

# CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY [\(http://www.culanth.org/\)](http://www.culanth.org/)

[Log In \(/login\)](#) | [Contact Us \(mailto:culanth@culanth.org\)](mailto:culanth@culanth.org) | [Join SCA \(http://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1945&navItemNumber=764\)](http://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1945&navItemNumber=764)

## Teaching Embodiment through Technology

by Leah Zani and Marzieh Kaivanara

This three-hour class is intended to be modular: it is broken into three one-hour units (Embodiment, Technology, and the Case Study) that are designed to fit within a larger syllabus on the anthropology of the body. To facilitate this, each unit includes a selection of readings from which teachers may select appropriate titles. We have included generous readings that invite multiple connections across disciplines and theories. For example, the readings in the unit Technology could be connected to other readings in Women's Studies, Human-Computer Interaction, and Science and Technology Studies. The class ends with a case-study of Congenital Limb Deficiency in American Culture by Gelya Frank with which students can practice applying the theories they have learned.

### Learning Outcomes

After this lesson, students will:

1. Have a general understanding of theories of embodiment.
2. Have acquired knowledge of key literature at the intersection of studies of embodiment and technology.
3. Via the case study, have practiced applying theories of embodiment to ethnographic data while also engaging with existing scholarship.
4. Have further developed an awareness of their own body as a site of technology and technical power.

### Audience

Undergraduate students in Social and Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, Women's Studies, and Critical Theory disciplines.

Faculty teaching seminars on Body, Embodiment, and Technologized Bodies.



([https://typhoon-production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/image\\_attachment/image\\_attachment/2191/arcimboldo.jpg](https://typhoon-production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/image_attachment/image_attachment/2191/arcimboldo.jpg))

Arcimboldo, "An Anthropomorphic Still Life With Pots, Pans, Cutlery, a Loom, and Tools." May 13, 2015 via Art Net.

### 1: Embodiment

(Total time: 1 hour)

#### Overview of Theme

Humans are always located somewhere and at sometime, and our awareness is profoundly influenced by the fact that we have a body. Embodiment is often defined as "how culture gets under the skin" (Anderson-Fye 2012, 16). Theories about embodiment are relevant to many fields including psychology, religion, science, philosophy, sociology and anthropology. In this syllabus we look at embodiment via feminism. We suggest that gender is a

productive way to learn (and think) about embodiment because we all experience its paradoxes in our daily lives. While our focus is on gender, we have also included readings (in this section and the next) on race and disability for the teacher to choose from. Race and disability, for much the same reasons as for gender, are other important ways to connect students to the study of embodiment.

As noted by Csordas (1999, 143): "If embodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or inter-subjective ground of experience, then studies under the rubric of embodiment are not about the body per se. Instead they are about culture and experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of bodily being-in-the-world."

## Suggested Readings

### Core Readings

Alcoff, Linda M. 1999. "The Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment." *Radical Philosophy* 95: 15–26.

Anderson-Fye, E. P. 2012. "Anthropological Perspectives on Physical Appearance and Body Image." In *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*, Vol. 1, 15–22. San Diego: Academic Press.

Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893>)." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4: 519–31.

Csordas, Thomas J. 1999. "Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology." In *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*, edited by Gali Wiess and Honi Fern Haber, 143–64. New York: Routledge.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, and Lock, Margaret M. 1987. "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/maq.1987.1.1.02a00020>)." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 1, no. 1: 6–41.

### Ancillary Readings

Astuti, Rita. 1998. *It's a boy, It's a girl!: Reflections on Sex and Gender in Madagascar and Beyond* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/498/>). London: LSE Research Online.

Gammeltoft, Tine M. 2008. "Child Disability and Parental Moral Responsibility in Northern Vietnam: Towards Ethnographies of Intercorporeality (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2008.00533.x>)." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 4: 825–42.

Ralph, Laurance. 2012. "What Wounds Enable: The Politics of Disability and Violence in Chicago (<http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3270/3099>)." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 3.

Yancy, George. 2012. "Looking at Whiteness: Whiting Up and Blacking Out in 'White Chicks.'" In *Look, A White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*, 107–28, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

## Pre-Class Assignments

1. Selected readings from the above list.
2. View one or more videos (see below, Multimedia Content).
3. Bring five images to the class that represent embodiment.
4. Watch the film: "The Skin I live In" (2011) or "White Chicks" (2004) (see below, Multimedia Content).

