of Persons,* ed. Rorty (Univ. of California Press, 1976), pp. 301-324.

- Excerpts from *New English Library Book of Internet Stories* (2000)?

wk 3 | Feb 4, 6 | Louisa Hall, Speak (2015)

Monday:

- Hall, pp. 1–78

Wednesday:

- Hall, pp. 78–157

- Claire L. Evans, *Broad Band: The Untold Story of the Women who Made the Internet,* (Penguin Random House, 2018), Chapter 2: Amazing Grace

wk 4 | Feb 11, 13 | Louisa Hall, Speak (2015)

Monday:

- Hall, pp. 158–234

- Tracy Chou and Clare L. Evans, *SVS: A Play for Four Bots, in Three Acts*

- Paul Neave, Lonely Tweets

Wednesday:

- Hall, pp. 235–end

- Max Read, "How Much of the Internet is Fake?", *New York* Magazine, December 24, 2018

wk 5 | Feb 18, 20 | Selves and Selfies

Monday:

- India Ennenga, "Toward a More Radical Selfie", *The Paris Review,* November 27, 2018

- Ian Mortimer, "The Mirror Effect", *Lapham's Quarterly,* November 9, 2016

Wednesday:

- Sarah E. Igo, *The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America,* (Harvard UP, 2018), Chapter 8: "Stories of One's Self," pp. 307-349

wk 6 | Feb 25, 27 | Kazuo Ishiguro, Never Let Me Go (2005)

Monday:

- Ishiguro, pp. 1–76

Wednesday:

- Ishiguro, pp. 77–145

wk 7 | Mar 4, 6 | Kazuo Ishiguro, Never Let Me Go (2005)

Monday:

- Ishiguro, pp. 146–217

Wednesday:

- Ishiguro, pp. 218–end

SPRING BREAK

wk 8 | Mar 18, 20 | Algorithms and Inequality

Monday:

- Taina Bucher, "Affective Landscapes: Everyday Encounters with Algorithms," in *If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics* (2018), 93-117.

Tuesday:

- Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor,* (St. Martins, 2018) [excerpts]

wk 9 | Mar 25, 27 | Ann Petry, The Street (1946)

Monday:

- Petry, pp. 1–112

Wednesday:

- Petry, pp. 113–211

wk 10 | Apr 1, 3 | Ann Petry, The Street (1946)

Monday:

- Petry, pp. 212–326

Wednesday:

- Petry, pp. 327–end

wk 11 | Apr 8, 10 | Anonymity, Privacy, Intimacy

- Stephen T. Margulis, "Three Theories of Privacy: An Overview," in Privacy Online: Perspectives on Privacy and Self-Disclosure in the Social Web (2011)

- Claire L. Evans, "Luddite Love," *Aeon,* January 16 2013

- Bratton, *The Stack* on the user as a fiction to "accommodate the cultural logics of human self identity" (345 et al)

wk 12 | Apr 15, 17 | Henry James, In The Cage (1898)

Monday:

- James, pp. 174-198

Wednesday:

- James, pp. 198-221

- Public By Default: amazing stories from publicly-accessible Venmo data, much like Henry James's *In the Cage*: https://publicbydefault.fyi/

wk 13 | Apr 22, 24 | Henry James, In The Cage (1898)

Monday:

- James, pp. 221-243

- Scott B. Weingart, "The Route of a Text Message", Jan 15, 2019

Wednesday:

- James, pp. 243-end

wk 14 | Apr 29, May 1 | closing