



FACULTY OF ARTS
Department of English
COURSE OUTLINE

ENGLISH 477: LITERATURE AND SCIENCE: AI & VR IN SCIENCE FICTION

Fall 2021

TR 9:30-10:45 (online)

Instructor	Dr. Anthony Camara
Email:	anthony.camara@ucalgary.ca
Web Page:	D2L (access via MyUofC portal)
Office Hours:	W 14:00-15:00 and by appointment, via Zoom

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The super-intelligent, and perhaps malicious, robot is a familiar trope in science fiction. Today more than ever before, this formulaic character looks far less like a speculative possibility than an immanent certainty. In fact, considering that “soft” artificial intelligence (AI) seems to be everywhere—in our phones, our cars, and in the drones that patrol our skies—one could say that AI is no longer an implausible thing of the future; it’s already here. This class examines depictions of AI and VR in speculative literature and popular media. We will be particularly concerned with science fiction’s exploration of the ethical questions implicit in the creation of AI and digital beings, problems that intersect with issues of race, gender, class, and disability, and the struggles of vulnerable peoples to be recognized as autonomous subjects. Course readings will not only include fiction but also theoretical and technical sources that will help to explain the computer science behind AI engineering. As we look at everything from cutting-edge science fictions to documents from Silicon Valley think tanks, we will ask how the prospect of AI and virtual worlds not only changes what we write, but how we write.

Prerequisites: 12 units of English courses at the 300 level or above.

Delivery: This course will take place **online** via Desire2Learn (D2L) and Zoom. To succeed in the course, students are encouraged to participate in the asynchronous learning tasks using the D2L learning environment as well as the synchronous Zoom sessions. The latter sessions will be held on Thursdays during the regularly scheduled course time, that is, from 9:30-10:45. Since participation in the latter sessions is crucial for success in the course, if you are ever unable to participate you must inform the instructor in advance so that an alternate activity can be arranged (this will most likely be a writing assignment in the form of a short analytical paper or a discussion board posting). The asynchronous component of the course predominately consists of watching Yuja lectures and posting on the D2L discussion board whereas the synchronous Zoom sessions will feature Q&A sessions, class discussions, and writing workshops.

COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Understand how historical developments in AI, VR, and machine learning have influenced literary production in the 20th and 21st centuries.
2. Analyze literature so as to interrogate and bridge the supposed divide between the humanities and the hard sciences / STEM fields.
3. Research and write essays examining how literature illuminates the profound impact of current technologies on our daily lives and the larger edifice of society.
4. Critically reflect upon and fruitfully discuss how their own personal experiences with technology have formed (and continue to form) them as human beings.
5. Identify and comprehend the ethical problems, as well as material prospects, that technology holds for our society now and in the future, especially in regards to POC and Indigenous folks, whose communities have suffered due to unequal access to high technology.
6. Contemplate how—in the personal, professional, familial, and civic facets of their lives—students might help to mitigate the problems, and maximize the benefits, of new technologies.

TEXTS, READINGS, AND LEARNING RESOURCES

1. Nalo Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* (Grand Central) [required book]
2. Greg Egan, *Permutation City* (Nightshade Books) [required book]
3. Annalee Newitz, *Autonomous* (Tor Books) [required book]
4. Ted Chiang, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* [required reading on D2L]
5. Elizabeth Bear, “Tideline” [required reading on D2L]
6. Peter Watts, “Malak” [required online reading]
7. Catherynne Valente, *Silently and Very Fast* [required online reading]
8. Alan Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” [required online reading]
9. Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism* [required online reading]
10. Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* (Knopf Canada) [required book]

LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES AND REQUIREMENTS

There is a D2L site for this course which contains many of the above required readings and other relevant class resources and materials, such as Yuja lectures and handouts (see d2l.ucalgary.ca).

In order to successfully engage in their learning experiences at the University of Calgary, students taking online courses are required to have reliable access to the following technology:

- A computer with a supported operating system, as well as the latest security, antivirus, and malware blocking software
- A current and updated web browser
- Webcam (built-in or external)
- Microphone and speaker (built-in or external), or headset with microphone
- Broadband internet connection.

