

# GRAY ARE

**“For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”**

— Hamlet

**“Let us be diverted by none of those sophistical contrivances wherewith we are so industriously plied and belabored – contrivances such as groping for some middle ground between the right and the wrong, vain as the search for a man who should be neither a living man nor a dead man.”**

— Abraham Lincoln

**“Freedom would be not to choose between black and white but to abjure such prescribed choices.”**

— Theodor Adorno

**“It is impossible, or not easy, to alter by argument what has long been absorbed by habit.”**

— Aristotle

**“People almost invariably arrive at their beliefs not on the basis of proof but on the basis of what they find attractive.”**

— Blaise Pascal, *De l'art de persuader*

**“The earth is round and flat at the same time. This is obvious. That it is round appears indisputable; that it is flat is our common experience, also indisputable. The globe does not supersede the map; the map does not distort the globe.”**

— Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*

**“If you turn the other cheek, you can be enslaved for 1,000 years.”**

— Malcolm X

**“When you're the victim of the behavior, it's black and white; when you're the perpetrator, there are a million shades of gray.”**

— Laura Schlessinger

**“In times of extremes, extremists win. Their ideology becomes a religion, anyone who doesn't puppet their views is seen as an apostate, a heretic, or a traitor, and moderates in the middle are annihilated. Fiction writers are particularly suspect because they write about human beings, and people are morally ambiguous. The aim of ideology is to eliminate ambiguity.”**

— Margaret Atwood

**“The greater the ambiguity, the greater the pleasure.”**

— Milan Kundera

**“Finding consensus and common ground is dull! Nobody wants to watch a civilized discussion that acknowledges ambiguity and complexity. We want to see fireworks!”**

— Calvin, *Calvin and Hobbes*

**“Normality is a paved road: It's comfortable to walk, but no flowers grow on it.”**

— Vincent van Gogh

**“Sometimes it's better to bend the law a little in special cases.”**

— Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

**“You must not forget that a monster is only a variation, and that to a monster the norm is monstrous.”**

— John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

**“The world is a thing of utter inordinate complexity and richness and strangeness that is absolutely awesome.”**

— Douglas Adams

The Thematic Option Honors Program, part of the USC Dana and David Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, is the University of Southern California's honors general education alternative: an interdisciplinary program marked by academic rigor that encourages exciting and vibrant discussion within its community. Each year, approximately 200 outstanding freshmen from all majors participate in its unique combination of core courses, writing classes, tutorials, and events.

The Thematic Option conference provides an opportunity for undergraduate students to enrich their academic experience by publicly presenting their ideas and research. In response to a general call for papers, Thematic Option students developed topics under this year's theme, **Gray Area**, to be presented as part of a panel. Each panel is composed of five to six students, with a faculty member serving as the panel's chair and respondent. A question and answer session follows the presentation of papers in each panel. Topics are reflective of students' various disciplines and interests and focus on issues ranging from politics to popular culture. Possible themes include stark contrasts and absolutes; complexities and complications; nuance; ambiguity; right and wrong; justice and righteousness; reciprocity; relativism; self and social responsibility; unreliable narrators; truth versus fiction; subjectivity; morals and ethics; equivocation; boundaries and liminal spaces; binaries and spectra; identity fluidity; ambiversion; compromise; uncertainty; heroes and monsters; vigilantism; realpolitik; power and its discontents; high, low, and popular culture; postmodernism; or the student's own unique interpretation.

## Student Conference Coordinating Committee

Bryant Chang  
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Aaron Ghrist  
Sophie Hammond  
Katherine Hayes  
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Stephanie Wicburg

Many thanks to the faculty and staff  
who have played an integral role in the success  
of the Thematic Option Research Conference.

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# Alone Together

Moderated by Professor Joseph Boone  
Departments of English and Gender and Sexuality Studies

Wednesday, April 17  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Milan Amritraj**

## **Trajectories of Queer Diaspora: Immigrant Subjectivity in *The Yellow Rose***

Does a change in audience alter the subject itself? Despite the relative wealth of analysis regarding the effects of geographical location on gender and sexuality, a notable omission from current academia is the matter of immigration for the intended purpose of queer acceptance, that is, an inquiry into whether or not an individual can effectively gain personal and societal approval for their queer identity by shifting an external factor: nationality. Drawing upon notable theorists, such as Butler, Spelman, and Rich, this paper applies the above hypothesis to *The Yellow Rose* by Yoshiya Nobuko, a queer-romance novel set in 1920s Japan. Specific emphasis is placed on the protagonist, Katsuragi Misao, and her decision to abnegate life in Japan following a tragic inability to realize her love for her student, Urakami Reiko. Close reading of Katsuragi's behavior at the story's conclusion, however, demonstrates that the move did not grant her any meaningful catharsis. Born from *The Yellow Rose*, my core proposition is that queer diaspora fails to ameliorate gender trouble. Ultimately, I conclude by offering a potential solution to Katsuragi's internalized turmoil, rooted in a relocation of the defining force behind gender in the individual rather than in a broader society.

**Lan Duong**

## **From Limbo to Living: The Necessity and Inevitability of Human Connection in *A General Theory of Oblivion***

Everyone occasionally needs alone time, but for Ludovica "Ludo" Fernandes Mano, the agoraphobic protagonist of José Eduardo Agualusa's *A General Theory of Oblivion*, "alone time" lasts decades. In the novel, Ludo builds a wall to shut herself in her apartment as the civil wars of post-independence Angola rage on outside. Nobody knows she is there, and while she technically exists, she is not truly alive. Day by day, Ludo withdraws deeper into herself until she befriends an Angolan boy named Sabalu who tears down her wall. With this act, Sabalu provides Ludo with what sociologist Georg Simmel, in his essay "Bridge and Door," calls a "door," and consequently, disparate character storylines coalesce and spill onto Ludo's doorstep. Simmel defines doors metaphorically as dynamic facilitators of communication and emphasizes the active effort involved in human connection. In pairing Agualusa's novel and Simmel's essay, my paper contends that the connections between characters are necessary for their lives to have value; to truly live is to be seen and remembered. However, I push Simmel's argument further and suggest that, in both *A General Theory of Oblivion* and our broader lives, human connection is not always an active effort, but an inevitability.

**Will Forker**

## **The 21st Century Existential Antihero: Sleeping off Capitalism and Consumerism**

With social media advertisements appearing to listen to your conversations and the latest styles and trends influencing our life decisions, taking a break from consumerism as a whole may not be such a crazy idea. In his 1960s book, *The Consumer Society*, revered French thinker Jean Baudrillard stated that consumerism and advertisements are inescapable entities, a language we speak. Further, Columbia professor Jonathan Crary's book, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, comments on how capitalist society drives us to never stop working. Unsatisfied with this materialistic cycle, the anonymous narrator of Ottessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, escapes this system by spending a vast majority of her time asleep or sedated, a stark contrast to most other upper-class young adults of the early 2000s. Even though the consumer society of New York rewards her attractive looks, wealthy family history, and ivy-league status, she squanders these things to find meaning in her empty life, replacing wealth and abundance with sleep and campy VHS movies. Through my research, I argue that the narrator's quest to break free from Baudrillard's and Crary's images of a money-driven world draws parallels to famous existential heroes, including Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. The "year of rest and relaxation," in all forms it takes, functions as

an escape from and recognition of capitalism's artifice, allowing the narrator and readers to explore the question: how can we uncover beauty and meaning in our world?

**Diana Hong**

**“To Infinity and Beyond!”:  
Complexities of Friendships in *Toy Story***

*A friend is one of the nicest things you can have and one of the best things you can be.*  
—Winnie The Pooh

What is a friend? Scholars have historically defined friendship as an affectionate, loving bond between two people. Yet recent critical analysis has complicated the subject, introducing the concept of friendships between nonhuman entities: animals, toys, robots, and even imaginary company. The movie *Toy Story* explores this possibility through a tale of toys who have come to life. As the film follows a Buzz Lightyear action figure's journey to survive the brutal realities of a child's bedroom, cruel treatment of both toys and humans to each other in the name of affection reveals subtle forms of cruelty and ambiguities, calling for the reevaluation of these unconventional companionships. Some critics have suggested a connection between the themes of intimacy and murder, while others assert the purity of children's love for toys. In my particular focus on Buzz Lightyear, I expand on these theories to evaluate the idealizations and misconceptions of the nature of friendship.

**Yuna Jeong**

**Unheard Among the Unheard:  
Lina in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy***

*Stories matter. Many stories matter.  
Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize.*  
—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

How many stories of Native Americans do you know? There are few enough that most can count on one hand, mention one or two familiar names. Disney's *Pocahontas*, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, a paragraph on Sacagawea in history textbooks. These are all Native American stories processed from an explicitly non-Native American perspective. Rarely has a Native American point of view been given such priority in American literature as in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, in which Lina, one of the main narrators, is an indentured Native woman living in the 1600s. One would expect scholars to rejoice at the voice of a female Native American in contrast to that of the white male European that dominated the time period, but hardly any substantial academic exploration of Lina's character exists. My paper will attempt to fill this gap and address the importance of Lina's point of view as a non-white, non-male, and non-elite person in early colonial America. I will further posit that ultimately Lina operates outside of existing race, gender, and class roles altogether, augmenting the importance of her character. She is not just a voice; she is a human, too.

**Hazle Thunes**

**The Sharp White Background of Baseball History:  
Ignoring Race in *A League of Their Own***

Erasure is a very powerful and prevalent tool in today's society. From daily microaggressions to large-scale systematic oppression, many groups find their marginalization normalized. *A League of Their Own* shows the subtle ways in which erasure can manifest itself, such as a lack of recognition for marginalized groups in the retelling of our collective history. Long considered a classic, *A League of Their Own* succeeds in its message of feminism by showing the triumphs of the first professional female baseball players. But it fails to represent the presence of the many black athletes who also played, and thus normalizes their erasure from the history of baseball. I will explore the ways erasure presents itself in *A League of Their Own* through the theories of Equality and Difference feminism as well as the words of Claudia Rankine as she describes the continued diminishing of black individuals through daily occurrences. Though *A League of Their Own* does a great deal to bring to light the story of women in baseball, by its exclusion of black players, the story remains incomplete.

# Environmental Studies

Moderated by Professor Roberto Diaz

Departments of Comparative Literature and Latin American and Iberian Cultures

Wednesday, April 17

6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.

Carnegie

**Michael Ahn**

## **Murderous Totoro:**

### **The Evolving Role of Nature from *My Neighbor Totoro* to *Princess Mononoke***

Nature is a frequently addressed theme in Miyazaki's films, and *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Princess Mononoke* are no exceptions. Through the use of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, I explore the critical differences between the characters that represent nature in the two films. In *My Neighbor Totoro*, I argue that Totoro, while lovable and affable, does not possess any sophisticated characteristics due to its one-dimensional traits that fail to develop beyond the typical benevolent hero. *Princess Mononoke*, on the other hand, develops the characteristics of Totoro into two unique characters, Moro and Deer God. Moro represents the maternal role of nature while the Deer God represents the indifferent, paradoxical part of nature that is more complex and puzzling to examine. I conclude by stating that this puzzling absence of pure good and evil characterizing the role of nature fits well with Nietzsche's statements on the dangerous and unreliable practice of defining absolute good and evil, which proves that the narrative of *Princess Mononoke* possesses more theoretical maturity than *My Neighbor Totoro*.

**Cameryn Baker**

## **The Pre-Space Travel Guide to Space Travel:**

### **Warnings in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles***

Scientists, businessmen, and professors are all saying that it is time we go inhabit Mars. The rockets are ready and the vacations await us. All that is left to do is decide to go. However, the alluring fantasy of spreading out a beach towel on hot Martian sand should not be the deciding factor. An event as drastic as extraterrestrial homesteading is not something that can be blindly rushed into. While in this gray area between staying on Earth and leaving it, we must be sure to avoid rashness by tiptoeing towards the future in careful steps. This paper highlights the importance of balancing our feelings of optimism with a proper amount of caution, using Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* as a guide. Bradbury's forward-looking stories of human expeditions to Mars serve as a useful tool to provoke the care and thoughtfulness needed to move humankind from Earth. Though published in 1945, the failures of his characters may be our chance to avoid the same mistakes.

**Fiona Baquerizo**

## **Happily Never After:**

### **False Claims of Feminism in Lucile Hadžihalilović's *Innocence***

And they lived happily *never* after... Or at least in Lucile Hadžihalilović's 2004 film *Innocence* they do. Set in an idyllic forest at an all-girls boarding school, the film follows children groomed to be beautiful and domestic young women. But an unknown danger lurks to threaten the girls' safety. The film presents the story as a fairy tale but underscores it with horror genre tropes to reveal precarious girlhood in a new way. In doing so, it claims to be a feminist work. But, what does it take to qualify as feminist? Does *Innocence's* comment on harsh societal pressures for adolescent girls hit the mark? Or, should it include a call-to-action and a message of empowerment for girls? After analyzing Hadžihalilović's film, in which girls are doomed if they submit to the system and doomed if they rebel, I will combat the film's self-proclaimed feminist title with Sharon Smith's feminist theory, claiming that forcing girls into traditional roles perpetuates their social marginalization. Though adhering to fairy tale tropes is a unique way to expose the harsh realities of girlhood, it is not sufficient enough to claim to be feminist. In a world of media-overload, it is critical to present girls with empowering tales that enfranchise them and allow them to seek hopeful futures.

