

English 197: The Post-Literary Condition (Fall 2019)

Professor Rita Raley

Class: MW 11:00-12:15, SH 2617 | Office hours: Tues 1:00-3:00, SH 2703

Description

What are the new modes of literary expression now—after the supposed death of the novel and the lyric voice, and as extinction narratives for publishing, the printed word, and even language itself grow ever more common? What is significant about literary uses of vernacular forms of communication, social media platforms, or game mechanics? How have writers and artists exploited the very media that are said to be their undoing? Now that natural language models are “better” at generating synthetic text—so good in fact that one can almost see the genres falling like dominoes, from [earthquake reports](#), sports recaps, and [market analyses](#) en route to the holy grail, the novel—the function and significance of human authors continues to transform. What is left for humans to do with symbolic systems—whether language, images, or code—and what constitutes creativity now? In short, what is the “post-literary condition” and how do language artists help us understand our place in this moment and this milieu?

Books & reading assignments

- The books you will need are available in the bookstore and on reserve in the library: Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*; Xu Bing, *Book from the Ground*; K.S. Mohammad, *The Front*; Christian Bök, *The Xenotext*.
- Assignments tagged as “excerpts” generally come from books and are available in PDF format; we will also be discussing born-digital works and projects available only online; all of this is linked to the syllabus and on Gauchospace.
- Please consult Gauchospace on a regular basis for supplementary material and references.
- The two films we will watch and discuss are also hosted on Gauchospace.

Assignments

Participation, including exercises: 30%

- Participation in any seminar involves both general attentiveness and active contribution to discussion. Since this course will be run as a seminar, attendance and participation in discussions will be particularly important, and more than two unexcused absences will significantly and adversely affect your final grade. Please read the assigned material before class and come prepared with questions and issues you would like to address (at times I will give you more specific instructions for this). You are welcome and even strongly encouraged to come talk to me about course material in office hours, particularly if you tend toward minimal in-class participation.
- *Guidelines for supplemental exercises:* Each member of the seminar will be asked to complete four search/discovery exercises, which will involve finding an artifact or anecdote that could be the basis of a case study for the topic under discussion. Please use Gauchospace to post these examples, with links if possible.

Final Seminar Paper (14-15 pages): 70%

- The final paper should be based on the material we study this quarter, and you will need to discuss your topic with me in advance. Part of the planning for this paper will involve drafting a brief proposal, which is required.
- Please take note of [UCSB's explicit policies](#) about plagiarism and academic integrity.
- One-page proposals due before Thanksgiving break. Final papers due December 11.

Schedule

September 30: Introduction to the course

No words, there are none

October 2: Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*

Picture languages & vernacular literary forms (*Emoji Dick*, animated gifs, Instapoetry)

October 7: Xu Bing, *Book from the Ground*

- Post an artifact, example, or article related to the topic of picture languages before class.

October 9: Xu Bing, *Book from the Ground*

[Almoji: AI-generated emoji](#)

Does writing have a future?

October 14: Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* (chapters: Inscriptions, Notation, Letters of the Alphabet, Print, The Digital)

October 16: Vilém Flusser, “[Our Images](#)” (from *Post-History*)

Semiocapital

October 21: Nick Thurston, *Of the Subcontract, or Principles of Poetic Right* (excerpts)

October 23: Rachel Zolf, *Human Resources* (excerpts)

Franco Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (excerpts)

Uncreative writing

October 28: Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day* (excerpt) and [Two Poems from “The Day”](#)

Goldsmith, “[It’s Not Plagiarism. In the Digital Age, It’s ‘Repurposing.’](#)”

Goldsmith, “[No Such Thing as Writer’s Block](#)”

Creative exploits

October 30: Ross Goodwin, *1 the Road*

Johannes Heldén and Håkan Johnson, *Evolution*

Allison Parrish, *Articulations* (excerpts)

Ip Yuk-Yiu, *False Words*

Flarf & writing with search

November 4: K.S. Mohammad, *The Front* (excerpts TBD)

Bill Kennedy and Darren Wershler-Henry, *apostrophe*

John Cayley, *How It Is in Common Tongues*

Extinction narratives

November 6: Shelley Jackson, *Snow*

Eugenio Tisselli, *Degenerative*

Stephen Collis and Jordan Scott, *Decomp*

- Come to class prepared to discuss a cultural-extinction narrative of your choosing.

November 11: Veterans Day

Post-literacy

November 13: Browse [The New Post-Literate: A Gallery of Asemic Writing](#)

- Post at least one asemic work you find conceptually interesting in advance of class.

Writing for the future

November 18: Christian Bök, *The Xenotext* (excerpts)

[The Xenotext \(A Progress Report\)](#) (video lecture)

November 20: Katie Paterson, [Future Library](#)

Michael Chabon, [“The Omega Clock”](#)

November 25: *Into Eternity* (Dir. Michael Madsen, 2010)

Scott Beauchamp, [“How to Send a Message 1,000 Years to the Future”](#)

November 27: Thanksgiving holiday

Alien communication

December 2: *Arrival* (Dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2016)

Eduardo Kac, [Lagoogleglyph series](#)

Recommended: Ted Chiang, [“Story of Your Life”](#)

- Explore “constructed scripts” section of [Omniglot](#) and come to class prepared to discuss at least one invented language of your choosing, from this site or elsewhere.

December 4: Trevor Paglen, [“Why Talk to Aliens”](#) and excerpts from *The Last Pictures* (2012)