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

- Attendance (5%) and Participation (5%): 10%
- Critical Reader Response (700 words): 25%
- Discussion Board Postings (roughly 1 post every three weeks): 30%
- Final Paper (6-page research paper with secondary sources): 35%

1. Attendance and Participation: attendance and participation in the Zoom sessions and on the D2L discussion board are absolutely essential to the success of this course. Attendance and participation are each worth 5% of your final grade. Attendance will be monitored at every Zoom session and participation will be evaluated based upon both the volume and quality of your contributions to our interactive Zoom discussions and the D2L discussion board. Any unexcused absences in excess of one Zoom session will reduce your final attendance and participation grade by 20% per absence. An illustrative grading rubric for the participation component follows:

A = Student engages in all the course's Zoom sessions, frequently contributing thoughtful and analytically incisive comments and questions to our class discussions which enhance understanding of the texts being studied. The student does likewise on the D2L discussion board, to which they contribute frequently (at least once every three weeks, if not more) and insightfully.

B = Student engages in the vast majority of Zoom sessions and posts regularly on the D2L discussion board, offering decent comments and questions that help to propel fruitful conversations.

C or lower = Student shows little to no evidence of engagement in Zoom sessions and on the D2L discussion board; comments, when offered, are neither particularly helpful nor stimulating, and/or suggest neglect of the course readings.

2. Critical Reader Response: This short assignment functions as an exploratory laboratory wherein students hone potential central arguments for the final paper. Nevertheless, responses must meet standards of acceptability for turned-in written work at the U of C. That is to say papers are evaluated according to clarity, organization, grammatical fluency, and argumentative sophistication. In formulating a robust thesis statement, students are expected to identify a critical problem or question that a text poses, suggest an answer to it, and then explain the significance of their answer to how one reads and interprets the text.

3. D2L Discussion Board Postings: These are critical to demonstrating the extent of a student's engagement with, and understanding of, the course readings, not to mention generating productive conversations that open up the assigned texts' aesthetic, philosophical, and political dimensions to our analysis and enjoyment. At least once every three weeks, students will go onto the D2L discussion board and post comments and questions about the course readings. While there is no set limit on the length of these postings, they should nevertheless be sufficiently long enough to treat course materials with scholarly rigor. Thus, postings should be predicated on *argumentation* (as opposed to opinions not backed up by textual evidence) and therefore need to *cite and close read quotations* from primary and/or secondary sources on the syllabus. The possible approaches to doing a discussion board posting are virtually limitless. A student could, for instance, formulate a question about a challenging passage; answer another student's question; discuss their affective and intellectual responses to a particular plot twist, character, or authorial attitude, etc.; or creatively push another critic's (or student's) interpretation into new or unexpected territory. It should go without saying that all the same standards of politeness, respect, and collegiality by which we abide in typical classroom discussions apply to the D2L discussion board. In other words, I will not tolerate any rudeness, abuse, or attacks on anyone's personal character and/or beliefs. If you disagree with someone, do so in an immanently courteous manner. For further details, please review the conduct statement below.

4. Final Research Paper: This 6-page paper must make use of at least six secondary sources—historical, literary-critical, and/or theoretical in nature—in order to further investigate any work from our syllabus. Students propose their own topics and are highly encouraged to consult with the instructor about the specifics of their central arguments. Some in-class time will be devoted to the final paper. Note that this essay must include a works cited page and must follow MLA formatting and style guidelines. If need be, please refer to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* for clarification.

ADDITIONAL REGULATIONS

- It is necessary to complete all course assignments in order to receive a passing grade.
- There are no extra credit assignments.
- Make-up assignments, excused absences, and extensions will only be issued by the instructor in the event of extenuating circumstances.
- If the course is to be worthwhile, students must contribute to the discussion board and come to the Zoom sessions prepared to engage with the texts, their fellow classmates, and the instructor. Therefore, students should complete all assigned readings before these sessions and have all the relevant texts at hand. To prepare for Zoom sessions, students are advised to read actively at home by annotating their books and making a list of questions and compelling ideas as they progress through the course readings; then, they can then draw from these lists during the sessions.
- Assignments will be submitted to the instructor via D2L Dropbox by the end of the day that they are due. The late penalty for assignments is 10% per day, which includes weekends and holidays. Note that late assignments will receive little, if any, feedback. Assignments more than four days late will not be accepted.
- If any extenuating circumstances arise which prevent a student from attending a Zoom session or turning in an assignment, it is the student's responsibility to contact the instructor as soon as possible so that proper arrangements can be made in the way of a make-up activity or assignment.
- Students should retain a copy of all assignments in the event that a technical glitch occurs while uploading. This goes for all assignments, from discussion board postings to final papers.

