

UNIT PROJECT #6: (UN)LEARNING TO BE A CYBORG

What has happened, of course, is the use of devices like smartphones combined with designs like social media, together with AIs hooked in with videos you see on services like YouTube....They've made the world a worse place. - Jaron Lanier

*When your soul is a button and your foot glows in heels
Program, deprogram, reprogram
One nation under a microchip
- Janelle Monae, "Metropolis"*

For this mini-unit project, you will experiment with the most common cyborgian appendage: your smart phone! **Our goal is to see how purposeful separation from these attachments can elucidate and enlighten us as to our precise relationship to them.** We are deep into cyborg-land these days, so this project is less about yelling at you to quit social media (although we probably should) or throw away your phone (although we DEFINITELY should) and more about finding ways to form a more intentional relationship with these objects.

Important note: If you do not have a smart phone, first of all, GOOD FOR YOU. But you will need to find another piece of technology or cyborgian/peripersonal object to experiment with. We'll chat!

1) Prewriting: 1-2 pages, single spaced. Answer the following questions in paragraph form.

- **Describe your cyborgian appendage in detail:** what it is, what it looks like, how it feels in your hand, where it lives upon your person or personal space, its apps, bells & whistles, etc.
- **How often and why do you use it?** Hours per day? What do you do on it?
 - Your phone should have a "use tracker" or "digital wellbeing" function that allows you to see how much & in what ways you are on your phone. Valuable data to be had!
- **How would you describe your relationship to it?** Positive, negative, antagonistic, collegial, addictive, playful, ambivalent? How did this relationship begin and/or develop in the first place? Has it changed over time?
- What are **3 benefits** you believe you get out of using your smart phone?
- What are **3 ways** you believe that your smartphone has a **negative** effect on you?

2) The Experiment Itself:

Choose TWO of the following options to perform 3X each. For Session #1, place your phone **on the desk or near you**. For Session #2, place your phone **in a backpack or other bag, in the same room as you but out of sight**. For Session #4, place your phone **in another**

room or give it to someone else to hold. These activities should be about 30 minutes in duration.

Option 1: At Meal Time

Option 2: During a Class Period

Option 3: While Reading, Writing, or Drawing

Option 4: During a Chore (i.e. doing the dishes, walking the dog, folding laundry, etc.)

***For each session, note the day/time it took place, its duration, location, and what activity you were doing. After each session, write about a brief paragraph describing your experience. Explain how the physical placement of your cyborgian appendage had a positive, negative, or neutral effect on you. Try to be as specific as possible and explain why you felt or acted the way you did. Did you notice any feelings in your body or mind?*

- These paragraphs can initially be in your notebook for quick reflections after each session, but you will type them up when you turn them in (for ease of reading on my end). For this portion, it is better to write immediately after your session, freely observing, without too much reflection or self-editing. You'll end the experiment with **6 entries.**

3) Final Presentation:

First, look over your entries and reflect upon your findings. Do you notice any commonalities or differences between the types of activities you separated during? (Were you more distracted during class than while doing the dishes?) How did your feelings change or progress over the course of the three iterations? Did the separating become easier, harder, weirder, etc. the further your appendage was from you? Was it anxiety-inducing having someone else hold your phone? What did this experiment teach you about your relationship to your appendage? What might you do differently to continue to augment / wrestle with this relationship in the future?

Then, pick your poison: craft either a Powerpoint/Google Slides/Prezi/other visual presentation OR a critical paper briefly summarizing the experiment, your process/approach, and analyzing the above findings in detail. Presentations should be ~6-8 slides, give or take a few, and papers will be minimum 2 full pages (but likely ~3).

- As you noodle through these thoughts, you will utilize at least 2 sources from this unit as scaffolding and support. Direct quotes, please! Free choice between readings from Week 19-21.

Project Specifics:

- Each stage of the project will be due separately. Your prewriting will be due first and separately in lieu of a topic proposal / first draft (see due dates below)
- All writing will be single-spaced, TNR, 12pt font, 1" margins. Visual presentations can be as creative/interesting as you'd like while adhering to project requirements.

