

Pavilion Seminars – Spring 2019

Section 001: The Case Against Perfection (Ashley Hurst)

Designer babies, genetic enhancement, performance enhancing drugs, and traumatic memory alteration are just a few attention grabbing headlines about an ever growing list of technologies aimed at making human life better. But is that really the case? Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel argues that our pursuit of perfection is sacrificing something essential to the human condition: an openness to the unknown in each child and person and the inherent imperfection in us. Inspired by his book *Case Against Perfection*, we will engage the social and bioethical issues impacted by new and ever expanding technologies that can alter, enhance and perhaps one day perfect the human mind and body. Should we seek to eliminate genetic diseases from the human condition, and if so which ones? Are performance enhancing drugs harmless ways to study more effectively or recover more quickly from athletic feats; a way to even the playing field with the “naturally” gifted? Or is there more at stake? This course will use an interdisciplinary approach (e.g., ethics, law, psychology, moral philosophy, and biomedical science) to examine explicit and implicit social values challenged by these new headline grabbing technologies that promise enhancements to human life.

Section 002: Comprehending Earth (Hank Shugart)

Comprehending Earth explores the intrinsic connectedness of the Earth’s systems, their dynamic change and their interactions with humans. The course is specifically designed for majors from all departments and presumes no science background.

The course is framed by a remarkable set of questions called “The Whirlwind Speech” found in the biblical Book of Job. These ancient questions treat topics of scientific relevance in a world that is ever changing and even modified by human actions: How did the Earth form? From what did the Oceans originate? How were animals domesticated? How does climate determine vegetation and vice versa? Can humans control the weather? The climate? Why do some animals persist while others become extinct?

The biblical Job could not answer any of these questions, and it is interesting to consider whether or not modern humans can. The seminar takes on these questions through scientific inquiry. We thus focus on environmental synthesis at large scales—regional to global scales in space; century to millennia to even longer scales in time. Our overarching themes involve planetary complexity, connectedness and dynamism in a human-altered world. There are no prerequisites.

Section 003: Puzzles, Poems, and Platform Games (Bradley Pasanek)

Participants in this Pavilion Seminar will be asked to unpuzzle poems, fabricate literary sculptures, and analyze video games, as we explore questions about media, form, and play. Focused on both making (rooted radically in the Greek term *poesis*) and reading (rooted in the Old English *rædellan*), we will devote energy to thinking about poetry in terms of riddles and will practice reading as a method of unraveling a narrative. While early assignments on the syllabus aim at traditional texts (poems, short stories, and two longer prose narratives), the main effort is to expand standard critical concerns to take in extra-literary media: cards, chess, puzzles, and video games. As a classroom experience that is adjunct to the Puzzle Poetry working group—an IHGC sponsored “humanities lab” (see <http://puzzlepoesis.org>)—this course seeks to

recruit students from Art, Computer Science, English, Media Studies, and other departments, including them in the ongoing IHGC discussions of “Humanities Informatics.” All in-class work will foreground cultural-political critique, with early-semester thinking about form and constraint preparing the way for the gamified representations of dystopia treated at midterm and after. The final third of the course has students studying so-called “puzzle-platform” video games and reading in game studies about identity and simulation, online misogyny, the politics of play, and the philosophical affordances of new media.

Section 004: New Orleans, Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea (Jennifer Tsien)

Should New Orleans exist? The very question was discussed shortly after the city was paralyzed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Since its foundation in 1718, it has suffered fires, plagues, and floods, as well as man-made problems such as racial injustice, corruption, and extreme violence. And yet the city represents a unique culture that lives on in the collective memory and in the rituals of its inhabitants; it also lives on in the fantasy of outsiders. Its sense of foreignness within the United States constantly makes us question assumptions about race, history, identity, and culture. The problems of New Orleans also expose the troubled relationship between a colony and its distant rulers, between a formerly French city and an American nation.

In the texts and other materials we will study, several themes emerge. As the title of this course indicates, ominous water imagery will appear repeatedly, as will the figure of the devil, a fanciful personification of the forces responsible for the city's troubles. Additionally, two emotions predominate: a certain nostalgia for lost things and a sense of the tragi-comic, or laughter as a response to horrible circumstances.

Materials for the course will include sources from history, French and American literature, African-American studies, anthropology, and popular culture: specifically, explorers' journals from the colonial period, fiction and films that established many of the clichés about the city (vampires, voodoo, the figure of the "tragic mulatta"), as well as scholarly studies of the city's unique food and musical culture.

Section 005: What Matters and How? (Jennifer Geddes)

In this seminar we will explore what matters to people and how it matters. While we may ask “what matters and why?” we often don't think about the quality of our relation with what matters to us. What does it mean for something to matter to someone, to a community, to a nation, to humanity? What do we love and how do we love it? Who do we esteem and how does that esteem play itself out in our lives? What do we pursue and what are the myriad ways in which we pursue it? How do we know that something matters to us? Because we are willing to pay a lot of money for it? Because we are willing to put down our phones and pay attention to it? Because we are willing to die for it? To explore these questions, we will read a range of texts, including philosophy, theology, literature, ethnography, economics, and history; hear from a range of guest speakers; conduct interviews; and engage in research. In short, the course will be a creative and interdisciplinary seminar in which students will be given a rich range of resources and assignments to help them grapple with the question of what matters to them and how.

Section 007: Inequality in America (Justene Hill)

Is inequality inevitable? Why is inequality increasing in American society? Wage inequality in the United States has increased dramatically over the last 30 years, approaching the same levels

that existed in the period before the Great Depression. In this seminar, students will interrogate these questions, considering the complexities of racial, gender, and socio-economic inequality in America. Students will be introduced to innovative historical, economic, sociological, and legal approaches to understanding how inequality in America evolved. Most importantly, students will discuss how popular discourse about inequality continues to fuel tensions, and violence, in American society today. Topics will include: slavery and the rise of American capitalism, poverty on Native American reservations, the prison industrial complex, educational discrimination and re-segregation, racial disparities in drug sentencing, the sub-prime mortgage crisis, gentrification, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. Readings will include a collection of sources, from sociologist Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* and novelist Richard Wright's *Native Son*, to documentaries, such as "Inequality for All" and "Abacus: Small Enough to Jail," and editorials from journalists Ta-Nehisi Coates and Nikole Hannah-Jones. At the beginning of the semester, students will select a research topic and at the end of the semester, students will prepare a digital, web-based project where they will present their research findings. By taking an interdisciplinary approach, students will interrogate how inequality has become one of the most pervasive and divisive issues in modern America.