

Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research  
WS 22033F: FUTURE SEX: Sex and Science Fiction  
Online Course Instructor: Victoria Miceli  
E Mail: vmiceli@uwo.ca

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Beginning with cutting edge contemporary practices, from sex reassignment surgery to virtual reality, this course will look at the ways in which we imagine the future of gender and sexuality. The focus will be primarily on science fiction texts that provide interesting alternatives to present-day ideas about sex and sexuality. The course will start by looking at a variety of cutting edge contemporary and near future issues, including genetic engineering (such as the detection of a "gay gene" and the abortion of "gay fetuses" or other controls over human sexuality), the use of biological modification and high-tech prosthetics for sex, reproductive technology, cybertechnologies (especially virtual reality), and the somewhat further future potentials of space flight, terraforming, human modification for colonization of other planets, etc. It will include a number of important science fiction texts, as well as investigations into the societal and personal effects on sexual desire, identity and embodiment.

## **LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

The course will enable students to:

- understand the inter-relationship between sex, gender and sexuality by examining both science fictional scenarios and cutting-edge real world practices;
- learn to read science fiction as a field for intense critical and theoretical thinking about practices of gender and sexuality;
- understand the effects and potential consequences of technology for both sexed bodies and sexual practices; understand various types of speculation about the future of reproduction and reproductive technologies;
- interrogate contemporary practices, such as teledildonics and virtual sex in Second Life;
- reflect on the ways in which science fiction has mirrored real world developments in sexual practices and policies, from debates over the criminalization of prostitution and the proliferation of pornography to issues around the decriminalization of homosexuality, the legalization of same-sex marriage, the medicalization of transsexualism, the battle to end infantile surgery for intersex people, the legalization of birth control, debates over in vitro fertilization and surrogacy, and speculation about cloning.

In addition, the course will assist students in developing aptitude for analytical/critical thinking; written communication skills; and research skills.

## **REQUIRED READINGS**

Ursula K. Le Guin. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. New York: Ace Books, 1969.

Marge Piercy. *He, She, and It*. New York: Fawcett, 1993 [1991].

Geoff Ryman. *The Child Garden*. Easthampton, MA: Small Beer Press, 2011 [1989].

*The other course readings will be provided through OWL*

## **ASSIGNMENT INFORMATION**

### Participation in Online Discussion (30%)

Weekly discussion questions, based on the readings, which must be posted by midnight each Wednesday. Guidelines and a grading rubric will be available on OWL.

### Critical Reflection (10% x 4)

Students will write a critical reflection on any four of the six modules. Assignments should be approximately 3 double-spaced pages and should be properly formatted with citations and bibliography. A detailed description of this assignment will be available on OWL.

### Final Essay (30%)

The final essay will be written on a work of science fiction of your choice. This is your opportunity to engage with a work not discussed within the course, using the tools, frameworks, and themes explored throughout the semester. The chosen work(s) must engage with how sex and gender is negotiated and/or (re)imagined through science fiction.

## **COURSE POLICIES**

### **Submitting Assignments:**

Electronic copies of written assignments must be submitted; submissions are registered as the date/time the assignments are submitted to Turnitin. **You cannot submit assignments in WS 2203F/G prepared for other courses.**

### **Turnitin:**

"All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under licence to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licencing agreement currently between the University and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>)."

(<http://www.Western.ca/univsec/handbook/exam/crsout.pdf>) . Links to the Turnitin site will be available on OWL for the course.

### **Late & Missed Assignments:**

It is the expectation that students in Women's Studies classes will submit assignments by, and sit tests and/or examinations on, the assigned dates; in the event that this expectation cannot be met, students are advised that the Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research follows the policies and practices of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and the Faculty of Social Science. As Western Senate requires, "Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department. For WESTERN Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness see: <http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/medical.pdf>.

### **Late Paper Policy:**

Late papers may be penalized at the rate of 2% per day including weekends. Again, if an assignment is late due to illness or other legitimate reasons, students must contact the professor as soon as possible and provide supporting documentation to the **Office of the Dean** of the appropriate faculty. Once the free extension has been used, no further extensions will be granted without **compelling and documented** reasons.

### **Participation and online discussion:**

You will be required to read for each module. Plan to read critically rather than just for content. You are expected to read all assigned materials for the module and to be prepared to participate in online class discussion.

*Scholastic Offences: Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following website:*

<http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholoff.pdf> .