**Brooke Elkjer**

**Mixed Signals:  
How Gatedness Relates to Refugee Politics in *Exit West***

In an age where you turn on the television and are likely to encounter stories about border security, walls, or terrorism within just minutes, it is important to take a step back and consider an immigrant narrative that centers around the *people* rather than the politics. Mohsin Hamid creates this kind of story for his characters Saeed and Nadia in *Exit West*. Saeed and Nadia immigrate from their unnamed home country to various refugee camps that serve as a dark mirror image of gated communities due to their isolated and restricted nature. I argue that this causes their lives to be characterized by unfair treatment and silencing, which contemporary scholarship refers to as "gatedness." In the case of Saeed and Nadia, the idea of gatedness manifests itself through governmental restrictions put on the couple's lives. My presentation will highlight the dissonance between the facade of humanitarianism and the reality of refugee treatment by global governments.

**Surya Nehra**

**A Light in the Depths:  
Redefining Liberty through Ballard's *The Drowned World***

The conversation surrounding climate change is one largely centered on institutions. In our search for a solution to this grave threat, institutions offer readily accessible scapegoats. More importantly, they give us the confidence that with a few tweaks, civilization can continue largely unchanged. J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*, however, takes a much bleaker view. Written in 1962 at the start of the environmental movement, this startlingly prescient work describes a world where climate change has all but destroyed civilization, allowing nature to reclaim what was once hers. Ballard's novel is commonly regarded as a criticism of human life in the twentieth century, with scholarship writing ad nauseum on its critiques of capitalism and racism. But, lurking within Ballard's world of giant lizards and post-apocalyptic looters is a radical paradigm shift with the capacity to change what it means to free. As I shall argue, it is not enough to rectify institutions when the conceptions of liberty that underlie them are tainted with fatal anthropocentrism. Through this lens, *The Drowned World* no longer takes aim at simply the mechanisms of civilization; it seeks to transform its very foundation.

**Jon Ranieri**

**Monkey Gone to Rumania:  
Ecofeminism in Carter's "Lady of the House of Love"**

*There was a guy/ An underwater guy that controlled the sea/  
Got killed by ten million pounds of sludge/ From New York and New Jersey  
—The Pixies, "Monkey Gone to Heaven"*

Critics since the 1970s have established how Angela Carter's literature questions and deconstructs the long-standing inequalities between men and women. For this, many critics have labeled her work as feminist. However, in stories such as "Lady of the House of Love," I find that Angela Carter disputes more than just sexual or gender norms. Carter chooses to question and deconstruct the abandon with which we, for the sake of societal progress, treat the environment. In a way not yet identified by scholars, Carter wrote "Lady of the House of Love" to explore and demonstrate what authors Susanne Gruss and Val Plumwood later referred to as the, "connection between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature." This presentation will investigate Carter's vampire story to accomplish two goals: give a brief introduction to ecofeminism—the overlap between ecocritical and feminist writings—and show Carter's take on naïveté as being the cause of modern oppression. This topic bears heavy significance to a world becoming ever more ravaged by climate change and to one in which women everywhere face challenges in society based on their sex.

# If You Like My Body

Moderated by Professor William Handley  
Department of English

Wednesday, April 17  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

**Nadia Filanovsky**

## **Flyer or Bust: The Cheerleading Physique(s) in Megan Abbott's *Dare Me***

*You know, there's no more dangerous creature on Earth than the teenage girl.*  
—Miranda Kenneally, *Catching Jordan*

In the world of high school cheerleading, levels of determination and insecurity run high in equal measure. This paper interprets Megan Abbott's noir *Dare Me* and the competition between the girls on the squad in their individual pursuits to become the "Flyer." The Flyer is the cheerleader at the top of the pyramid who does the riskiest stunts and in turn receives the greatest rewards. All of the girls are obsessed with this role for two reasons: it allows advancement in the sport and helps them feel less insecure. I argue that the obsession with this role, coupled with the prevailing insecurities of the girls on the team, leads to many of the destructive behaviors observed in the novel, such as eating disorders and threatening one another. These actions become so horrendous that they eventually culminate in murder. To make such an argument, I analyze the novel and the sport of cheerleading through gender theorist Judith Butler's concept of a "field of bodies." Using this lens, I identify and explain the field of bodies that exists within high school and the much more limited one within cheerleading, which glorifies the Flyer and leads to the obsession with the position.

**Katelyn Lee**

## **The Horrors of Puberty: Hormone Monsters in Netflix's *Big Mouth***

*Andrew: "What the hell is wrong with me?"*  
*Maurice: "Nothing. You're a perfectly normal gross little dirtbag."*  
—*Big Mouth*

Is "puberty" a dirty word? Society seems to answer, "yes." Due to the culturally contentious nature of adolescence and sexuality, society continues to lack the comprehensive sex education necessary for adolescents to adequately develop their identity and selfhood. But, Netflix's hit animated series *Big Mouth* aims to combat the stigma surrounding adolescent sexuality by celebrating the "horror" of puberty. The show's satirical portrayal of a group of middle school friends and their adventures with the hormone monsters they imagine to guide them through their individual sexual awakenings—and all the changes that come with adolescence—makes even the targeted post-adolescent audience wish they had their own hormone monsters. By analyzing the different ways that Maurice the Hormone Monster helps twelve-year-old Andrew Glouberman navigate puberty and by expanding upon Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory, I argue that *Big Mouth* exposes the good, bad, and funny truth of adolescence to validate the feelings of adolescents in a way that our society has failed to do on its own.

**Ava Luthin**

## **GamerBoyFreud: Life, Death, and Power in *Inside***

What if the goal of life was death? For the leading protagonist of the platformer puzzle video game *Inside*, by PlayDead Studios, it is. With the rise of the digital gaming world, the role of death and violence in consumer media has come to the forefront of many studies such as Jeffrey Douglas' article, "Wooden Reels and the Maintenance of Virtual Life: Gaming and the Death Drive in a Digital Age," which argues that death in video games symbolizes rebirth. However, this study and most others largely neglect to explore the motif of death as a symbol for control in games such as *Inside*. Additionally, the avatar girl exemplifies the instinct coined by Sigmund Freud as the "death drive" in his 1920 essay, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." She is ruled by her Freudian will to die, but she takes it one



step further by utilizing death as a means of consolidating power. In this essay, I will explore the ways in which *Inside* not only instills Freud's death drive into the game's plotline, but also expands on the ways in which video games invert our understanding of survival by making the dead strive for life while the living strive for death.

**Gwendolyn Strasberg**

**Ryan Gosling Explained My Mortgage, Now I'm Homeless:  
Mass Denial in *The Big Short***

*Truth is like poetry. And most people fucking hate poetry.*  
—Overheard at a Washington, D.C. bar

Ryan Gosling walks into a bar and starts talking about Collateralized Debt Obligations. What do you do? Today, proximity to fame feels almost akin to being famous yourself. In *The Big Short*, Adam McKay explores this undeniable allure of elite culture with celebrity cameos explaining the horrible 2008 housing market crash that left millions of people without homes or savings accounts, all the while making an example of their audience. By invoking a parallel of the characters' denial in the viewers themselves, the movie illustrates the manner in which we use the ostentatious appeal of stardom as a diversion from more disagreeable truths dispersed throughout our daily lives. Freud's *Group Psychology and an Analysis of the Ego* explores the allure of celebrity figures and defines the "ego-ideal" as an object of love which a group of people aim to emulate. Examining the film through the idea of the ego-ideal frames our obsession with fame and celebrity culture as an innate aspect of human nature rather than our fatal flaw. However, it still raises the question: does the fact that denial is natural mean it truly brings us happiness?

**Alex Szabo**

**I Write, Therefore I Am:  
Writing and Redefinition of Power Dynamics in Octavia Butler's *Kindred***

*If a story is in you, it has got to come out.*  
—William Faulkner

*Kindred* follows the perilous adventures of Dana, a black writer in 1976 California, who is repeatedly transported back and forth to antebellum Maryland. She must protect her white ancestor, Rufus, from danger he puts himself in, turning into his quasi-slave. Dana suffers nearly every hardship that slavery has to offer as a result of literary scholar Florian Bast's idea of "multiple jeopardy," which denotes both racial and gendered discrimination that combine to oppress Dana's agency. Despite these obstacles, Dana uses her power as a writer to inform the plantation, bringing an enlightened 20th century perspective to the 19th century. I will examine the power dynamics of *Kindred* through a gendered and racial lens, and the role of writing in redefining the existing power dynamic. Ultimately, Dana is a work of fiction, but also non-fiction; she acts as the voice of black females across time, a call to awareness about the legacy and trauma of slavery. She has a story in her, and she needs you to hear it.

# Medium Is the Message

Moderated by Professor Mike Petitti  
Thematic Option Honors Program

Wednesday, April 17  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Gutenberg

**Tahrima Bhuiyan**

## **It's a Smaller World:**

### **Understanding the Contemporary Refugee Experience through Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West***

"Geography is destiny," Mohsin Hamid writes in *Exit West*. And for Saeed and Nadia, the two young adult protagonists of the novel, this destiny is a bitter one. The geography into which Nadia and Saeed have been born and raised is that of a poor nation in the midst of war, where people are "blown to bits," teenagers play soccer with severed human heads, and bodies hang, swaying in the wind. In such a place, the only destiny that awaits Nadia and Saeed is a premature death. So, like tens of millions of refugees around the world, Nadia and Saeed are forced to escape the danger in their own country to seek a new home and a new destiny in a world that does not welcome such asylum-seekers. Drawing on contemporary refugee scholarship, I will analyze the stages of the refugee journey and the struggles that refugees face along the way. I will further discuss the way Hamid explores two opposing phenomena which coexist in reality: one, increasing interconnectedness due to technological innovations and globalization, and two, increasing divisions and fear as a backlash to this interconnectedness. In this paper, I explore the way in which Hamid presents the real experience behind Warsan Shire's iconic line: "No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark."

**Natalie Chak**

## **Baby, Can't You See:**

### **How Britney Caused the Financial Crisis**

Have you ever thought about just how much time you spend following the lives of celebrities, whether it be updating yourself on the most recent Kardashian feuds or reading about celebrities' favorite brunch spots on *The Daily Mail*? This kind of behavior is mocked by director Adam McKay in his 2016 film, *The Big Short*. On the surface, the film merely recounts the financial crisis from the perspective of several hedge fund managers who profited from it by betting against the housing market. But, McKay also makes the unique artistic decisions to incorporate stock footage and "celebrity interludes," featuring names like Britney Spears and Margot Robbie, and in this way critiques America's obsession with celebrity culture. I argue that these unusual techniques imply that America's obsession with celebrity culture was partly responsible for the 2008 financial crisis. That McKay's message failed to reach its audience, however, is indicated by the way celebrity culture has become even more influential since 2014. Why is the world's youngest self-made billionaire reality TV star Kylie Jenner? How did a TV personality become the president? We seem to live in a world where celebrity shapes not only our financial realities but also our political and social spheres at levels we barely seem to understand.

**Katie Kim**

## **Reading the Sheet Music of Thyself: The Musicality of Maturation in *Demian***

*Ever since I was a child I have...felt musical things inside of me as natural and self-evident.*  
—Hermann Hesse, *Demian*

Your voice cracks all the time, you grow hair everywhere; growing up seems so physical. But, the very novel of maturation, the *bildungsroman*, focuses on its protagonist's mental and moral development. Maturation is metaphysical and must be explored through metaphysical things, but scholars scarcely consider the experience of music, especially in the classic *bildungsroman* *Demian* by Hermann Hesse. In *Demian*, schoolboy Emil Sinclair seeks wisdom from mentors and tries to define his individual identity, all while listening to music. However, he struggles with what scholar Terri Brown calls "doppelgangers." He splits himself into two dichotomic selves: the inexperienced child Sinclair and the knowledgeable adult Sinclair. My paper provides relief to this tension, as I argue that music—genres, composers, and the music itself—pushes Sinclair to reconcile his double identities and realize life's holistic

composition. With the resolution of Sinclair's journey, the reader must consider their own question: What kind of music did you listen to while you were growing up?

**Lauren Sanders**

**Lesbians, Brecht, and Rage:  
*Nanette* as a Product of Comedic Tradition and an Agent of Empowerment**

When you attend a stand up comedy show, do you expect to be on the receiving end of a tearful bout of rage? If your answer is “no,” you are in the same boat as most audiences of *Nanette*. Hannah Gadsby's 2018 “comedy special” is an hour-long stand up roller coaster that shocks viewers with its juxtaposition of lighthearted comedy and unadulterated fury. *Nanette*'s groundbreaking style of comedy has not yet been dissected by scholars, but I posit that Gadsby's comedic structure and goals are akin to those of a figure very familiar to academia: 20th century German playwright Bertolt Brecht. In synthesizing the work of Gadsby with that of Brecht, I will consider to what extent the bones of political comedy—strategy, goals of efficacy—can remain unchanged in the face of evolving standards of empowerment and oppression, bridging the gap between Brecht's satire of capitalism and Gadsby's excoriation of homophobia. It is crucial to understand *Nanette* as part of this older comedic tradition because it allows us to understand how comedy has evolved, why it must continue to evolve as a political stage, and how we can critique it in order to facilitate even more strength in diversity in mainstream media.

**Aarohi Sheth**

**Stay Woke:  
Sight and Photography in Jordan Peele's *Get Out***

*That's the power of story and genre.  
You can ask a white person to see the world through the eyes of a black person for an hour and a half.  
—Jordan Peele, *The New York Times**

*Get Out* is a disturbing horror film that confronts race head on with Chris, a young, black photographer and the Armitages, a psychotic, white family that enjoys hosting garden parties and transplanting the brains of white people into the bodies of black people. With *Get Out*, Peele has taken white and black America's broken relationship and turned it into a nightmare to get white audiences to understand the black experience. Using scientific studies on the sense of sight and anthropological articles on photographic methods, my presentation will focus on how Peele strategically used the sense of sight, Chris' camera, and photography to frame the audience's experience. Seeing is so often believing, so by subtly playing with our dependence on sight and using the camera as a means of visibility, Peele allows viewers to experience and comprehend race in a different way. As a result, we are forced to face the racial tensions in our society—a society in which racism is more present than we like to think.