## In-Class Activities

1. Share and discuss the images the students brought to class. For inspiration, we have included an anthropomorphic still life by the Italian Renaissance artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo, above. How do images such as this one portray embodiment?
2. If the teacher is comfortable with her class, she might help students think about embodiment by allowing students to gender her. For example, she might stand in front of the class and ask them to analyse how we perform gender. The students, then, get to analyse the teacher's performance of gender as a way to make the abstract theory real to them. Please note that this activity may be uncomfortable for some students or teachers, and should be done slowly and carefully. The activity may provoke feelings of embodied discomfort—which can be an important part of learning, but may also cause some students to shut down.
3. In the Mirror Exercise, students can be invited to pair up and face each other, as if they are each others' reflections in a shared mirror. Students may choose to touch palms (this makes the exercise easier, but some students may not be comfortable touching). One student leads by changing position or facial expression; the other pretends to be the mirror, mimicking their partner's position or expression. Partners then switch roles. Once they have had time to practice, they can try to do the exercise with their eyes closed. In the context of this class, the goal of the Mirror Exercise is to get students to experience how they learn to be in their bodies, how they model the bodies of others, and how they see themselves and expect others to see them.

Please note that this exercise does not require the students to be the same height, or to share any physical characteristics at all. The magic produced by this exercise can happen between any persons (as it does, to some degree, in all our interactions with other people).

4. Free write (choose one or more of the following questions):

- How do we understand our bodies as archives of the cultural and the personal?
- How does your bodily state affect your perception?
- How are experiences of embodiment heightened when we undergo some sort of ‘deviation’ from the ‘norm’?

## Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean that we are bodies and that we embody?
2. What are the differences between having a body and embodiment?
3. Think of some of the embodied gender habits that have been taken for granted.
4. How does gender influence our understanding of being in the world?
5. How does the body shape the way we think?

## Multimedia Content

“[The Skin I Live In](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EolQSTTtpI4) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EolQSTTtpI4)” trailer

“[White Chicks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6V25aqQbIM) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6V25aqQbIM)” trailer

[Introduction to embodiment](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYacDPOWsmE) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYacDPOWsmE) video

[Mind/Body](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lujqHjqOBsM) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lujqHjqOBsM) video

[How people’s bodily cues shape their internal states and their judgments of the external world](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGOsNkj3W4A) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGOsNkj3W4A). TEDx Oxbridge video

“[The Embodiment Lab](http://www.embodimentlab.com/research.html) (http://www.embodimentlab.com/research.html)” website

## 2: Technology

(Total time: 1 hour)

### Overview of Theme

With the emergence of ubiquitous personal technologies (e.g., smart phones) and biotechnologies (i.e., hearing aids) in our lives, interest on exploring and thinking about the intersection of embodiment and technology has increased. Embodiment in the context of this Teaching Tool centers around the notion that human reasoning and behavior is defined by our physical and social experience and interaction with the world. Although concepts of embodiment are not new, the relationship between the body and technology, extensively theorized in recent decades, has enabled radically different forms of interaction and of experiences of “being in the world.”

### Suggested Readings

#### Core Readings

Boellstorff, Tom. 2011. “[Placing the Virtual Body: Avatar, Chora, Cypherg](http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/b.9781405189491.2011.00032.x) (http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/b.9781405189491.2011.00032.x).” In *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Foucault, Michel. 2006. “Utopian Body.” In *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*, 229–34. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

De Preester, Helena. 2009. “[Technology and the Body: The \(im\)possibilities of Re-embodiment](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10699-010-9188-5) (http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10699-010-9188-5).” *Foundations of Science* 16, no. 2–3: 119–37.

Haraway, Donna. 2003. “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.” In *The Haraway Reader*, 7–46. London: Routledge.

#### Ancillary Readings

Coleman, Beth. 2009. “[Race as Technology](http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2008-018) (http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2008-018).” *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1: 177–207.

Jones, Caroline. 2006. Introduction to *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*, 1–4. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Hoang, Kimberly K. 2014. “[Competing Technologies of Embodiment: Pan-Asian Modernity and Third World Dependency in Vietnam’s Contemporary Sex Industry](http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0891243214523122) (http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0891243214523122).” *Gender & Society* 28, no. 4: 513–36.