(see <http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/exam/crsout.pdf>)

**Plagiarism is a major academic offense** (see the Scholastic Offense Policy in the Western Academic Calendar).

### **Plagiarism checking:**

Western University uses software for plagiarism checking. Students may be required to submit their written work in electronic form for plagiarism checking. Western Senate statement on plagiarism

---

## **SCHEDULE**

### **Introduction:**

This section is designed to introduce you to the course, to explain the working of each module, to go over the assignments, and to provide you with a context to think about the six modules that make up this course. Read the Orientation Guide, familiarize yourself with the syllabus, and introduce yourself on the forums!

### **Module 1: On the Cutting Edge**

In this module we look at contemporary cutting edge practices, ranging from forms of ‘virtual’ sex (such as sex in Second Life, teledildonics, etc.) through prosthetics and artificial bodies (such as the ‘Real Doll’ phenomenon and including current work and predictions about robotics and artificial intelligence) to re-thinkings of gender, from Intersex activism to various transgender and transsexual practices to theories of post-genderism.

*Required Readings:* Sullins, “Robots, Love, and Sex”; Kim “Why do Dills Die”; Dorsey “(Learning About) Machine Sex”; Varley, “The Barbie Murders”

*Recommended Readings:* Dvorsky and Hughes, “Postgenderism”; Mehta and Plaza, “Pornography in Cyberspace”

*Film:* Guys and Dolls (BBC, 2007); available online (link will be provided)

### **Module 2: No Sex, Please, We're Adolescents: From the Golden Age to New Wave SF**

Science fiction provides alternative ways to think about and imagine sex and sexuality. It has, in fact, done so for a long time despite the perception that sf in the so-called Golden Age. In this module, we look at Rob Latham’s argument that ideas about sexuality were a significant part of Golden Age of science fiction and we look at what that means in terms of the types of themes and technologies explored in these stories as well as the sorts of changes that set up the possibilities for greater openness that came with the New Wave.

*Required Readings:* Latham, "Sextrapolation"; Sturgeon, "World Well Lost"; Ellison, "A Boy and His Dog"; Del Rey, “Helen O’Loy”; C.L. Moore, “No Woman Born”.

### **Module 3: Transitions I**

The New Wave of the 1960s and 70s brought an influx of women, in particular, as well as people of colour and openly gay/lesbian writers into sf. Some of the best writing of the period, notably that by Ursula K Le Guin, Joanna Russ, James Tiptree Jr., Suzy McKee Charnas, and Samuel R. Delany was explicitly feminist. One of the major topics that emerged from this period of sf writing (and from this group of novelists) was the idea that binary biological sex is neither necessary or ideal. Taking alternate sexual biologies as the topic for a thought experiment is the basis of what is arguably the 20th century’s most important sf novel, Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of*

Darkness.

*Required Readings:* Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

#### **Module 4: Transitions II**

The Left Hand of Darkness was extraordinarily generative for sf in general and for feminist sf in particular. Many works written since its publication refer back to it in some way in order to think about how biological sex might work differently and also how differing biologies might interact with cultural constructions of gender. The works we are studying this week look at both inadvertent and deliberate changes to how human beings experience biological sex and the effects this has on perceptions of gender.

*Required Readings:* Hamilton and Joyce, "Eat Reecebread"; Carter, "Congenital Agenesis of Gender Ideation"; Blumlein. "The Brains of Rats"; Hopkinson, "Ganger (Ball Lightning)".

#### **Module 5: Prosthetic Bodies, Robot Sex, and Cyborg Realities**

This module traces the ways in which various forms of artificial biologies, including advanced prostheses, cyborgs, and even the completely non-human, including robots and artificial intelligences, might interact sexually. It asks questions about the “naturalness” of the human body and about the ways in which we understand forms of sexual practice that extend, or extend beyond, human corporeality.

*Required Readings:* Piercy, *He, She and It*;

*Recommended Readings:* Hollinger, "Something Like a Fiction".

#### **Module 6: Queering (Non)Reproductive Futures**

If we primarily imagine the future through ideas of procreation, what happens when procreation is impossible or difficult or produces entirely unexpected results? This module takes up the ways in which queer science fiction questions and/or re-works simplistic notions about the relationship between procreation, child rearing, and futurity. It imagines different (not always queer) ways of relating and asks if there is meaning in humanity outside of the ability to reproduce.

*Required Readings:* Geoff Ryman, *The Child Garden*

*This course outline is subject to change with sufficient notice.*