**Mei Zhang**

**Fifty Shades of Fanfiction:  
How *Fifty Shades of Grey* Ensnared Middle-Aged Women**

Hot sex is about handcuffs, leather, and controlling men—at least, that is what *Fifty Shades of Grey* seems to say. *Fifty Shades of Grey*, by E.L. James and later directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson, follows the whirlwind romance between Anastasia Steele, a recent college graduate, and Christian Grey, a self-made, 27-year-old multimillionaire. Critics regard this as “glazingly dull,” and yet this story was riveting for the primarily female audience, making \$571 million at the box office. Another riveting fact: *Fifty Shades* was originally published as *Twilight* fanfiction. Due to its origins, *Fifty Shades* understandably exhibits many fanfiction storytelling elements: specifically, Ana's character was designed to be a “Mary Sue,” a popular fanfiction trope that basically allows fans to empower themselves by writing themselves into the narrative. I argue that it is Anastasia Steele's status as a Mary Sue that allows women to seamlessly relate to and find empowerment within her character. This is why women are so taken with *Fifty Shades*: because they feel sexually empowered through Ana. That they do so also reveals the severe marginalization and lack of representation in society for women to explore their sexuality.

# To Thine Own Self

Moderated by Professor Devin Griffiths  
Department of English

Wednesday, April 17  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

**Dillon Cranston**

## **I Am Not a Camera**

“I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.” These lines open the story of Christopher Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin* and are arguably the most significant of the book. Isherwood’s delivery is dispassionate, unsympathetic, and robotic. Here, he is declaring his intent to narrate as though through the lens of a camera: he will state facts, report evidence, and take care not to form attachments with his subjects. This is how prevailing scholarship has read these famous lines, but I argue that this take forms an inaccurate understanding of the narrator, mistaking his mood in one moment for a sweeping summary of his character and conduct. In doing so, this reading depersonalizes a highly personal story, and strips the work of its themes of loss in a time of social upheaval.

**Amanda Hmelar**

## **When the Body Is a Haunted House: The Problem of Embodiment within Angela Carter’s Female Gothic**

Allow yourself to imagine a haunted house that surrounds and traps you, forcing you to confront your worst fears with no escape. In Angela Carter’s short story “The Lady of the House of Love” a young Countess is cursed by her family to be a vampire, despite her reluctance to feed on humans’ blood. Motifs of gothic mansions and settings convey an environment of entrapment and discontent that illustrates the Countess’ haunted existence. Literary scholar Ellen Moers coined the genre of the female gothic, which describes the use of gothic structures and settings to symbolize the social oppressions women faced throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. In my paper, I discuss the body as a haunted house, since the Countess is trapped within it despite rejecting it. The misalignment of the body and the self represents a severe personal conflict, passed off by critics of Carter’s work as antifeminist as the Countess seemingly desires to revert back to a weakened human state by rejecting her supernatural ability. However, the Countess’ pursuit of liberation is, in itself, a process of empowerment and reclamation of identity, dealing less with aggression and power and more with liberation. The question is: can she really escape?

**Carmen Mascarenhas**

## **A Duality of Desire: The Stranger’s Agency in Her Own Strangerhood in *Quicksand***

Nella Larsen, in her 1928 novel *Quicksand*, captures the inescapable loneliness of being foreign to others *and* to oneself through the perspective of her protagonist, Helga Crane. Helga moves constantly, searching for a community that claims her as its own while also elevating herself above the very people to whom she wants to belong. Larsen’s narrative therefore suggests that what makes someone a “stranger” is not just how she is received in new places—a phenomenon observed in sociologist Georg Simmel’s 1908 essay “The Stranger”—but also the mindset with which she goes into them. Considering these binary qualities of strangerhood, we see that Helga’s two irreconcilable longings for individuality and community ensure that she will be unhappy anywhere that she goes. While scholarship on Larsen’s *Quicksand* tends to focus on everything that gets in the way of Helga’s happiness besides Helga herself, I argue that *Quicksand* communicates the essential element of strangerhood that external factors cannot account for: personal agency. Helga, whether consciously or unconsciously, takes advantage of her own loneliness to indulge her impulsive, self-serving streaks, leaving each community she inhabits before she has time to assimilate, and thus remains a perpetual stranger.

**Ariana Isabel Sokolov**

**Alone Together:**

**An Analysis of How Sylvia Plath's Poems in *Ariel* Inform the Experiences of Social Media Sad Girls**

It is hard living in a man's world. Women experience mansplaining, body dysmorphia, and misogyny, and that is just a normal Monday. Although critics revere Sylvia Plath as a feminist poet, Plath never intended to write feminist poetry. Rather, she notes that her poetry's main prerogative is to reveal an underlying truth about mental illness hidden beneath cultural taboos. However, scholars fail to examine how Plath's accounts of mental illness interlace with those of her distinctly female experience. In her book *Ariel*, Plath's poetry details how her experiences as a mother and wife coincide with her depression. Similarly, many women have risen up to share their truths about sadness anonymously on social media in the 21st century's "sad girl" movement. Plath and the movement highlight how sadness is a prominent part of the female, rather than male or human, experience. Plath and the movement raise two important questions: why does sadness play a prominent role in the female experience and why is expressing these widespread feelings culturally taboo? Lauren Berlant's theories on female vulnerability help answer this question by illustrating that female suffering is produced by a patriarchal society and that expressing this vulnerability only solidifies the patriarchy's power. I will argue that applying Berlant's theories to the sad girl movement and Plath's work illustrates that the mental illness women experience and the cultural stigma they feel in expressing these feelings is grounded in patriarchal oppression. Understanding the root of this phenomenon uncovers why many women are afraid to reveal their true experiences.

**Magenta Tewksbury**

**Waving a Flag of Femininity:**

**Gender Performance in Megan Abbott's *Dare Me***

In young adult literature, extensive discussion of some social issues is distinctly absent. Gender performance—the visible display of characteristics to define one's gender identity—is especially obscured. Megan Abbott's novel *Dare Me*, however, is a break from that tradition of concealing gender performance. *Dare Me* is a young adult novel about conflict within a high school girls' cheerleading team after they get a controversial new coach. Abbott uses the framework of cheerleading to expose gender performance in high school because this concept is ingrained in cheer culture. Thus, *Dare Me* focuses on a cheerleader's perspective to uniquely portray gender performance in young adult literature. I use research on femininity and adolescence to inform my exploration, but I primarily analyze the ways that Abbott deconstructs the cheerleaders' images, as well as that of the new coach, who at first seems to be perfect. By exposing the reality of the coach's and girls' lives, Abbott allows her readers to see other sides of girls' identities.

**Veronica Yu**

***Coraline*, Not Caroline:**

**Transcending Binary Gender Standards in the Search for Selfhood**

To conform is to die, to lose oneself. In the 2009 film *Coraline*, gender nonconformity is presented as a means of survival, as binary gender standards—embodied by the overly feminine and phallic Other Mother—transform into the evil monster our young heroine, Coraline, must slay. In the film, Coraline enters the seemingly ideal, mirror Other World, where everyone has buttons in place of eyes. There, she encounters the evil Other Mother, a representation of the extreme binary gender standards, who attempts to impose the uniform button eyes upon her, but fails. Contrary to many scholars interpreting the film as a call to return to heteronormative standards, reinforcing "weak" feminine stereotypes, I argue that Coraline's story defies these constraints. In order to defeat the Other Mother, Coraline transcends the rigid dichotomy between traditionally feminine and masculine standards, fusing the two together to preserve her individuality—her eyes. Framing Coraline's search for selfhood in the lens of Žižek's Symbolic Self and Lacan's Mirror Stage, I will examine how Coraline redefines gender standards to gain self-awareness in relation to her parents, affirming that to rebel is to live, to find oneself.

# Artfully Crafted

Moderated by Professor Trisha Tucker  
Thematic Option Honors Program

Wednesday, April 17  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Carnegie

**Lindsay Huang**

## **“You’re So Cute, I Could Eat you Up!”: Food as a Cultural Love Language in Pixar’s *Bao***

The infamous eating scene in Pixar’s *Bao*, in which a mother eats her dumpling-son, has polarized audiences. Critics often label the act as “disturbing,” questioning its necessity in the film. Far from being inconsequential, however, I argue that this scene is crucial in allowing director Domee Shi to accurately explore the immigrant parent-child relationship, one in which violence and love are inextricably mixed. The son’s particular portrayal as a morsel of food further reveals the complex emotional truth of these relationships, echoing—as dubbed by author Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong—“quasi-cannibalistic” imagery consistently found in Asian-American works of literature. While some may argue that such a portrayal casts the culture in a negative light, I contend that the eating scene in fact allows Shi to offer both a critique and an homage to Chinese immigrant parents. Unlike many animated films, Shi does not attempt to moralize the violence in the film, thus demonstrating the pitfalls of unrestrained love. Yet that same violence, embraced by emotional complexity, ultimately serves as a testament to the culture by dispelling the model-minority myth and instilling the characters with dimension and agency.

**Evie Kay**

## **Houston, We Have a Utopia: Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*, Cold War Premonitions, and Art on an Imperfect Planet**

The utopias we imagine are defined by boundless technology. To innovate and assemble a perfect Tomorrowland, profound ingenuity is essential; such creativity is highly dependent on the culture that shapes our daily lives. In his 1945 novel *The Martian Chronicles*, Ray Bradbury challenges typical science fiction narratives of mechanized utopias, presenting Martians at the summit of cultural nirvana while humans are on the cusp of nuclear ruin. *The Martian Chronicles* is a warning of the dystopian future that awaits us if we choose technology over art and culture. In this paper, I will introduce a new interpretation of utopia by illustrating that humanity’s fatal flaws may not just be in the proliferation of technology, but also in the censorship of imagination. Bradbury’s vision of perfection was greatly influenced by the imperfect world he lived in, and thus I will assert that the dystopia of *The Martian Chronicles* is a prophecy of the Cold War culture that followed its publication. Through this examination of the past, future, and presence of art in utopia, we will redefine humanity’s Tomorrowland.

**Jiwon Lee**

## **Shaping Subtleties on Screen: *Never Let Me Go*’s Modernist Adaptation of a Postmodern Novel**

“It’s *completely* different from the book,” has always been a euphemistic phrase for, “this movie sucks.” But, does staying faithful to the original novel always signify a good filmic adaptation? My paper attempts to answer this question by analyzing the filmic adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*—a futuristic novel depicting the lives of clones—in terms of modernist and postmodernist theories. In adaptation theories, the modernist view prioritizes the adaptation’s faithfulness to the original, while the postmodernist view prioritizes the adaptation’s ability to provide new perspectives. The film *Never Let Me Go* is a modernist adaptation, as observed from numerous lines that are almost identical to the novel. The film’s modernist attempt, however, is complicated by the fact that Ishiguro’s novel is a postmodern literary work. Using close reading analysis, I argue that the film’s attempt to replicate the novel has led it to provide the answers to the questions the novel intentionally poses; hence, the film is a substitution rather than a supplement to the reading of the novel. We are, then, ultimately left to ask the question: is a modernist adaptation of a postmodern work truly appropriate?

**Ela Passarelli**

**Art and Amoralty:  
Art's Role in Transcending Societal Boundaries in *Demian***

Should artists be held accountable for their art? Is art allowed to push boundaries, for good or for bad? Why can art portray things that are illegal or forbidden in real life? The debate about art's morality has been relevant for decades, with some scholars arguing that art is the tool that allows us to understand the world morally, while others assert that art is given leeway by society to express concepts and themes that would otherwise be taboo, rendering it above the moral sphere. Clarity is given when looking at art's role in adolescent development, as specifically shown in *Demian* by Herman Hesse. For the main character Sinclair, art is an escape, and he uses it to learn about sexuality and break free from the influence of an intensely Christian upbringing. This paper addresses art as a medium that transcends the religious and societal limitations of its time through examining art's role both in *Demian* and in Herman Hesse's life in Germany. By closely examining art's role in individual development through Sinclair and Hesse, this paper will show how art is given leeway by society and gives insight to the extremely difficult question of whether or not art transcends morality.

**Maria "Lupita" Roa**

**Traumatic Memories, Repression, and Our Body:  
A Narrative Tool in *X-Men: Deadly Genesis***

Trauma, prevalent in superhero origin stories, is omitted in the critical conversation with the comic form and our own form—the body. *X-Men: Deadly Genesis*, a comic series, serves as a meta text on how comics elaborate on trauma and repressed memories through the retcon and retelling of *Giant-Size X-Men*. The comic form inherently institutionalizes back issues with memories, and some are of traumatizing events that are formed or forged deliberately, as explored with Professor X's role, into repressed memories. McCloud's theory of iconography in comics establishes that readers inflict, reflect, and transplant their identity onto iconic, simple character's bodies, like Cyclops, through the physical form of comic books. Additionally, Dr. Kolk's body-oriented theory with successfully proven therapies demonstrates the link between trauma and the body, as our body can either embody or heal our repressed, traumatic memories. The untangling of *Deadly Genesis*' plot parallels the unraveling of traumatic, repressed memories necessary for traumatized individuals to heal. Through a body-centric perspective linking trauma studies with *X-Men: Deadly Genesis*, I will discuss how the body's correlative functionality to trauma manifests into repressed, traumatic memories through comics and iconic character's physicality, inherently linking trauma to the body.