McPherson, Tara. 2012. “[Why Are The Digital Humanities So White? Or Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation](http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/29) (http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/29).” In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, 139–60. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Price, Sara, George Roussos, George et al. 2009. *Technology and Embodiment: Relationship and Implications for Knowledge, Creativity and Communication* (http://www.beyondcurrenthorizons.org.uk/technology-and-embodiment-relationships-and-implications-for-knowledge-creativity-and-communication/). London Knowledge Lab.

## Pre-Class Assignments

1. Selected readings from the above list.
2. Bring to the class 5 images that represent the embodiment of technology.
3. Listen to the podcast “You Are Not So Smart,” episode 42 on Bodily Resonance (Multimedia Content).

## In-Class Activities

1. Share and discuss the images that students brought to class. How do the images portray technologized bodies?
2. Have students raise their hands if they have or use eyeglasses, hearing aids, breast implants, cavity fillings, shoe inserts, braces, orthotics, prosthetic limbs, canes, wheelchairs, blood pressure monitors, activity monitors (like fitbit, sleep monitors, calorie counters, blood pressure monitors, blood sugar monitors), medications, shoes, etc. See if you can get the whole class to raise their hands. Become increasingly more mundane and get the class to start to think about the limits, or boundaries, between what they think of as technology and as the body. Be sure to preface this activity by making sure students know that participation is optional and each student can choose to raise their hand or not for each question (for example, if a student does not wish to disclose that they have a cochlear implant).

## Discussion Questions

1. What would a body be without technology? What about non-biological bodies (like robots, AIs, avatars, etc)? What is a body anyway?!
2. How do technologies influence your experience of the world?
3. How do people use technologies to produce certain bodily abilities or styles?
4. Access to technologies, particularly biomedical technologies, is not the same for everyone. How might this unequal access to technologies produce different embodiments?

## Multimedia Content

Podcast “You Are Not So Smart,” episode 42 on [Bodily Resonance](http://youarenotsoSMART.com/2015/01/28/yanss-042-reducing-unconscious-biases-and-prejudices-with-rubber-hands-and-virtual-reality/) (http://youarenotsoSMART.com/2015/01/28/yanss-042-reducing-unconscious-biases-and-prejudices-with-rubber-hands-and-virtual-reality/)

[Embodiment Blog](https://embodimentblog.wordpress.com/tag/technological-embodiment/) (https://embodimentblog.wordpress.com/tag/technological-embodiment/)

## 3: Case Study

(Total time: 1 hour)

### Core Reading

Frank, Gelya. 1986. “[On Embodiment: A Case Study of Congenital Limb Deficiency in American Culture](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00114696) (http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00114696).” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 10, no. 3: 189–219.

### In-Class Activities

1. Begin by outlining Gelya’s article on the board as a group. Make separate sections for ethnographic data, key arguments, and key theories/sources.
2. Free write: Do you agree with Gelya’s interpretation? How might you build on her analysis to demonstrate your own point of view? Try using another reading from this class to support your point of view. For example:
  - Identify another reading that contradicts part of Gelya’s argument.
  - Identify another reading that supports part of Gelya’s argument.
  - Use other readings to create you own interpretation of Gelya’s ethnographic data.

### Discussion Questions

1. Our abilities and bodies change throughout our lives. What does the study of disabilities tell us about embodiment, more generally?
2. How does Gelya gather ethnographic data on embodiment? What are her methods?
3. How does she present this data to a reader who may not be familiar with the experience of limb deficiency?
4. How is the body part of producing anthropological knowledge (as fieldworkers and as subjects of study)?

## Metadata

### *Published On*

May 17, 2015

### *Cite As*

Zani, Leah and Kaivanara, Marzieh. "Teaching Embodiment through Technology." Teaching Tools, *Cultural Anthropology* website, May 17, 2015.  
<http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/682-teaching-embodiment-through-technology>

### *Conversation*

- [Teaching Tools \(/conversations/16-teaching-tools\)](#)

### *Created By*

Paula Serafini

### *Share*

 (<https://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.culanth.org%2Ffieldsights%2F682-teaching-embodiment-through-technology&t=Teaching%20Embodiment%20through%20Technology>)  (<https://twitter.com/share?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.culanth.org%2Ffieldsights%2F682-teaching-embodiment-through-technology>)  (mailto:?subject=Check%20out%20this%20article%20on%20CulAnth&body=I%20just%20read%20this%20article%20on%20CulAnth%20and%20I%20wanted%20to%20share%20it%20with%20teaching-embodiment-through-technology)

## Comments

### Post a Comment

Please [log in or register \(/login\)](#) to comment