

Carleton University
Winter 2026 Preliminary Course Outline
Department of English Language and Literature

ENGL 2900A
Literature of the Self

“AI U”

Literature of the Self in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Prerequisites: Second-year standing or permission of the department
Preclusions: None

Instructor: Prof. S. J. Murray
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***** This is a preliminary syllabus only—texts and assignments are subject to change. A complete version will be available closer to the start of the term. *****

Calendar description:

A study of developments in the literary representation of the self. The course considers a wide range of major texts from the Middle Ages to the present.

Detailed course description:

This course explores the literary, cultural, and philosophical implications of artificial intelligence on the construction and narration of the self. Titled *AI U*, the course plays on the dual meaning of “AI” and “U”: the technological force reshaping society and the university, and the personal “you” increasingly mediated by algorithms, platforms, and digital systems. As large language models and chatbots enter the classroom, therapy session, and diary alike, we will critically examine how these tools participate in life-writing, self-reflection, and even ethical formation.

AI U is intentionally experimental: students will be invited—not prohibited—to use generative AI in their assignments, provided it is used reflectively and with critical engagement. We will explore the self not as a stable interiority but as a product of discourse, mediation, and relational technologies. Through fiction, theory, and film, we’ll examine how literature, like AI, functions as a technology of the self—and how new machines of language might both expand and constrain what it means to be human.

Reading & Viewing List (Tentative Selection):

Theory & Critique

- Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self* (excerpt)
- Lauren Berlant, “Intimate Publics” (excerpt)
- Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”

Fiction & Life-Writing

- E.M. Forster, *The Machine Stops*
- Ted Chiang, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* and/or *Exhalation*
- Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (selections)
- Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom* (excerpt)
- Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (excerpt)
- J.G. Ballard, *High-Rise*

- Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*

Film & Media

- *HyperNormalisation* (dir. Adam Curtis)
- *eXistenZ* (dir. David Cronenberg)
- Selected scenes from *Her* (dir. Spike Jonze) or *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (dir. Steven Spielberg)
- Public statements by Elon Musk on empathy, AI, and society

Learning Outcomes:

- Analyze how literature and media construct, complicate, or destabilize the idea of a unified self.
- Reflect critically on the role of generative AI in shaping personal expression, memory, and identity.
- Interrogate the ethical, emotional, and political implications of artificial intelligence in both public and private life.
- Engage productively with theoretical texts that frame the self as discursively and technologically mediated.
- Develop original arguments and creative assignments using and/or reflecting on AI tools.
- Articulate how empathy, care, and narrative operate in both human and machine-mediated contexts.
- Connect literary representations of the self to broader debates about surveillance, control, and digital culture.