**Benjamin Tee**

**Saying "Goodbye":  
The Loss of Berlin and Isherwood's Message**

Sex, partying, drinking, fun. Did that get your attention? It should. These are things that sound pretty good to pretty much everyone. They would make for both a fun night and a good dream. What about: Gangs, bigotry, death squads, and anarchy? They are probably a bit less enticing. They would probably ruin a good night and transform the dream into a nightmare. In his dramatized semi-autobiography *Goodbye to Berlin*, Christopher Isherwood examines that exact transformation through his experiences in early 1930s Berlin. While you might never have heard of this book, you might have heard of its adaptations: the play *I am a Camera* and the musical and film *Cabaret*. These adaptations of *Goodbye to Berlin* are more popular than the book itself, and it is partly because they play a different tune. Their appeal is the dream. They revolve around it, with other major elements of the book being distorted or even ignored. The nightmare is a fact of the setting, not something which is truly explored. This is a problem because Isherwood establishes his message through experiences with characters and scenes that are not found in the adaptations. Considering you are far more likely to have seen the adaptations instead of read the actual book, Isherwood is effectively muted. While Isherwood tries to say "goodbye" to Berlin, we actually end up saying "goodbye" to his message.

# Group Think

Moderated by Professor William Thalmann  
Department of Classics and Comparative Literature

Wednesday, April 17  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Rose An**

## **Black Pariahs: *Sula and the Black Female Community***

Why do people stay in toxic environments? We can apply this question to the black community of the Bottom in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. *Sula* follows the Bottom's women as they try to survive the racist and sexist pressures of the 20th century. It is obvious from even a cursory reading that the community's unspoken rules pin its women into the narrow roles of disposable mothers and wives, yet the women adamantly refuse to step outside of these roles. Many scholars condemn this oppressive environment, praising main character Sula, who manages to live a life outside of the community's rules. Yet, if Sula seems to prove that one can simply move beyond the community, why do communities exist? What is not so widely considered is the necessity of minority communities. While ethnic enclaves like the Bottom can be problematic, the truth is that in a world that is inhospitable to women of color, there is no other place for them to turn for comfort and support. Thus, in my paper, I will be exploring the necessity of communities like the Bottom, which, though limiting to their residents, ultimately are necessary as pillars on which those residents can lean for support and survival.

**Amartya Ranganathan**

## **Race to the Bottom: The Tragedy of the Commons in Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles***

*Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush.*  
—Garrett Hardin, *Tragedy of the Commons*

When economist Garrett Hardin established the “tragedy of the commons,” his outlook was foreboding. The theory articulates that each human action prioritizes individual interest, leading to inefficient—and often destructive—use of natural resources. In his collection of stories, *The Martian Chronicles*, Ray Bradbury supports this theory, as his characters maintain selfish, unsustainable myopia as they colonize Mars. The characters' actions range from cigarette use to property claims to nuclear warfare, demonstrating Bradbury's perspective that humanity's flaws overcome its ability to enjoy and conserve the environment. Most academics read *The Martian Chronicles* as stories of change, where human beings leave their existing world in hopes of finding an identity on a new planet. I add to the discussion by using Hardin's theory to analyze the lesser explored environmental and economic critiques Bradbury forms with this change. I argue that the author advocates for political and economic collaboration as potential solutions. This discussion becomes especially relevant as space travel and habitation become growing realities.

**Joshua Speckman**

## **Spirit of the Game, Letter of the Law: Constructing Sport in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen An American Lyric***

What is “tennis”? Certainly it is a sport, played according to some set of rules, but tennis is not defined by those rules; if the net were made higher, or the court wider, or the rules of service adjusted, the sport would remain recognizable. Using Claudia Rankine's examination of Serena Williams in *Citizen: An American Lyric* as a starting point, we develop an understanding of sport as a cultural phenomenon, constructed and enforced in the public consciousness, and demonstrate that the mechanism of this construction creates unfair treatment for marginalized players, even when the rules of the sport are nominally equitable. Furthermore, in examining the work in its entirety, we see that this dynamic is recreated in graver circumstances. Moving on from the initial case of tennis, we investigate “racialized rightlessness,” a phenomenon which occurs when people of marginalized identity occupy spaces in which they are not traditionally imagined, violating an unspoken norm and opening up a new understanding of systemic oppression from the court to the courtroom.



**Terrel Su**

**Remonstrance:  
Extreme Rejection of Racial Zombification in Junot Diaz's "Monstro"**

Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Junot Diaz's short story "Monstro" imagines a not-so-distant future where a mysterious disease starts blackening the skin of Haitians and eventually turns them into cannibalistic zombies. Told through the lens of a Dominican-American visitor, "Monstro" examines not only the conditions that give rise to a symbolic skin-blackening disease but also the insufficient responses of self-interested world powers like the U.S. and the neighboring Dominican Republic. My paper uses three separate contexts—the original zombie in Haitian Vodou religion, the zombie figure in American popular culture, and the legacy of a multi-century ethnic conflict between Dominicans and Haitians—to conclude that the Dominicans reject both the disease and the diseased due to insecurity of personal identity. The residual legacy and modern continuation of colonialism has taught Dominicans and other children of the African diaspora to revile and reject both their personal "blackness" and their native culture, manifesting in a disease that disassembles arbitrary boundaries—between Dominican-American and Dominican native, between Dominican and Haitian, between zombie and human, and between the Other and the Self.

**Elizabeth Walburger**

**A Stranger is a Friend, Not a Villain:  
Unfamiliarity in John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation***

*I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people...  
every person is a new door, opening up into other worlds.  
—John Guare, *Six Degrees of Separation**

With 7.5 billion people on the planet, there always seem to be more strangers than friends. In John Guare's 1990 play *Six Degrees of Separation*, wealthy Manhattan couple Ouisa and Flan Kittredge meet Paul, a well-educated, well-connected young man in need of help, and believe they have found a friend. Nevertheless, the Kittredges unravel Paul's deceptions and realize Paul is simply a clever stranger. To reconcile the charming Paul they befriended with the person who conned them, Ouisa and Flan villainize Paul, portraying him as a far worse person than he is. Villainization occurs in this play, as well as in everyday life. Communities fear strangers, and often use conspicuous differences to turn strangers into people to be feared and shunned. However, Ouisa recalls the theory of six degrees of separation and realizes that she and Paul were never truly strangers. The idea that there is a chain of six people who connect everyone to every other individual on the planet, reminds us that despite the enormity of humankind, there is not much separating us. The principle of six degrees of separation offers a remedy to the problem of villainizing strangers and provides hope that someday strangers will not be villains but friends.

# Lose Yourself

Moderated by Professor Veli Yashin  
Department of Comparative Literature

Wednesday, April 17  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

**Christine Lee**

## **Living in a Diary: Complexities of Memory and Trauma in *A General Theory of Oblivion***

In José Eduardo Agualusa's novel *A General Theory of Oblivion*, the agoraphobic protagonist Ludo isolates herself inside her apartment in order to escape both the Angolan civil wars happening right outside her veranda and the trauma of her rape. As the years pass and paper runs low, Ludo begins to scrawl her diary entries on the walls. She thus finds herself living in her diary instead of her apartment, but the walls engulf her within her memories and prevent her from advancing into the future. This paper contrasts the stagnation of Ludo's character growth within the confines of her apartment-turned-diary with her transformation that occurs when she finally reemerges from her apartment. An examination of Ludo's memories and trauma in *A General Theory of Oblivion* ultimately demonstrates the inevitable estrangement that we all feel from our past selves. Although the inability to recognize our past selves may seem tragic, Ludo's experience unveils the relief of leaving our past behind. Therefore, her story reassures those who are afraid of distancing themselves from their pasts: by leaving the past behind, we enable ourselves to own the present and look to the future.

**Madison Miller**

## **Sparkling Shade of Gray: How Friendship is the Optimal Relationship in Toni Morrison's *Sula***

Who is the most important person in your life? Is it your spouse, sister, brother, cousin, or is it someone else entirely? Often times, this answer tends to be a person's best friend. They are some of the most important and influential people in our lives, yet society does not acknowledge the tie with any formal bond. In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Sula and Nel experience the struggles of life as a black woman together and form a bond of friendship unlike any other. It is almost spiritual in its depth. Yet, Nel's relationship with Jude is seen as the most important because he is her husband, in spite of the fact that their connection is based on Nel serving Jude. Therefore, I would argue that society's focus on the relationship of husband and wife reflects the fact that women are subjugated into roles to serve men because the world views women as less than men.

**Jordan Page**

## **Wait A Minute. Who Are You?: An Exploration of Inaccessible Memory Retrieval in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and Beyond**

Do you remember what you ate for breakfast yesterday? What about what you ate for breakfast on the same date ten years ago? Personally, the answer to both of those questions is, "no." Yet, neurologists have found that the brain records every experience we have ever had and stores it throughout our cerebral cortex in the form of long term memories that rarely ever decay. Regardless, most neurotypical people can only remember a fraction of their pasts. How can this be? This inability to access certain memories is explored by French author Marcel Proust in his three-volume epic *In Search of Lost Time*. Proust proposes that some of our memories may never be accessible to us consciously, and no matter how hard we try to recall them on our own, we simply cannot do so. If we believe Proust's musings on memory to be true, then I maintain that we must look to the physical world to find the answers to our burning questions about ourselves. Ultimately, I will debate the question: Is it possible for us to know everything there is to know about ourselves? And, if so, are there things about ourselves that we *should not* know?

**Angela Rong**

**“Your existence will be as a passenger”:  
Curating Black Identity in *Get Out***

At the end of Jordan Peele's 2017 horror film *Get Out*, the black protagonist, Chris, escapes a white family that wishes to lobotomize him for bodily possession. Many consider the ending to be positive, a subversion of an expected violent end. But, while Chris may be escaping physical danger, he is fundamentally changed, having navigated the "Sunken Place," a mental void brought on by the white manipulation of black trauma. Thus, what does it mean to truly "get out"? I believe that analyzing racism necessitates a second reflection beyond the immediate acts of whiteness upon black bodies; we must also examine how whiteness perpetuates itself in the psyche of black characters. Through the association of Chris with racial stereotypes, through the revisitations of trauma necessitated by the call to "get out," the whiteness in *Get Out* makes pain intrinsic to blackness even after physical liberation. By intertwining Chris' character with such pain, *Get Out* illustrates the complex struggle of reclaiming black identity from the whiteness that defines it.

**Indiana Schnicer**

**The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up:  
Fear of Adulthood in *The Little Prince***

As a society, we have a complicated relationship with childhood. We idolize children, paint them as eternal symbols of innocence, curiosity, honesty, and love. At the same time, we harbor a stigma around lingering childhood, shaming grown adults who enjoy "childish" endeavors like cuddling with a stuffed animal or watching cartoons. In *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, an aviator narrates what happens after he crash-lands in the Saharan desert, where he finds an odd young boy who, little by little, recounts his stories of interplanetary travel and the different characters he meets on the way, including six grown-ups, each a master of his own asteroid. Critics have formulated that the book's grotesque portrayal of these six self-absorbed men predicts that the world—and particularly, children—are doomed to destruction by adult society. I argue that this dire interpretation overlooks the nostalgic, but ultimately hopeful tone of the book. By taking a closer look at his most whimsical passages, often dismissed as frivolous, I uncover de Saint-Exupéry's challenge to our preconceptions of what it really means to "grow up."

# This Is America

Moderated by Professor Panivong Norindr  
Departments of Comparative Literature and French and Italian

Wednesday, April 17  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

**Zachary Becker**

## **When One Door Closes, the Same Door Opens: The Duality of Immigration in 84 Lumber's Super Bowl Commercial "The Entire Journey"**

*The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom.  
For in all the states of created beings capable of law, where there is no law, there is no freedom.*  
—John Locke, "Two Treatises of Government"

In an effort to "Make America Great Again," President Trump and the typically conservative Republican Party advocate for liberalism—Lockean liberalism. But how do policies restricting unlawful immigration correspond with the guarantees of liberty and self-determination espoused by Enlightenment doctrine? The extended cut of 84 Lumber's 2017 Super Bowl commercial, titled "The Entire Journey," resolves this dissonance. 84 Lumber's advertisement depicts undocumented migrants traversing the uncharitable desert, only to be met by a newly constructed wall and a closed door. The migrants' desperation positions them to be exploited by human smugglers known as *coyotes*, an exploitation that will not cease upon ingress to the United States. Instead, illegal immigration perpetuates the exploitation of undocumented persons' labor to sustain "coyote capitalism." Such a system robs illegal immigrants of economic and social mobility, reducing the freedoms afforded to them and subverting Locke's liberal philosophy. I contest that 84 Lumber champions legal immigration and a secure border because closing the door to illegal immigrants opens the door to opportunities that beget far more liberties and better align with the ideology of Lockean liberalism.

**Isabel Bosch**

## **Perverted and Political *Pink Flamingos*: How John Waters Challenges Us to Question Societal Norms with the Help of Queer Theory**

Foot fetish, cannibalism, and feces: *Pink Flamingos*, directed by John Waters, is a film concerned with all things filthy. In fact, the protagonist, an over-the-top drag queen named Divine, and a vile heterosexual couple, Connie and Raymond, battle for the title of the filthiest person alive. While some spectators may dismiss the movie because of its grotesque images, the film is powerful because it aligns with queer theory's challenging of societal paradigms. Like *Pink Flamingos*, queer theory urges people to question what is deemed normal in contemporary society. Although Waters has claimed that his movie is not political, I will examine how the incorporation of queer theory in his film politicizes *Pink Flamingos*. In the film, gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity are all "queered" or made unfamiliar in a manner that suggests Waters' evident support for modern queer theory, even if he was not aware of it at the time. In a broader sense, because *Pink Flamingos* aligns with the values of queer theory, the movie serves as a useful source for the contemporary queer community.