- Your experiment writing portion does not need to be fancy, elaborate, or particularly well-written: it is more important that you copy down your accurate, immediate thoughts after each separation session. Some light proofreading is fine.
- Include either a Works Cited slide or page at the end of your final presentation, specifically for the 2 sources cited in your postwriting but also including any others you cited for this project.

Due Dates:

- **Prewriting** is due **Week 21**
- **A mid-experiment check-in** (i.e. what you are intending to do and when) is due **Week 22**
 - Think about how much of the experiment you'd like done by this time! Plan ahead.
- **Final project** (i.e. experiment write-ups + either Powerpoint or final paper) is due **Week 23**

UNIT PROJECT #7 / MIDTERM PROJECT: THE CREATIVITY OF VISIBILITY & FUTURIST REPRESENTATION

So, I thought, you are neither black nor white. You are neither male nor female. And you are that most ambiguous of citizens, the writer...
- Samuel Delany

I like science fiction and physics, things like that. Planets being sucked into black holes, and the various vortices that create possibility, and what happens on the other side of the black hole. To me it's the microcosmic study of the macrocosmic universe in man, and that's why I'm attracted to it.
— Wesley Snipes

As we've worked through Units #6 and #7, we've explored **our ongoing relationship to technology, visibility, and progress**, through a variety of lenses both creative and critical. We've wrestled with the idea that the future is not a uniform entity or promise for all kinds of folks, and as we begin explorations in Afrofuturism and the upsides/downsides of visibility across the artistic spectrum, we can see that the conversation—and the images available to us—around these topics is full of holes.

For our mini-unit project, which will also serve as your midterm paper, you will craft a **futurist short story (~3-4 pages double-spaced)** utilizing, imagining, or reimagining a social justice issue/power structure in today's present as a futuristic element in science fiction. This can be dystopian in nature (if you must, you cynics), but I encourage you to think VERY critically about whether or not you are perpetuating the imbalance that has plagued much of dystopian lit, i.e. the “white dystopia = Black reality” trope we discussed in class.

The specific angle is up to you. Afrofuturism sets us up to think critically about race within futurist contexts, specifically that of the Black experience and the African diaspora, but that's not the only racialized element to sci-fi that we see (good lord, it is not). Our discussions on invisibility/hypervisibility have also asked us to wrestle with questions of gender, sexual and relationship orientation, ableism, ageism, classism, globalization and Americentrism, and more.

****Your Big Bad Question****

Who or what is typically left out of the conversation when popular culture imagines the future of technology, progress, equality, etc.? What does that tell us about our outlook on the future and what we explicitly/implicitly value? What do alternate perspectives have to offer?

A Note On Fan Fiction: One way you may approach this project is to craft an alternate universe / alternate storyline / altered character from an existing science fiction, apocalyptic, or futurist universe, i.e., in the tradition of "The Ones Who Stay and Fight," having an explicit conversation with the greater world of scifi. The primary caveat, however, is that you must choose a relatively known universe/text to riff off of (i.e. no extra obscure dystopian pirate musicals or hyper-niche anime, please!). This will both help me read your piece accurately and thoroughly, AND will assist you in thinking about our questions of visibility/representation in a broader cultural context.

As usual with our creative projects, you will also write a brief (~2 page double-spaced) critical essay to elucidate, elaborate upon, and analyze your own writings within a critical context. This critical piece will require you to pull in at least 2 secondary sources, i.e. texts from this unit, i.e. readings beginning with Week 23.

Project Specifics:

- **Creative piece:** ~3-4 pages double spaced, Times New Roman font, 1" margins, etc.
- **Critical piece:** ~2 pages double spaced, Times New Roman font, 1" margins, etc.
- Conclude your packet with a properly-formatted-according-to-MLA **Works Cited page**, including all cited or referenced sources (can be more than the required two if you so choose).

Other Elements to Keep in Mind:

- You are, above all else, trying to craft a compelling story that plays with, subverts, replaces, or acknowledges the more problematic tropes that come up when we engage with questions of technology, representation, and visibility in the digital age.
- Be careful to not simply rehash these tropes, but approach them with a critical eye.
- Remember that you, as N.K. Jemisin does, get quite meta if you'd like! Break the fourth wall, play with form, use language play to your advantage. There's no formal rules here besides taking part in the wider SF/F conversation.
- As usual, I'm always interested in seeing your creative takes on our material and prompts, so if you have something weird in mind, I encourage you to let it play out and see what happens!
 - We will stick to the genre of short stories for this piece, just to keep it simple.