CONDUCT

Students, employees, and academic staff are expected to demonstrate behaviour in class that promotes and maintains a positive and productive learning environment. Members of the University community must exhibit conduct that is consistent with the University of Calgary Calendar Code of Conduct and Non-Academic Misconduct policy and procedures, which can be found at: <http://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/k.html>

According to the University Calendar, "the University of Calgary community has undertaken to be guided by the following statements of purpose and values: to promote free inquiry and debate, to act as a community of scholars . . . to respect, appreciate, and encourage diversity, [and] to display care and concern for community." The Department of English, like the university as a whole, is committed to a "positive and productive learning and working environment." This environment is characterized by appreciation and encouragement of diversity and respect for the dignity of all persons: students, support staff, and faculty. The department will not tolerate unacceptable behaviour such as threatening gestures, threatening or abusive verbal or written communication (including e-mails), or any conduct

that “seriously disrupts the lawful education and related activities of students and/or university staff.” Any cases of such misconduct should be reported immediately to the department Head, who, depending on the nature and severity of the incident, may then take further appropriate action.

USE OF INTERNET AND ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION DEVICES IN CLASS

Laptop and mobile devices are acceptable when used in a manner appropriate to the course and classroom activities. Please refrain from accessing websites and resources that may be distracting to you or for other learners during class time. Students are responsible for being aware of the University’s Internet and email use policy, which can be found at: <https://www.ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/electronic-communications-policy.pdf>

GUIDELINES FOR ZOOM SESSIONS

Zoom is a video conferencing program that will allow us to meet at specific times for a “live” video conference, so that we can have the opportunity to meet each other virtually and discuss relevant course topics as a learning community.

To help ensure Zoom sessions are private, do not share the Zoom link or password with others, or on any social media platforms. Zoom links and passwords are only intended for students registered in the course. Zoom recordings and materials presented in Zoom, including any teaching materials, must not be shared, distributed or published without the instructor’s permission.

The use of video conferencing programs relies on participants to act ethically, honestly and with integrity; and in accordance with the principles of fairness, good faith, and respect, as per the Code of Conduct. When entering Zoom or other video conferencing sessions (such as MS Teams), you play a role in helping create an effective, safe and respectful learning environment. Please be mindful of how your behaviour in these sessions may affect others. Participants are required to use names officially associated with their UCID (legal or preferred names listed in the Student Centre) when engaging in these activities. Instructors/moderators can remove those whose names do not appear on class rosters. Non-compliance may be investigated under relevant University of Calgary conduct policies (see the Student Non-Academic Misconduct Policy). If participants have difficulties complying with this requirement, they should email the instructor of the class explaining why, so the instructor may consider whether to grant an exception, and on what terms. For more information on how to get the most out of your zoom sessions visit: <https://elearn.ucalgary.ca/guidelines-for-zoom/>

If you are unable to attend a Zoom session, please contact your instructor to arrange an alternative activity for the missed session (e.g., to review a recorded session). Please be prepared, as best as you are able, to join class in a quiet space that will allow you to be fully present and engaged in Zoom sessions. Students will be advised by their instructor when they are expected to turn on their webcam (for group work, presentations, etc.).

The instructor may record online Zoom class sessions for the purposes of supporting student learning in this class, such as making the recording available for review of the session or for students who miss a session. Students will be advised before the instructor initiates a recording of a Zoom session. These

recordings will be used to support student learning only and will not be shared or used for any other purpose.

GRADING SYSTEM

The University of Calgary's four-point Grading System, as described in the Calendar, will be used in this course. All assignments will receive numerical scores that will be used to calculate the final grade, which in turn will be converted into a letter grade in accordance with the following departmentally standardized percentage conversion scale.

90 + %	A+	4.0	67 – 69 %	C+	2.3
85 – 89 %	A	4.0	64 – 66 %	C	2.0
80 – 84 %	A–	3.7	60 – 63 %	C–	1.7
77 – 79 %	B+	3.3	55 – 59 %	D+	1.3
74 – 76 %	B	3.0	50 – 54 %	D	1.0
70 – 73 %	B–	2.7	0 – 49 %	F	0

Although the A+ is solely an honorific that entails no additional points in the 4-point system, the course instructor will employ this mark to distinguish superlative work that exceeds expectations in style, correctness, intellectual depth and breadth, sophistication, and originality.