**Colin McDonnell**

## **Following False Figures: The Devastating Effects of Misplaced Trust in *The Big Short***

2008 ravaged America, obliterating nearly everyone's financial stability. Gone were the days of the American middle class. The trust that citizens placed in Wall Street executives prior to this crash exploded. Why? While most blame the crisis on delinquent mortgage owners, corrupt lenders, and the sheer numbers involved, Adam McKay, director of *The Big Short*, depicts this crisis through a satirical lens that paints a different picture—a picture of the psychological roots of the crash. These psychological roots are addressed explicitly at the end of the film by Michael Burry, an awkward hedge fund manager in the film, whose meticulous close-reading skills enabled him to predict the crash and make millions by betting against, or "shorting," the US economy. In his goodbye e-mail to the clients who had failed to trust him, Burry describes the foolishness of individuals and their misplaced trust. I will shed light on Burry's brief, acerbic message by reading it through the lens of Sigmund Freud's theory of the first primitive family and the role of the father within it. By using Freud to read the sentiments of a hedge fund manager, I will argue that

people tend to put their trust in father-like figures, even though the criteria we use to select father figures can be faulty, especially in desperate times.

**Khounish Sharma**

**Gender-Race Intersectionality:  
Investigating Serena Williams in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric***

Are we truly a racist nation? This is the question at the core of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Through specific examples of racism ranging throughout time—including Jim Crow Laws and their modern-day corollary, microaggressions—Rankine's prose collection systematically dismantles the belief that the United States is in a post-racial era. However, upon closer examination of Serena Williams' explosive outbursts at the 2009 US Open, and her general presence in women's tennis, Rankine's text suddenly becomes intersectional, also exposing the issue of gender inequality in contemporary America. I contend that Rankine's repeated use of criticism surrounding Serena Williams as an individual and the image of Caroline Wozniacki's controversial mockery of Williams, demonstrate the interconnected gender inequality and racism embedded in sports, and ultimately, American society. By examining sports in this way, we can better understand how intersectional inequalities manifest in our society, and more effectively combat them.

**Michael Sullivan**

**(Brad)Burying the Martians:  
The Overlooked Consequences of American Colonialism and *The Martian Chronicles***

*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*  
—Nelson Mandela

While education has the power to raise awareness of global injustices and instill values of empathy and respect in students, it can also promote bigotry and apathy toward other cultures if those in charge of the educational system have biased points of view. With the intent of demonstrating the superiority of capitalism over communism, the American educational system of the 1950s reinterpreted the American past in a way that accentuated the greatness of the United States. Widespread indifference toward the atrocities committed against Native Americans was one result of this reinterpretation. In his novel *The Martian Chronicles*, science fiction author Ray Bradbury criticizes the American apathy toward the negative consequences of past colonization efforts. By illustrating how the American settlers expand to Mars, Americanize the landscape, and kill off the Martian population without feeling remorse, he connects the fictional Martians to the indigenous Native Americans and draws attention to the horrors they suffered. Bradbury's text not only reveals the biases in the cultural and educational norms of the 1950s that prevent acknowledgement of the darker aspects of America's past, but it also presents several insights about how to explore in an ethical manner—insights that may still be of use in the 21st century.

**Cynthia Syren**

**The Impossible Quest for Rest:  
Drug Abuse and the Search for Sleep in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation***

To meet the demands of a growing population, technological innovation, and higher living standards, America's working class has grown increasingly strained. This overlying capitalistic burden has developed a "24/7" mindset in many Americans that one must be working at all waking moments to achieve success. In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Ottessa Moshfegh's unnamed narrator defies our 24/7 universe by gradually alienating herself through the increased use of prescription medications that lull her into long phases of unconsciousness. Moshfegh sets the novel in New York City, a city which undoubtedly represents the pinnacle of American capitalism. The narrator constantly expresses her frustration of the "New York City lifestyle" and the materialistic ideals it perpetuates. She becomes exhausted to the point where she cannot be bothered to speak to others or even leave her apartment. Her exhaustion culminates in her decision to seek out a therapist to prescribe her insomnia medication. The interesting juxtaposition Moshfegh builds contrasting the narrator's medicated pursuit of rest within her apartment and the "city that never sleeps" outside of her building leaves me with several questions. Why does the narrator seek out sleep? Why does the narrator rely on drugs to help her sleep when she has no trouble sleeping on her own? I plan to examine how capitalist derivatives such as consumerism and materialism can impact physical health in the context of the narrator's prescription drug abuse and determination to sleep in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

# Versus

Moderated by Professor Amy Cannon  
Thematic Option Honors Program

Wednesday, April 17  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Gutenberg

**Hannah Cho**

**Peek-A-Boo, Welcome to Monstropolis:  
How Language Expression Traces The Fluid Boundaries of Childhood in Pete Docter's *Monster's, Inc.***

Was there ever a monster in the closet at night? *Monsters, Inc.* answers this question with Boo, a two-year-old girl who peeks in and finds out. In the film, Boo enters Monsters, Inc., a scare factory that extracts screams from children for energy. Meeting two monsters, Sully and Mike, she journeys through Monstropolis, the monster city. Most scholars contrast the fictional city's scream energy crisis to the postmodern anxiety that haunts energy production in America. This discussion neglects to address, however, the film's focus: the child. What happens when a child enters an unfamiliar realm? In this realm, does the child lose agency over his or her own independence? Throughout the film, Boo and Sully forge a strong father-daughter bond that nurtures Boo. Yet, *Monster's, Inc.* juxtaposes their displays of affection with Boo's independent desire to explore Monstropolis. Boo's limited language introduces her interaction with Monstropolis separate from Sully's caregiving influence. Examining Boo's language expression, this paper argues that the ability to traverse between the real and imaginary defines childhood. I will explore how Boo blends the human and monster worlds to destabilize standard definitions of the child and invite us to enter Monstropolis ourselves.

**Joan Lee**

**Home Is Where the Heart Is:  
Exploring Identity and Liminality in *El Norte***

Today, when we hear about undocumented immigrants in the media, they are usually portrayed through a political lens. We often forget about the human side of this marginalized group, and thus fail to consider their ordeals and their perspectives. Gregory Nava's *El Norte* allows us a glimpse of the undocumented immigrant experience through siblings Rosa and Enrique. In their birthplace, Guatemala, their lives are in danger. In Mexico, there are no economic opportunities. In the United States, they are viewed as illegal immigrants. In this paper, I will draw on anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of liminality, in which people in transition pass through a "cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state." Rosa and Enrique's geographical location shapes their identity, and each country in their journey acts as a marker for Turner's three stages of ritual: separation, liminality, and reaggregation. Yet, due to their illegal immigrant status, Rosa and Enrique never reach their ultimate goal of reaggregation: the American Dream.

**Jackie Martinez**

**What Sophia and Siri Can Tell Us About Being "Human"**

*The greatest benefit of the arrival of artificial intelligence is that AIs will help define humanity.*

*We need AIs to tell us who we are.*

—Kevin Kelly

With the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), or what many are calling the 4th Industrial Revolution, there is a growing wave of fear, excitement, and even desire for AI. Indeed, much of what we once thought made us distinct as human beings is now exhibited in robots. Consequently, there is a growing fear about our jobs, our conquering, and our value as human beings. At the same time, there is also a desire for AI—for convenience, control, and service. Underneath these different responses rest far more ingrained feelings that are indicative of not only how we perceive AI, but also ourselves. As the lines between robots and humans blur further, will our definition of "humanity" change? Why do we find some robots cute and others eerie, and what could this concept of the "Uncanny Valley" reveal about our *true* fears? Above all, how might AI, like Sophia and even our familiar Siri, impact how we view and treat each other?

**Margot May**

**Too Feminine? Too Masculine? :  
The Objectification of Female Athletes in *A League of Their Own***

Pushed into a suffocating sphere of identity by our heteronormative society, female athletes are expected to linger somewhere between a masculine and a feminine identity. My research explores *A League of Their Own's* perhaps unintentional yet inherent tendency to further perpetuate the contradictory pressures female athletes endure in society. The film that champions itself for its feminist portrayal of the triumphs of female athletes during the first year of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League is also a portrayal of the league's oppression of the true identities of its players. An examination of the film's omission of sexual minorities, masculine portrayal of the most athletic players, sexualization of women, and over feminization of the characters, will explicate how the movie reinforces both the habit of the athletic world to force masculinity on its female players and the habit of society to force femininity on women.

**Lucy Warren**

**Unmasking America's New Favorite Superhero:  
*Black Panther*, a Progressive Film That's Far from Progress**

*Black Panther* has been described as "progress" in Hollywood for its inclusion of black faces and African culture in a superhero film. Recent scholarship has decried the lack of equal and accurate representation in media, specifically as it impacts children's self-esteem and well-being. Accordingly, *Black Panther* provides remarkable benefits for young minority children as they are able to see themselves on screen. However, the overwhelming amount of praise for the film has left little room for deeper criticism, so my paper will walk through three major questions about the film's representation. First, does *Black Panther* provide an accurate, realistic representation of black people? Second, does the film represent and include all intersections of the black community? And third, is mere representation enough? As we enter the gray area in determining what is and what should not be considered progress, I will look to utopian thinking and compare perspectives of civil rights activists to determine if *Black Panther* is just another symbolic victory. Due to unrealistic and non-inclusive representation, as well as exploitation of the black community, *Black Panther* should no longer be seen as unassailable "progress," but as a progressive film with much room for improvement.

**Sarah Zhang**

**The Asian Female "Monster":  
Colorblindness in Lucile Hadžihalilović's *Innocence***

As anxieties over increasing racial diversity dominate political conversations, various nations have addressed the integration of minority races in different ways. France has adopted racial policies of colorblindness. Influenced by these policies, French director Lucile Hadžihalilović's film *Innocence* portrays an isolated and oppressive all-girls boarding school where discipline and punishment instill uniformity and obedience. One of the major characters, Iris, is the only Asian girl in the film, yet her race goes unnoticed through the majority of the story. I will show that this colorblind approach ignores important cultural differences and perpetuates existing Asian stereotypes of the model minority and perpetual foreigner. When Iris' race is obvious, Hadžihalilović manipulates the submissive and hypersexualized stereotypes of Asian females to emphasize the challenges of the over-sexualization in girlhood, which is not a holistic or true expression of the Asian race. Beyond the narrative of girls emerging from a male-dominated society in *Innocence*, my paper will explore the underlying discrimination of Asian immigrants and reveal the need for multiculturalism in order to gain independence of identity as an Asian female.

# Metaphorically Speaking

Moderated by Professor Sharon Lloyd  
School of Philosophy and Gould School of Law

Thursday, April 18  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Bissmun Gill**

## **Sex, Drugs, and Revolutions: Drugs as Tools for Social Disruption in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower***

From melange to Moloko Plus, soma to Substance D, drugs have long been staples of science fiction stories. In the 2020s America of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, drug-related chaos and violence have overrun the country and fractured relations between different social and economic groups. I will focus on the drug Paracetco, which, when abused, can lead to a condition called "hyperempathy," where the afflicted feels others' pain and pleasure as though it were their own. Protagonist Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy allows her to rewrite social rules and effect social change. David Lenson's *On Drugs* illuminates the apparently contradictory nature of Paracetco, which simultaneously induces suffering and encourages an upheaval of societal norms. Ultimately, Paracetco in *Parable of the Sower* is Butler's way of arguing for unity and transcending social divisions in order to enact meaningful change.

**Nicholas Kassoy**

## **"You Don't Know Where I've Been": The Significance of the AIDS Crisis in David Fincher's *Fight Club***

David Fincher's cult film *Fight Club* is rife with toxic masculinity. Yet, the film's take on the harrowing transformation of underground male fight clubs into the full-blown terrorist organization of Project Mayhem is quite ambiguous: is it critical of or in support of this toxic male journey to find self-worth? Homoerotic readings of the film often argue that such male-on-male tensions point out the hypocrisy of these men's attempt to see themselves as the ultimate representation of straight, white, male power. Yet, existing scholarly critique has not considered an essential element when analyzing the film's view on masculinity: the AIDS crisis, an extremely prevalent facet of society at the time of the film's release. It is important to note because when we think about how queer men's lives were cut short due to AIDS, suddenly the way in which the straight, healthy men of *Fight Club* embrace pain and death to elicit meaning in their lives feels insensitive, and even trivial. In this context, the film becomes a lens through which to critique toxic masculinity rather than uphold it. Furthermore, upholding such "Red Pill" readings of the film undercuts the suffering of HIV-positive people by failing to acknowledge the parallels of the fight club members' experiences and that community's struggles. Through an analysis of key imagery in the film that brings to mind the AIDS crisis—body marks, fluid exchange, and male bonding—I will question why such a blind spot regarding AIDS has persisted in viewings of this film.

