Western
UNIVERSITY · CANADA

**Department of Anthropology**

# ANTHRO 3379G-001: Engineering Ourselves – The Anthropology of Cyborgs

## BRIEF COURSE OUTLINE

## Winter 2025

*Date: August 9, 2024*

**Instructor and course information:**

Instructor: Dr. Jay Stock

Method of delivery: in person

Credit value: 0.5

Antirequisites: None.

Prerequisites: Completion of first year, including at least one course in Social Science, Science, or Health Sciences. Recommended but not required: Anthropology 2226A/B, 2237A/B or 2240A/B.

**Course Description:**

Humans have been indirectly and directly biohacking ourselves for millennia. We are all, as Donna Harraway writes "chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism: in short, we are all cyborgs". This course considers the evidence for human 'self-engineering' throughout human evolution, the archaeological record, and today. Throughout the course we will incorporate broad comparative perspectives on cultural influences on human anatomy, physiology, genetics, and the history, ethical, and social context of conscious human self-modification. The course begins by considering cybernetics and cyborgs and the evolutionary and archaeological evidence for human self-domestication, and self-engineering. We then consider historic perspectives, such as social Darwinism and eugenics, as a warning of how poor understandings of science and biological processes can be misapplied as ideas 'self-directed evolution'. Within this framework, we consider changes in science through the 20th century that include the 'ascent of information', and the contrast between predictions of cyborg dystopias and techno-optimism. In the second half of the course we consider contemporary issues in human self-modification, including the rise of biomedicine and chemical biohacking, genetic modification and synthetic biology, replacement organs and body parts, neural hacking and 'cyborg minds', artificial intelligence, aging and immortality, and the future of human-technology interactions, such as technosymbiosis or the 'singularity'.

A full course schedule including a week-by-week breakdown of topics and assigned readings will be available on the course's OWL Brightspace site before the first day of class.

**Course Materials:**

There is no textbook for this course. Readings, videos, and other material will be compiled and made available in OWL for each relevant week under the 'Weekly material' tab.

Registered students will be able to access course readings through the course site in OWL Brightspace before the first day of class.

**Evaluation:**

Grades will be based on the following:

Annotated Bibliographies – 10%
Problem Based Learning – Briefing Documents – 20%
Research Paper or Alternative Assignment – 35%
Final Exam – 25%
Participation – 10%

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