Networked Selfhood and the Novel

ENGL B291

Spring 2019

English House III

MW 2:40 – 4:00

Professor Grant Wythoff
(gwythoff@brynmawr.edu)
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

The following books are required for the class, and are available at the campus book store. In addition to these books, we will be reading a number of articles in PDF that will all be linked to in the schedule below.

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

Grading Components

30% Digital Sabbath Journal

[~10p of writing: 4x2p uploads, 2p final statement]

On Sundays this term, we will institute a "digital sabbath." What this looks like is up to you. As a starting point, I suggest disconnecting all of your devices from the internet (phones in airplane mode, computer WiFi turned off) for at least six consecutive hours, ideally beginning from the time you wake up. Keep a journal of your experience during this period of disconnection, commenting on

your concentration, creativity, productivity, loneliness, etc. Your journal should be kept in a fresh notebook at least 5"x8.5". You should have this notebook by our second week of classes.

Your journal can take the form of a diary, scrapbook, sketchbook, to-do list, or handwritten drafts of text messages and emails to be sent when you re-connect on Monday. Overall, it will serve as a repository for the ways you experience your sense of self differently when digitally disconnected, and how our class readings served as points of reference for those experiences.

Feel free to experiment with the ways you go about doing this. I want to hear about your techniques of disconnection. If you fail on any given day (that is, if you find yourself turning your Internet connection back on), that's okay. Reflect on the reasons why you felt that pressure to connect.

Throughout the semester, you will be required to provide four uploads from your journal. You will also be asked to produce an author's statement at the end of the semester reflecting on the experience, enumerating the subjects, themes, and ideas that you came across and that resonated with our readings throughout the semester.

Several aids will be discussed in class, including the NoPhone, Resistor Case, and IRL Glasses.

10% Distributed Memory Project

[~3 pages of writing]

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 left behind both willingly and unwittingly: emails, Facebook likes, activity trackers, etc. Research your life on that day like a private investigator and be as exhaustive as possible. Then, write a narrative of this day using your digitally-distributed memories. How was this information collected? With or without your knowledge? In our digital sabbath, we'll reflect on the experience of disconnection. But what forms of digital memorialization do we lose out on when we no longer have such a granular level of access to our daily lives in the past?

10% Data Trails Log

For the week of March 25, keep a data trails log. Every time you shed some data (a debit card transaction, using your phone number for frequent shopper rewards, an email, a status update, sharing your location data, etc.) mark it in your log. Don't try to actively avoid leaving trails, just passively make a note when you realize that you are leaving a breadcrumb of data behind. Ideally, this log will be kept in a notetaking app on your phone, so that you always have it with you. Keep your diary from the perspective of your data. As we will discuss in class, we in the United States cannot request our data from platforms like Facebook. And so the work of imaginative storytelling and narrative becomes important.

25% Final Essay

A final essay of 8-10 pages on one of our novels. Further details will follow.

25% participation

Class participation is vital to the success of this course. The importance of the works under discussion lies not in the works themselves, but rather in their interrelationship with our discussions and other media that you and I encounter in our daily lives. Simply attending class will not be enough to earn full participation credit. Instead, you must be an active participant, someone who comes prepared and engages with all aspects of the class.

Everyone shares responsibility for including all voices in the discussion. If you have much to say, try to hold back a bit; if you are hesitant to speak, look for opportunities to contribute to the discussion.

Summary of assignment due dates

- **Mon, Feb 4:** sabbath journal 1
- **Mon, Feb 18:** sabbath journal 2
- **Mon, Mar 4:** distributed memory project
- **Mon, Mar 18:** sabbath journal 3
- **Mon, Apr 1:** data trails log
- **Mon, Apr 15:** sabbath journal 4
- **Mon, Apr 29:** digital sabbath author's statement
- **Fri, May 10:** final essay

Schedule

wk 1 | Jan 23 | intro

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

Unit 1: Connection

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.