**Ambika Nuggihalli**

## **The Russians, Chinese...and Heptapods?: The Political Nature of the "Other" in *Arrival***

One of the hallmarks of science fiction is that the genre depends on the theme of what critic Darko Suvin calls the "other," stranger, or alien. Denis Villeneuve's film *Arrival*, the story of linguist Louise Banks's time working with the US military to decode an alien language and solve world conflict, is no different. It is Louise's outlook on the alien heptapods, characterized by compassion, trust, and open-mindedness, and not the military's deep suspicion of the heptapods, that ultimately gives Louise the key to restoring peace to the world. In this sense, it would seem the main message of *Arrival* is acceptance of the aliens, and therefore, the "other." However, by analyzing the portrayal of Russia and China in these scenes, I explore messages in *Arrival* that support a more guarded, "other"-fearing outlook, which undo the film's more progressive messaging. There is no better time to engage with *Arrival*'s portrayals of the "other" than the present, when the question of how we treat immigrants—an instance of the "other"—has taken center stage in American politics.



**Hanna Kaye Raskin**

**“You Talkin’ To Me?”:  
The Universality of Loneliness in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver***

For decades, Martin Scorsese has introduced his viewers to the underworld of the human psyche through films such as *Taxi Driver*, *Goodfellas*, *Casino*, and *The Wolf of Wall Street*. His films captivate audiences not only because of his ability to display graphic images, gore, and glamour, but also because he creates characters with whom audiences connect. In *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese accomplishes such a union between viewers and his protagonist, Travis Bickle, through cinematic devices such as narration, score, and camera angles. Scorsese takes us along Travis’s journey as he wanders through New York City and slowly becomes detached from his surroundings and from himself. In *Taxi Driver*, viewers do not simply observe Travis’ story of alienation; Scorsese’s use of narrative and cinematic devices allows his viewers to actually experience Travis’ alienation. In my presentation, I will demonstrate how Scorsese accomplishes the connection between Travis and the audience and what that connection indicates about humanity as a whole.

**Rachel Roberson**

**“I’m Part Cat, Part Elephant, Part Dolphin”:  
Building Empathy through Imagination in *Inside Out***

Dealing with big changes in the mind of an eleven-year old, *Inside Out* employs the imagination to demonstrate how emotions interact. In the film the protagonist’s imaginary friend, Bing-Bong, serves as an emotional tour guide. In this paper, I argue that by using Bing-Bong in this way, the film is able to unpack complex emotion, which leads to the teaching of empathy. Challenging recent psychological research, I will also argue that—unlike previous Disney-Pixar films—*Inside Out* teaches empathy to younger children through Bing-Bong’s approachability and continuously selfless perspective. By constantly thinking through the lens of Riley’s experiences, Bing-Bong is able to translate the imagination of an eleven-year old girl into a step-by-step guide to building empathy, an essential interpersonal skill.

**Pauline Roth**

**From Observer to Participant:  
Repression and Fascism in *Goodbye to Berlin***

*This evening is a dress-rehearsal of a disaster.*  
—Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*

What happens when openness meets repression? Enter: Germany. Hitler’s takeover in 1933 ended the Weimar Republic of 1919. Weimar Germany celebrated sexual freedom, artistic innovation, and a vibrant nightlife. This world is portrayed in Christopher Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin*, based on the time the author spent in Berlin in the early 1930s as an openly gay man. The narrator of the novel shares Isherwood’s first name, Christopher, and scholars like Tamas Tukacs and David Thomas have debated Christopher’s function, focusing on his statement, “I am a camera, quite passive, recording, not thinking.” While some take this to mean that Christopher is an expatriate observer, others argue that Christopher does participate. I am interested in another implication, namely, the metaphor’s reference to Christopher’s repressed sexuality. Scholars have failed to note that Christopher becomes increasingly comfortable as the novel progresses and as the Nazis grow in Berlin’s landscape, making the German citizens suspicious of one another. This links fascism and the repression of one’s sexuality. It may seem counterintuitive, especially when applied to an openly gay author, but the surprising implication sheds light on what it is like to be queer in a heteronormative world.

# Public/Private

Moderated by Professor Anthony Kemp  
Department of English

Thursday, April 18  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Carnegie

**Meredith Byrnes**

## **Cotton Candy Bombs: Intergenerational Trauma Through the Body in *Hausu***

If you question how *Hausu*—a bizarre 1977 Japanese horror film featuring a girl-eating piano, a killer aunt, moments of playful cartoonishness, and several scenes of floating, severed body parts—could have anything to do with the Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombings, you would be right to do so. However, beneath *Hausu*'s layers of strangeness lies director Nobuhiko Obayashi's meditation on intergenerational relations and tension in the post-Hiroshima era. Through his creation of a maternal figure as the perpetrator of bodily violence against her own children, thereby subverting the tropes revealed in film scholar Sarah Arnold's analysis of Japanese maternal self sacrifice, Obayashi explores the broader question of the morality behind the continuation of trauma within the family structure. By examining the relationship of *Hausu*'s cartoonishness to its gorier moments, and how the body is violated in terms of gender, family, and the bombings themselves, I hope to reveal the trauma-centric family restructuring that occurs in the film. Moreover, I will touch upon the moral implications of this restructuring. After all, murderous pianos aside, *Hausu* cannot and should not be reduced to just its absurdity.

**Julia Cordero**

## **"If You're Smiling, You're Doing It Wrong": Theatricality Heralds Decay in *Goodbye to Berlin***

*Make America great again.*  
—Donald Trump

The all-capital tweets. The hyperbolic claims. And of course, that famous tagline slapped on hats, T-shirts, and banners across the U.S.: "Make America Great Again." An alien observer might think America is thriving; after all, any country whose leader is going to act and speak so provocatively must have excellent economic, social, and political health to support that behavior, right? It could not possibly be an illusion. In his novel *Goodbye to Berlin*, set in Berlin in the early 1930s, Christopher Isherwood explores this very question with characters whose theatricality and correlative questionable mental health rival that of our forty-fifth president. Using Kenneth Ligda's observation of Isherwood's characterization pattern of "comedy with a glimpse of weakness," I examine how those characters in the novel who most theatrically exaggerate their health are in fact those who are closest to the brink of collapse—just like the precarious sociopolitical situation of the city in which they live. Ultimately, we will see that the more a leader insists on the health of their society, the more likely that society is to be ill.

**Andrea Klick**

## **Identity and Environments: The Gray Area of Coming Out in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home***

In the popular 2018 movie *Love, Simon*, the titular high school teen worries that his family, friends, and classmates will make fun of and dislike him if he ever admits that he is gay. When he eventually comes out to his family and friends, however, they openly accept him. While this idealized narrative is a reality for some LGBTQ+ youth, it overlooks the coming out experience of many teens who are met with push back and negativity. Both literary and scientific research often divide LGBTQ+ people into two categories: out or closeted. This binary ignores the large groups of people who fall somewhere in-between, as family members and friends are aware of their sexual identities and allow them to express themselves in certain ways, but discourage them from publicly coming out because of their environment or personal attitudes. In *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel discusses how she discovered and learned to accept her lesbian identity, while also discovering that her father was a closeted gay man who had affairs with local men. Using insight from qualitative studies on the coming out process for LGBTQ+ youth and past *Fun Home* scholarship from authors like Ariela Freedman, this paper examines the gray area that exists in many conservative small towns like Alison and Bruce's, and how it strands members of the LGBTQ+ community in the closet.

**Cameron Roper**

**Life Beneath the Sea:  
Identity as Claustrophobic Physical Space in *Giovanni's Room***

*Life in that room seemed to be occurring underwater, as I say, and it is certain that I underwent a sea change there.*  
—James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

James Baldwin's 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room* tells the story of David, a homosexual man fleeing the heterosexual expectations of America to a room in Paris belonging to his new lover, Giovanni. Baldwin's novel addresses the claustrophobic nature of identity through the use of suffocating depictions of physical space. David spends the novel locked within himself, and locked within the rooms of his lovers. Various literary critics of *Giovanni's Room* have discussed the connections between physical space and David's character. However, by utilizing the psychological lens of Jesse Lile's essay "Toward a Structural Understanding of Identity Formation," which uses the language of physical space to describe the structure of identity, this paper builds on previous literary arguments to claim that the use of physical space in the novel symbolizes David's own identity—or false identity—construction. The "underwater" nature of Giovanni's room, in which David spends much of his time avoiding heterosexual expectations, illustrates the source of David's emotional turmoil: he is unable to establish an identity that can withstand external heteronormative pressures, just as he is unable to cram himself into identities that do not suit his true self.

**Sharon Zhang**

**Behind Closed Doors:  
Sexuality within Public and Private Spheres in *Fifty Shades of Grey***

"Don't mix business with pleasure" is easier said than done. With the rise of modern communication methods, keeping information within their respective public and private spheres has become increasingly difficult. As boundaries between the two shift, so do power dynamics between men and women. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Christian Grey typically keeps his work and personal life completely separate, to the point that the general public speculates about his sexuality and wonders if he is gay. At the same time, when he enters a relationship with the naïve Anastasia Steele, he privatizes the fact that he participates in BDSM by making her sign a non-disclosure agreement. Using this dichotomy as a launching pad, I examine the ways in which Christian and Anastasia navigate the public landscape, each other, and the (lack of) concerns from close friends and families. As public and private spheres blend as a result of instant messaging and changing power dynamics, I find that there are moments when Anastasia seems to gain agency, but there are also moments when Christian plays on the ideals of romance to get away with his abusive tendencies.

# The Others

Moderated by Dr. Christopher Muniz  
The Writing Program

Thursday, April 18  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Gutenberg

**Serena Allen**

## **Doctor's Deemed Doom in *Goodbye to Berlin*: Why Medical Authority Historically Caused LGBTQ Persecution**

Have you ever questioned your doctor's recommendation? Do you ever doubt that your doctor has gone far enough with their medical care? What happens when medical neglect, prejudice, or ignorance produces a concept like "degeneracy," a medical term that provided scientific backing for minority-persecution in Nazi Germany? In the chapter "On Ruegen Island" in *Goodbye to Berlin*, protagonist Christopher Isherwood stays with his friends Peter and Otto, who have a complex, toxic, and sexual relationship. The three men spend their days by the oceanside, seemingly removed from the political and economic unrest of 1930s Berlin. Eventually, the group meets a Nazi-supporting doctor who uses his medical knowledge to inform Isherwood why homosexual men "ought to be put into labour-camps." I will argue that this conversation demonstrates our willingness to accept medical authority and the ways that doctors exploit this willingness. By foreshadowing the actual concentration camps where millions of Jews, LGBTQ people, and other so-called "degenerates" would be murdered, the conversation also shows how such instances of micro-aggression or "micro-neglect" helped perpetuate the Holocaust, and why we should still be concerned about medical authority and LGBTQ persecution today.

**Katie Donenfeld**

## **A "Pointe" of Contention: The Sexualization of Dance in Hadžihalilović's *Innocence***

"Pliant, quivering with responsiveness, ready to be guided anywhere." The female dancer, as described by Susan Foster, has been reduced to a sexualized image. How did this phenomenon materialize and when is it considered inappropriate? Lucile Hadžihalilović's 2005 film *Innocence* provides an example of the how the male gaze sexualizes dance. In this film, young ballerinas are objectified by female dance authorities and men who watch their performance. Utilizing the works of Susan Foster, Judith Hanna, and Laura Mulvey, I argue that the sexualization of dance, as portrayed in *Innocence*, comes from the nature and origins of dance, the viewers' instincts and desires, and the dancer herself, through ignorant encouragement. Because the sexualization has many sources, there are both instances in which it is acceptable and unacceptable. I argue that the acceptability depends on whether the intentions of the viewer and the dancer align, and conclude that the sexualization of dance in Hadžihalilović's *Innocence* is a gross overstep of acceptable viewing. Despite the unacceptability, this sexualization and similar occurrences persist because of the difficulty in distinguishing intentions.

**Angel Duan**

## **Reworking Our View of the Other: Depictions of Aliens in *The Lathe of Heaven***

"The aliens have landed." This occurrence is all too familiar in popular science fiction texts and films such as *E.T.*, *Arrival*, and the *Avengers* series. For decades, humans have been concerned about extraterrestrial beings invading Earth. Science fiction has propelled emotions affiliated with this anxiety when characterizing aliens as an invader or teacher, as friend or foe, or as human's victims or judges of society. However, little has been written about integrating aliens as human's equals. This is where Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Lathe of Heaven* stands out. After an alien invasion occurs, these figures seamlessly assimilate with humans as engaged citizens. I will examine this positive portrayal of aliens and pit it against other depictions of the Other in science fiction. My paper reveals that fictional reactions humans have towards aliens can be used to interrogate our own attitudes towards illegal aliens in our society.

Patrick Fang

**A Dream from the Depths:  
Music and Ursula Le Guin's Beautiful Other**

What is it that lets us dream of a better life, dream of a better future, dream of a better and more just world than what we have now? What, in other words, motivates our *utopian impulse*? Ursula Le Guin's short story "The New Atlantis" takes place in two locales: one, in a wasteland of an America ruined by capitalist greed and government bloat; and two, in the midst of a surreal, new world order populated by graceful alien beings rising from the depths of the sea. Belle, a musician and the central character of the story, is the only one able to access these two disparate worlds and, in a moment of profound musical beauty, bring them together. I aim to investigate how beauty enables us to tear down our pernicious fear of the mystery that is the Other and how, by doing so, it motivates us to seek utopia. I pay particular attention to Le Guin's unique construction of the Other, the transformative role of Belle's music within the story, and the glue of utopia which binds these two concepts together.