According to the University Calendar (F.1) <https://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/f-1.html>, instructors may use their discretion when rounding upwards or downwards when the average of term work and exams is between two letter grades.

Academic Integrity:

This course, like all courses at the University of Calgary, holds students to high standards of honest and responsible scholarship. Please consult the [Academic Integrity website](#) for a detailed description of university policies, which will be enforced in this course. Cases of suspected academic misconduct will be referred to the Associate Dean of Arts for a ruling.

Plagiarism is a type of academic misconduct. Plagiarism occurs when a student presents the ideas, expression of ideas, or work of another person as their own. Another equally serious form of plagiarism occurs when a student submits something they have written themselves for credit in two or more courses without first securing written permission from all those course instructors. Consequences for plagiarism include failure on the assignment, failure in the course, and possible suspension or expulsion from the university. Using any source whatsoever without clearly documenting it is a serious academic offense.

Deferral of term work and final examinations:

Should you require an extension for completion of term papers or assignments beyond the deadline of five days after the end of lectures, an [Application of Deferment of Term Work](#) must be completed. It is

the student's responsibility to initiate this process with the instructor. The University also has regulations governing the [deferral of final examinations](#).

Grade appeals:

To pursue a Reassessment of Graded Term Work or a Reappraisal of an Academic Assessment, Consult the [University Calendar](#) and request advice from the English Department at engl@ucalgary.ca. Please note that mere dissatisfaction with a grade is not sufficient grounds for an appeal.

[English Department Website:](#)

For more information about courses, programs, policies, events and contacts in the Department of English.

Scribe and Muse Club for English Students:

The [Scribe and Muse Reading and Writing Club](#) fosters and champions reading and writing through community service, leadership, and engagement. Our email address is smecuofc@gmail.com.

Writing support:

[The Student Success Centre](#) offers both online and workshop writing support for U of C students.

[Academic regulations and schedules](#)**Student Academic Accommodations:**

The Student Accessibility Services website is available [here](#). University accommodation policies can be found at the following links:

<https://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/b-6-1.html>

<https://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/b-6.html>

<https://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/b-6-2.html>

Program Advising and Student Information Resources is done through the Faculty of Arts Students' Centre. Office location: SS102; phone: 403-220-3580; email: ascarts@ucalgary.ca
Website: <http://arts.ucalgary.ca/undergraduate>

Instructor's Intellectual Property

Course materials created by instructors, including presentations, posted notes, labs, case studies, assignments, and exams, remain the intellectual property of the instructor. These materials may not be reproduced, redistributed or copied without the explicit consent of the instructor. The posting of course materials to third party websites such as note-sharing sites without permission is prohibited. Sharing of extracts of these course materials with other students enrolled in the course at the same time may be allowed under fair dealing.

Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy

Student information will be collected in accordance with usual classroom practice. Students' assignments will be accessible only by the authorized course faculty and teaching assistants. Private information related to the individual student is treated with the utmost regard by the faculty at the University of Calgary.

Research Ethics [delete section if not applicable]

- If a student is interested in undertaking an assignment that will involve collecting information from members of the public, they should speak with the course instructor and consult the CFREB Ethics (<http://www.ucalgary.ca/research/researchers/ethics-compliance/cfrieb>) before beginning the assignment.
- If students are going to be used as research subjects or expected to conduct research (such as interviews), a statement about this expectation must be included. Please note that if you plan to have students conduct research for class, you must get ethics approval for the course.

Sexual violence policy:

<https://www.ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/sexual-violence-policy.pdf>

Other important information:

- [Wellness and Mental Health Resources](#)
- [Student Success](#)
- [Student Ombuds Office](#)
- [Student Union \(SU\) Information](#)
- [Graduate Students' Association \(GSA\) Information](#)
- [Emergency Evacuation/Assembly Points](#)
- [Safewalk](#)

Universal Student Ratings of Instruction (USRI):

Please participate in [USRI Surveys](#) toward the end of the course. The feedback they provide helps us evaluate teaching, enhance student learning, and guide students as they select courses.