Due Dates:

- **Partial rough draft due Week 26.** Get some ideas down on paper, a few pages of text going...give yourself a head start on the final!
- **Final draft due Week 27** (i.e. when we get back from spring break; that's an additional two weeks to work on this!). That will serve as the conclusion for this unit.

UNIT PROJECT #8/FINAL PROJECT: Biophiliacs, Unite and Take Over

Is this not a holy thing, the kindling of this fire? So much depends on the spark.
- Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass

The mind specializes on analogy and metaphor, on a sweeping together of chaotic sensory experience into workable categories labeled by words.
- E.O. Wilson, Biophilia

All year, we have committed to creatively exploring the chewy critical and artistic texts we've read, watched, and otherwise devoured. We would be remiss if we did not carry that mission all the way through our final unit centering around *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

For this final project, you will craft an artistic response to Kimmerer's many evocative ideas and inspirational calls to action. After contemplating Kimmerer's writings (as well as the accompanying texts by E.O. Wilson, Elena Passarello, and more), applying them to your own life and the lives of others as you see them existing in this society, what has resonated with you the most? What thesis statements, implicit and explicit, continue to occupy your imagination? What further ideas or inspirations have you been carrying around with you? What challenged you, where did you struggle, where do you want to poke? **Return to your notes and see what threads captured your attention the most.**

You will then choose an artistic medium: painting, photography, film, poetry, sculpture, collage, music, etc. Of course, if you have a medium not listed here, please feel free to explore it! You all are always so good at pulling in surprises for these projects.

Note, the first: I'm not opposed to a critical exploration, i.e. a more conventional literary response paper, but I'd like it to be a little sideways and embody the themes/ethos of *Braiding Sweetgrass* in some fashion. Could you shape even a typical analytical essay with some kind of challenge of either form, content, or approach?

Note, the second: You may work in partners/small groups OR solo for this project.

In particular, I am interested in ways you can engage in an **ongoing conversation** with her themes and ideas. Can you apply these writings to or shape them around your own life? To our community here in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the Great Lakes region? To the plants and animals, cultural traditions, foodways, rituals, and more of your backyard, your household, your family? The connection and initial inspiration from Kimmerer can be quite **laser-focused/granular or loose and open-ended** (you have your usual accompanying critical essay to explain your thoughts and intentions for this project), but it should serve as the jumping off point.

Thematic ideas to toss around:

- Using the natural world as model and metaphor for human life and interactions
- Gifts and reciprocity
- Ritual and ceremony
- Cultural origin stories and the power of narrative
- The everyday sacred
- Becoming "indigenous" or native to place; unpacking the "we are all immigrants" story
- Climate change, conservation, and responsibility
- Others?

Project Specifics:

- **Artistic Response.** Medium of your choosing, length will vary. As usual, strict length matters less than your approach, analysis, and creativity; I want to see your intention and effort, but that has almost never been a problem with this group so I don't expect it to be now!
- **Critical essay accompaniment.** You know the drill for this by now: 1.5-2 pages, double spaced, explaining those elements above! What was your approach for this project, why the genre, what inspiration did you take from Kimmerer and how did it spin off into the final product we see before us now? **2 different authors quoted here, please** (obviously one will be Kimmerer, potentially in multiple essays of hers; one should be a different author. More is always welcome, of course). You will also craft a Works Cited page with relevant sources to be attached.

Due Dates:

- **Proposal + plan due Week 31.** This will take the form of a paragraph or two telling me which chapter(s) from Kimmerer you are drawing inspiration from, whether you're working in partners or solo, your genre of choice, and your plan for completion. Since we are not having formal class Week 31, I want to make sure you are ready and on track.
 - Because of the nature of these varying genres, you will NOT have a rough draft of any sort due. You will need to keep track of your progress on your own and check in with me as you need according to your own volition.
- **Finals + presentation Week 33.** Let's talk about how we want to wrap up the semester! Do we want to do that fam & friends showcase we talked about? Should we reserve the very final day of class for an (ideally outdoor) party? What sounds good to you all? I will make whatever you'd like to have happen, happen.