Nikki Ramsy

**Robes, Repression, and Rebellion:  
Autonomous Arab Womanhood in Hamid's *Exit West***

Burkas. Beatings. Bellydancing. Western society often plasters Arab women with labels: terribly oppressed, enchantingly exotic, pitifully submissive. But Nadia, one of the main characters in Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West*, rejects these foisted expectations. She does as she pleases, unswayed by the resounding dissent from her friends, her family, and even her readers. Using Edward Said's definition of "Orientalism," my essay highlights the ways in which Nadia shatters Western conceptualizations of Arab women. Yet, in spite of her bold and brazen rejections of constructed Arabness, Nadia retains one undeniably Arab characteristic: the black robe, or *abaya*, she wears over her clothing. I will examine the symbolic potency of the abaya as a representation of Nadia's fundamental Arabhood, undiminished by her lack of conformity to Western perceptions. In his book *Orientalism*, Said concluded that the "Orient is a stage on which the whole East is confined." But Nadia's abaya is not a costume, and she refuses to play the theatrical part. Instead, she decides for herself—and only for herself—what it means to be an Arab woman.

Simran Sandhu

**A Power Unknowable:  
Fear and Control of the Unknown in N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season***

What makes something terrifying? What is it that we as humans are most afraid of? N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* introduces readers to *orogenes*: people with a natural ability to control geological energy. On a planet in which the land is constantly shifting, *orogenes* are immensely powerful, yet they are ostracized and hated, often murdered if their powers are discovered during childhood. One may initially believe that society's loathing of *orogenes* is due to their simply being different—that is, simply being the "other"—yet Jemisin hints at the idea that there may be more to society's rooted hatred of *orogenes* than difference alone. Acclaimed horror writer H.P. Lovecraft proposed that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." This paper examines humanity's fundamental fear of the unknown and the ways in which this fear is fueled by a desire for biopolitical control in an inherently uncontrollable society.

# Vantage Point

Moderated by Professor Lucas Herchenroeder  
Department of Classics

Thursday, April 18  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

**Rajvir Dua**

## **Ava's Subversive Triumph: A Panoptic Reversal of the Male Gaze in Garland's *Ex Machina***

Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* is filled with nude female bodies. Caleb, a programmer, is invited to test the consciousness of Ava, a female artificially intelligent android, that his company's CEO, Nathan, has created and imprisoned in a glass room. Not only does Nathan watch every one of Caleb and Ava's interactions, Caleb is also given around-the-clock access to Ava, even while she's sleeping and (un)dressing. It is almost as if the film is inviting the viewers to join Nathan and Caleb's sexual gaze and objectification of Ava. How can the film then be feminist? Most viewers sympathize with Caleb and objectify Ava as a monster for leaving him behind at the end of the film. Using Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" and Jeremy Bentham's "panopticon" to shift Caleb's image from a "good-guy" to a selfish and somewhat sexist character, we change our perception of his abandonment. I argue Ava should leave Caleb behind because he is a threat to her freedom in the outside world. Our sympathy lies with Caleb when it should lie with Ava. She is no "fuckin' bitch," as is popularly believed, but is instead a subversive genius. I contend that Ava's use and embrace of her sexuality for her personal gain unveils a deeper meaning behind the prevalent nudity and reveals Garland's intentions of creating a feminist film.

**Elijah Genda**

## **What's Your Favorite Scary Movie Deconstruction of a Genre?: Genre Film in the Wake of *Scream***

Ever since its release in 1996, Wes Craven and Kevin Williamson's *Scream*, a satirical horror movie following a teenager trying to avoid falling victim to a masked killer, has proven to be an incredibly influential film in the horror genre, managing to reinvent some of the cornerstones of the slasher film, such as the final girl and the horror monster. The film was lauded for its use of metanarrative: self-referential humor and in-text deconstruction used to explore narrative. Notably, *Scream* used metanarrative to restore interest in the waning slasher genre, a successful tactic that spawned many films following in *Scream*'s footsteps and launched a trend which has been adopted by other genres and some of the most popular franchises in Hollywood. *Scream*'s cultural significance has transcended beyond simply reinventing horror, and extends to influencing the way audiences view genre film in the modern cinema landscape.

**Seo Yeon Lee**

## **When We Become Most Uncanny to Ourselves: A Real Imaginary Friend in *Spirited Away***

*In order to grow your audience, you must betray their expectations.*  
—Hayao Miyazaki

*Spirited Away*, an animated Japanese film directed by Hayao Miyazaki, portrays the maturation journey of a young female protagonist, Chihiro, upon her arrival to the Spirit Realm. Adhering to the common notion of imaginary beings, scholarly discussion frames the spirits as imaginary friends to Chihiro, who aid her in her journey of growth. However, a betrayal of such anthropocentric expectations unveils a different reading, in which Chihiro drives the narrative not as the protagonist but as an imaginary friend herself—a secondary character who advocates the spirits' character development. In the process, a strange role reversal occurs, where the spirits become real and we humans become imaginary. This argument breaks down hierarchies between the creator and the created, the human and the non-human, and the real and the imaginary. With these breakdowns comes a change in perspective that prompts us to shift the emphasis from ourselves to the spirits. But this non-anthropocentric examination ironically accentuates the impossibility for us humans to surrender our self-centered nature. Even a momentary change in thinking, however, may catalyze growth in the depth and width of our perspective and empathy.

**Klaus Neyer**

**R, Matey:**

***Fifty Shades of Grey* as a Product of Commercialism, Film Ratings and Self-Censorship**

Sex sells. This uncomfortable yet undeniable fact permeates our culture, spanning from the infamy of 1972's pornographic film *Deep Throat* to the hyperabundance of online pornography to, of course, the megahit erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which soon became a feature film. *Fifty Shades* centers on enigmatic billionaire Christian Grey, who tries to entice his love interest Anastasia Steele into signing a contract agreeing to be his "submissive" and engaging in BDSM sex. In this presentation, I examine the translation of this work from an explicit novel to the self-censoring world of the big-budget studio film. All tension in this work stems from Anastasia's hesitance to accept Christian's sexual dominance. Yet, in order to fit the constraints of the "R" rating needed for wide release, the film is unable to explicitly depict BDSM sexuality, and thus finds itself attempting to develop Christian's dominance by portraying his entire character as a micromanaging, controlling partner. This invalidates the film's ability to examine the questions of dominance and sexuality at its core, reducing Anastasia and Christian's relationship to little more than a transaction: she loves him, seemingly, for nothing more than his wealth.

**Dariush Onori**

**Suburban Mob Justice:**

**Freddy Krueger as an Outcast Scored**

We all know Freddy, even if we never get around to watching Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street*. He appears as a murderous ghoul, a force to be reckoned with, a monster, a sexual predator. But, we never really think about him as a human, a rational actor, or even a *victim* of mob justice. The assumption of Freddy's guilt drives critical literature about the film, yet this assumption removes a thought-provoking and haunting element from the story: the uncertainty of our own morality. Viewers should take a more objective view, since the actions of the parents and the facts we have at hand show a different story. Using Carol J. Clover's concept of an equivalency between fear and arousal in slasher films, I attempt to explain Freddy's actions and show you another Krueger. The community hunted him without reason in the same way we have demonized some groups throughout history. Once we realize that the boogymen in our closet are actually often misunderstood people in unfortunate circumstances, maybe we can stop repeating this cycle of hatred.

**Samantha Skinner**

**Drawing on Empathy:**

**Understanding Immigrant Narratives through Visual Communication in *The Arrival***

It might not be surprising to find images of fantastical cities and make-believe creatures in a children's picture book, but it is difficult to imagine their place in an immigrant narrative. Therefore, it is impressive that in his graphic novel, *The Arrival*, Shaun Tan eliminates the perceived dissonance between the fantastical nature of children's literature and the solemnity of immigration. Not only does he accomplish this, but the lack of text and the fictional lens used in *The Arrival* successfully convey a universally comprehensible immigrant narrative. Tan is able to bridge any cultural or linguistic barriers audiences might encounter in a traditional immigrant narrative through these fantastical elements as readers struggle alongside the protagonist to find solace or familiarity in the new, unfamiliar land of immigrants. I maintain that the unique presentation generates an "empathetic visual narrative," a story that uses pictures to promote the reader's ability to understand and share the feelings of the protagonist. Specifically, Tan places the reader in a position to relate to the immigrant through his universal and fictional depiction of immigration. In order to demonstrate this, I will draw on Suzanne Keen's theory of narrative empathy and apply it to graphic images. Ultimately, the power an image possesses to generate empathy can illustrate how emotional investment can provoke greater understandings.

# What's My Motivation?

Moderated by Professor Vanessa Schwartz  
Departments of Art History and History

Thursday, April 18  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

**Priya Irukulapati**

## **An Interstellar Love Affair: Romanticization and Science-Fantasy in Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles***

*We earth men have a talent for ruining big, beautiful things.*  
—Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles*

With NASA's Mars Exploration Program and SpaceX's plan to "start a city [on Mars] by 2050" in mind, Bradbury's morose comment on our treatment of Earth raises the question: Why do we love Mars so much? Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* tells stories of what life could be like on Mars, challenging the bounds of our imagination. Between stories of Martians hunting Earthlings to dead relatives reappearing on Mars, Bradbury may have intended for his work to be firmly science-fiction. However, I argue his work actually includes many components of science-fantasy, a similar sounding category with a worlds-apart meaning. With the spread of science-fantasy—a subgenre of sci-fi which ignores basic scientific principles—has come the romanticization of Mars, or more specifically, the belief that escape from the monotony of daily life can only be found millions and millions of miles away. By connecting *The Martian Chronicles*, which rides the border of science-fiction and science-fantasy, to society's growing urge to find solace away from Earth, we can begin to both understand and reverse the consequences of our glorification of what lies beyond the stars.

**Nikhilesh Kumar**

## **Mutant-Culturalism: An Investigation of Otherness in Grant Morrison's *New X-Men***

Neoliberalism commodifies everything it can: our politics, pedagogy, discourse, and more, all sacrificed at the altar of market utility. Recent scholarship asserts that neoliberalism can co-opt even our most basic ideals, like our desire for an egalitarian society. This phenomenon, known as neoliberal multiculturalism, homogenizes and eliminates difference that is not immediately profitable to the free market. Grant Morrison's *New X-Men*, a landmark comic run which resuscitated the X-Men series, initially seems to fall into this trap. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that Morrison's seminal work is not an endorsement of neoliberal multiculturalism. Rather, Morrison uses the character of Magneto as a vehicle to mount a layered critique of neoliberal multiculturalism and expose the homogenizing pressure inherent to comics themselves. I will examine how Morrison employs irony to reverse multiculturalist tropes, illustrating the absurdity, and the danger, of this phenomenon. Understanding how neoliberal multiculturalism works in our art will allow us to combat the structural inequalities brought on by capitalism, and get closer to a society where all difference is celebrated rather than just that which provides market utility.

**Arianna Proul**

## **For the White Eye: Misrepresentation of Non-White Cultures in the 84 Lumber 2017 Super Bowl Commercial**

*We, as a nation, modified or suppressed and lied about all the darker forces in our history.*  
—James Baldwin, "The Creative Process"

In a country founded on inequality, the oppression of non-white cultures has been magnified, normalized, and even disguised in the contemporary era, becoming ubiquitous in our biggest source of information: entertainment. The controversial 2017 Super Bowl commercial by 84 Lumber exemplifies this oppression in mainstream media, following a mother and daughter on their journey to enter the United States from Mexico in the midst of the volatile border conversation. However, this story is told in an extremely inaccurate way. The act of turning non-white cultures and struggles into a spectacle is done to satisfy the white audience as they hold majority viewership. In this presentation I will explore the reasonings and methods for the evasion of truthful representation of non-white



cultures in media. The oversimplification and fictionalization of race perpetuates the problematic representation of non-white characters in literature and film in order to satisfy a white audience, reinforcing the white norm.

**Camille Rougier**

**What's Forgotten?:  
Jazz Music and White Ignorance in Minghella's *The Talented Mr. Ripley***

How do you define jazz? Is it a genre? A culture? A musical moment? In Anthony Minghella's film adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Dickie Greenleaf is the epitome of wealthy American privilege, parading through 1950s Italy when he meets Tom Ripley, a poor pianist sent by Dickie's father to retrieve him. Minghella intentionally diverges from the book by changing Dickie's favorite pastime from painting to jazz, a more contextually charged interest with origins in black culture. Current scholarship on jazz in the film only emphasizes class and sexuality. What about race? The jazz performances in the movie are never about enjoying a facet of black culture; Tom and Dickie appropriate them at their leisure, exemplifying white ignorance. While the book only explores the dichotomies of poor versus rich and gay versus straight, Minghella's use of white ignorance during jazz scenes in the movie adds an overlooked intersectional layer to the text about race and privilege. Scholarship on the movie appears to exemplify the same type of cultural dismissal that Tom and Dickie participate in.

**Aria Schuler**

**Consent Is NOT Sexy?:  
The Lack of Cinematic Consent in *Fifty Shades of Grey***

The film adaptation of E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the number one book for grandmas and plane rides, grossed over \$571 million at the box office since its release on Valentine's Day 2015. The film tracks the story of Anastasia Steele, a college student who catches billionaire Christian Grey's eye. Christian introduces Ana to the world of BDSM, pushing her limits sexually and pushing her verbally to sign a contract to consummate the relationship. But, does Ana ever really consent to "being his"? While the box office numbers are there, the cinematic devices suggest that the hardline consent associated with BDSM is not, choosing romance over equality. I strive in this essay to analyze specific cinematic details in the backdrop and the messages they subtly convey about consent, particularly about how these impact Anastasia's identity and personal agency. Moving beyond the context of the film, I hope to show how trends in the Hollywood representation of consent and romance in films like *Fifty Shades of Grey* impact the women who consume them, for better or for worse.