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

Monday:

- *DUE: SABBATH JOURNAL 1*
- 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), Introduction: The Dell, and 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

Unit 2: Memorialization

wk 5 | Feb 18, 20 | Selves and Selfies

Monday:

- *DUE: SABBATH JOURNAL 2*
- 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:

- *DUE: DISTRIBUTED MEMORY PROJECT*
- Ishiguro, pp. 146–217

Wednesday:

- Ishiguro, pp. 218–end

SPRING BREAK | Mar 11–17

Unit 3: Capture

wk 8 | Mar 18, 20 | Algorithms and Inequality

Monday:

- *DUE: SABBATH JOURNAL 3*

- 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:

- *DUE: DATA TRAILS LOG*

- Petry, pp. 212–326

Wednesday:

- Petry, pp. 327–end

Unit 4: Closure

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

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

Monday:

- *DUE: SABBATH JOURNAL 4*
- James, pp. 174-198

Wednesday:

- James, pp. 198-221
- Public By Default: stories from publicly-accessible Venmo data

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

- *DUE: DIGITAL SABBATH AUTHOR'S STATEMENT*
- Final essay presentations, closing thoughts

final essay due Fri, May 10

Administrivia

Attendance

While I do not advocate missing any classes, I realize that you may face unpredictable circumstances once or twice throughout the term. For this reason, you may miss two classes this semester without penalty. Additional absences will impact your final grade. However (and this is important) you are responsible for seeking class notes from a classmate. I will not provide them.

Each additional absence will lower your final grade by half a letter grade. Students with perfect attendance receive a bonus on their participation grade. Two late arrivals count as an absence. Early departures also count as an absence.

Laptop Policy

If you have a laptop, bring it to class. Periodically, we will use laptops for in-class exercises and experiments. Additionally, if you traditionally a laptop to take notes, feel free to do so; however, please practice good screen etiquette: keep it to the side and don't stare too long. Our meetings are built around the capacity to listen and observe one another, to be mutually present in our shared physical space. Good screen etiquette allows this to happen.

Late Assignments

Late assignments are accepted a week beyond the assignment's due date. Late assignments will be marked down half a letter grade with each missed day.

Honor Code

I regard plagiarism as a very serious matter. In this class, plagiarism consists of work taken partially or entirely from an uncited source (the Internet, a peer, a published article, etc.) and assumed as your own. If you are caught plagiarizing, I will ask that you report yourself to the Haverford and Bryn Mawr Honor Board.

Campus Resources

Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges are committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first register with Access Services. Bryn Mawr

students should also contact Deb Alder, Coordinator of Access Services (610-526-7351 or dalder@brynmawr.edu), as soon as possible, to verify their eligibility for reasonable academic accommodations. Haverford students should contact Gabriela Moats, Coordinator of Accommodations, Office of Disabilities Services at hc-ods@haverford.edu. If you have already been approved to receive academic accommodations and would like to request accommodations in this course because of a disability, please meet with me privately at the beginning of the semester (within the first two weeks if possible) with your verification letter.

Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. Any student who has a disability-related need to tape record this class must first speak with the Coordinator of Access Services and to me, the instructor. Because of laws within the State of Pennsylvania, class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website (http://www.brynmawr.edu/access_services/).

Bryn Mawr | Academic Support and Learning Resources

Students are encouraged to reach out to the Academic Support and Learning Resources Specialist to explore effective learning, studying, test-taking, note-taking and time and stress management strategies that are essential to success in this course and college life. Students can schedule a meeting with Rachel Heiser, the Academic Support and Learning Resources Specialist by calling the Dean's Office at (610)526-5375. For more information, please visit: http://www.brynmawr.edu/deans/acad_support/learning_resources.shtml

Haverford | Office of Academic Resources (OAR)

Located at Haverford in Stokes Suite 118, the OAR offers students many resources, including communal study spaces, peer tutoring, workshop series, and individual coaching with the center's trained staff. See their website for more information: http://www.haverford.edu/oar/.

Writing Center

The Writing Center offers free appointments and experienced peer tutors who are there to help you at any stage of the writing process. The Writing Center is located in Canaday Library. You can get more information at http://www.brynmawr.edu/writingcenter.

At Haverford, the Writing Center is located in Magill Library, Stokes, and Zubrow Commons. You can get more information about hours and how to make an appointment at http://www.haverford.edu/writing-center/.