**Kristin Wong**

**Colorless Like Us?:  
*Black Like Me* and the Aims of a Post-Racial Society**

Racial inequalities loom large in our society. Even sixty years after the civil rights movement—a period of time considered as making progress towards a post-racial United States—racial disparities continue to permeate American communities and ideologies. Journalist John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* is a perfect depiction of racist America. In the book, Griffin uses medication to darken his white skin to a deep brown, trading his privileged, white life for an unemployed black man's. Though it may be that Griffin's project was well-intentioned in pushing us towards a post-racial society, scholars recognize that the perspective Griffin provides is privileged and therefore does not successfully create the result that Griffin intends. My paper will show *Black Like Me* to be a reflection of our broader cultural attitude towards ending racism by establishing the differences between races. With policies such as affirmative action, we give benefits based on demographics, essentially fighting discrimination with discrimination. I will argue that contemporary racial politics mirror Griffin's actions: positive intentions that have unforeseen negative consequences when carried out. We live in a society that is aware and has good intentions, yet good intentions do not always equal effective policies. So where do we go from here?

# Between the Lines

Moderated by Dr. Patience Moll  
Thematic Option Honors Program

Thursday, April 18  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Maggie Bowen**

## **But That Can't Be Funny: Approaching Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* as a Humorist**

A few years after *Fear of Flying* was published, North Carolina senator Jesse Helms questioned why the National Endowment for the Arts chose to give author Erica Jong a five thousand dollar grant to write a "reportedly filthy, obscene book." The novel's so-called obscenity likely derives from Jong's use of frank vernacular to discuss "filthy," salacious details of female sexuality, desire, and run-ins with misogyny. Fixated on the shock value of her work, critics and scholars have yet to focus on Jong's explicit use of humor as a tool to discuss feminist theories, debates, and social issues of the era. In this paper, I argue that humor—rather than incidental—plays an essential role in understanding the messages and thematic elements of *Fear of Flying*. Jong employs a semi-autobiographical and satirical approach to protagonist Isadora's tale of sexual liberation, using comedy and humorous literary devices such as situational irony, sexual puns, and exaggerated metaphors as a means of contemplating the evolving positions of women, particularly in the Western society of the time.

**Alex Hemmerlein**

## **Playing With Ideas, Not Toys: "Twilight" and Freud's *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming***

What if? Whether in one own's bed or on Freud's psychoanalyzing couch, this question and its resulting fantasies are often pondered lying down. In his 1908 piece *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, Freud explores the evolution of fantasizing as one ages and its role in creative writing. He maintains that humans transition from playing as a child to daydreaming as an adult, however, he fails to define when such daydreaming occurs and why it is necessary. I assert that daydreaming occurs in the time between being awake and being asleep, a time which I call "twilight." Twilight is the time when we can be most creative, most attuned to our surroundings, and realize the lesser-known effects on memory. To address such topics, I incorporate the work of Stefan Fischer and David Marcusson-Clavertz, who argue that mindset and one's willingness to daydream make a larger impact in achieving positive outcomes than being well-rested. Thus, those who either choose not to sleep or cannot sleep have a unique opportunity to specialize and even become more productive than the commonly praised "early birds."

**Lucia Jiang**

## **Things Fall Apart: Letting Go of Eurocentrism in "The Second Coming"**

*What rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*  
—W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

One hundred years after W. B. Yeats wrote these lines, scholars still are not sure of the poem's meaning. While many have attempted to read "The Second Coming" in terms of "modern" political events ranging from the rise of the Third Reich to the election of Donald Trump, it has rarely been applied to any events outside of the Western consciousness mentioned. In my paper, I argue that interpreting allusions out of context and haphazardly applying them to situations that relate only to Western suffering violates the spirit of "The Second Coming." In his poem, Yeats invokes Christian imagery in order to challenge and displace it with a more global, multicultural way of speaking. If the poem fits Catherine Morley's definition of modernism and "confront[s] a world distorted by the experience of industrialization, capitalism, and urbanism" in an age "increasingly defined by the shattering experience of total war," Yeats' poem also describes a world in which Europe is no longer the center. In this way, "The Second Coming" exposes the Eurocentric implications of the term "modernism" itself.

**Kate Lange**

**Reading Between the Lines:  
Suspicion of Print Literacy in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist***

In Colson Whitehead's postmodern noir novel *The Intuitionist*, elevator inspectors are highly influential members of society. Most inspectors are Empiricists, who carefully inspect elevators for damage, but some are Intuitionists, who can simply "feel" what is wrong with an elevator. The novel follows Lila Mae Watson, an Intuitionist and the first black female elevator inspector, as she unravels the tangle of mysteries, shady alliances, and political power-grabs set off by a catastrophic elevator accident. While most scholarship on *The Intuitionist* focuses on the allegory of the elevator as an instrument of social uplift, my paper will examine the less obvious theme of literacy. Overtly, the book seems to exalt literacy as a means of education and self-help. However, an analysis of the novel's structure suggests that Whitehead is pointing out the shortcomings of print literacy. I will also analyze a tension in Lila Mae's character: while she thinks she is "never wrong" about what books and elevators are telling her, she often misreads people. Lila Mae's false confidence, along with the book's structure, leads me to conclude that Whitehead is calling for a new kind of "expanded literacy" to bring about true societal equality.

**Nathan Vogel**

**How a Book Becomes a Blueprint:  
*The Drowned World* and Living with Sea Level Rise**

My children will never stand on the same beach I did as a child; it will be ocean floor for them. Where I went to high school will either be entirely sunk or in the process of sinking when my children become freshmen. When most people discuss climate change, they discuss ways to halt its progress, but sea level rise projections where I grew up in Florida are locked in for the next century. So, how are we going to live with them? Pulling focus on living with the coming, inevitable sea-level rise, I will explore how climate fiction, and J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* in particular, can help us imagine future living conditions and psychological reactions to the climate change we now face. Change is coming quickly; our children will grow up in a different world than we did. If that world is indeed drowning, how are we prepared to survive? It is a practical question, and literature may have practical answers.

**Samantha Zhang**

**"Did you fall, or did you let go?":  
Performative Trauma in the Digital Age**

*Feels like we could go on for forever this way / two friends on a perfect day.*  
—*Dear Evan Hansen*

In the musical *Dear Evan Hansen*, teenaged Evan finds himself accidentally entangled in the suicide of his classmate Connor, weaving together a story of their imagined friendship balanced on an intricate web of lies. Through an examination of the role that imaginary friends play in traumatic events, my paper enters the current discussion in performance theory relating to "liveness" in the age of technology. The prevailing notion of liveness argues that all art that instantly makes a claim on its audience should be considered "live." I argue that contrary to this all-encompassing definition, *Dear Evan Hansen* emphasizes the important dichotomy between live and non-live performance and their contrasting effects on audiences. Ultimately, this distinction creates a unique mirroring effect, allowing the audience to see parallels between Evan's world and their own. Utilizing both a plot-based examination and theatrical analysis of *Dear Evan Hansen*, this paper seeks to gain a holistic perspective into how trauma is shared with an audience in the Digital Age.

# Man or Machine

Moderated by Dr. Aaron Winslow  
Thematic Option Honors Program

Thursday, April 18  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Carnegie

**Helen Burch**

## **It's Just Human Nature: Complicating the Binary of Natural versus Man-Made in *Ex Machina***

*Ex Machina*: We come for the robots, we stay for the romance, and we all but ignore the ecofeminist undertones which shape the message of the film. Director Alex Garland incorporates nature throughout the film to supplement its most critical question: can humanity be manufactured, and further, can the natural be man-made? The binary of natural versus man-made is emphasized by dialogue, setting, transitions, and even the characters themselves, who define the natural as a possession of man. By comparing Garland's portrayal of technology as fallible and oppressive, as well as the neglect of natural elements in the film by the protagonist, to trends in recent science fiction, I argue that *Ex Machina* advocates for a societal reversion to the natural. Further, I examine the ironic parallels between the mechanized android Ava and the natural/environmental imagery in the film to investigate the connection between Ava's feminine sexuality and the environment, and the subversion of both to a patriarchal creator.

**Manushri Desai**

## **Buzz Words and Political Polarization: A Critique of the Narrator's Rhetorical Moves in "The Machine Stops"**

*We love to dichotomize...we have a basic urge to divide things into two distinct groups,  
with nothing but an empty gap in between.*  
—Hans Rosling, *Factfulness*

"Flesh of flesh": that famous repetition from E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" follows protagonists Vashti and her son, Kuno, as they struggle to keep their relationship alive in a world that shuns human interaction. In the futuristic fable, inhabitants live in standardized underground cells due to the unsuitable conditions on Earth's surface and are ruled by "the Machine." The technologically-driven world has been so stripped of individuality that Forster highlights this difference in "flesh" between Kuno and Vashti through the rhetoric of the third-person narrator. While many scholars read third-person narrators as transparent and reliable storytellers, I argue that the narrator's rhetoric in "The Machine Stops" draws on "binary thinking" and aligns Kuno with the concept of techno-pessimism and Vashti with the concept of techno-optimism. By presenting the binary viewpoints of technological advancement—techno-optimism and techno-pessimism—Forster advances his rationale behind machine-mediated dystopia. Motivated to demonstrate the destructive effects of technological development, Forster uses the narrator's rhetoric to urge a distaste in Vashti's support of techno-optimism and a sympathetic reading of Kuno's belief in techno-pessimism. Drawing on the work of digital-age theorists, climate politics scholars, and science fiction historians, this paper seeks to complicate the role of the narrator's rhetoric in "The Machine Stops."

**Jackson FitzGerald**

## **Live Hard, Die Homeless: Massacre by the Forces of Biopower in *Tropic of Orange***

You think Los Angeles traffic is bad now? Imagine how long you would sit in rush hour if the city's homeless population built a community on a stretch of the 110. Such a community is created in Karen Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange*, and such a community is destroyed. This essay examines the destruction of the homeless community in the context of the authoritative theory of "biopower." Biopower is the idea that modern governments hold as their highest goal the protection of the lives of the people they govern. While this development sounds like a progressive victory for humanity, the reality is anything but. According to the theory, governments protect lives to ensure the existence of capitalism. Thus, the homeless, who do not contribute to capitalism, pose an existential problem for biopower. Because the homeless create a community that does not align with biopower as a means of control, they are therefore eliminated by a government that does, in a massacre at the end of the book. Yamashita argues that

biopower, as the dominant authoritative framework, is inherently flawed, failing to protect the lives of those who need government protection the most. Biopower, she suggests, allows those in the government to carry out heinous deeds in the name of protecting those society has deemed valuable.

**Rayyan Ibrahim**

**A Life Behind the Screen:  
An Examination of Agency in *Doki Doki Literature Club***

Video games have been sadly ignored when it comes to their artistic value, yet as a medium, they have a lot to say concerning agency, one of the most passionately debated philosophical concepts of the modern age. Small independent title *Doki Doki Literature Club* offers a reconsideration of agency more nuanced than any other gaming title in recent memory. The game, what can only be described as a meta-narrative horror dating sim, accomplishes this through a subversion of common gaming elements, such as immersion and player agency. Ultimately, *Doki Doki Literature Club* questions the nature of choice in gaming, commenting on its superficiality while expressing a vision of the concept that brings agency itself down from the philosophical pedestal it has occupied. I will examine autonomy in the context of *Doki Doki Literature Club*, tracking the evolution of the concept throughout the game, as well as in the context of gaming itself, in order to justify my claim that choice is an illusion people depend on to maintain ignorant sanity in the face of a world that all too often falls into madness.

**Victor Perez**

**Robotic Curiosity and Human Algorithms:  
How *Wall-E* Argues Against Commercialized Automation**

What will happen to humanity when it is replaced by robots? Do artificial intelligences deserve rights? Will artificial intelligence be able to emulate the magic of life? These are important futurist questions addressed by Andrew Stanton's 2008 animated children's film, *Wall-E*. In *Wall-E*, the Buy n Large Corporation (BnL) owns all the means of production and controls all human endeavors. BnL has created a semi-utopian society in a fully-automated spaceship, the Axiom, as humanity waits for WALL-E robots to clean up the Earth. The film explores the possibility of robots equipped with a learning AI resembling the brain of humans as a possible bridge for human-robot interactions. With human-like intelligence, robots can experiment with their life's purpose and find meaning beyond the directives given to them by BnL. In contrast, the Axiom's humans have had their purpose stripped and replaced with constant satisfaction from BnL. But, those who wake from BnL's grasp want to live. To regain a personal life's purpose, the members of the Axiom's dystopian society overthrow BnL and establish a modest and equal society on Earth founded on the idea that both robots and humans are living, productive beings.

# Rugged Individualism

Moderated by Professor Brett Sheehan  
Departments of History and East Asian Languages and Cultures

Thursday, April 18  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

**Quinn Daly**

## **Hall of Mirrors: Acceptance and Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand***

Nella Larsen's 1928 novel *Quicksand* features a mixed-race female protagonist, Helga Crane, who flees from various communities seeking a place of respite from her racial binary limbo. Helga's character is best understood through the lens of the Lacanian "mirror stage," the period in early infancy when an infant "is developing an image of itself as an autonomous being," recognizing "itself in a mirror." This image, usually reflected through the parent, "helps to unify [the infant's] 'fragmented body-image.'" Being the product of a black father and white mother, Helga has never been provided an adequate "mirror." Instead, Helga looks to the world as a mirror to understand herself and craves an acceptance of her whole self. Because the racially-divided communities which Helga enters are unable to grapple with her whole identity, they only accept the parts which they can understand, and Helga willingly accepts these modifications, shedding the parts of her which do not quite fit. I argue that Helga Crane's story is a testament to the ways that we sacrifice our whole identity in order to receive acceptance from a world which disdains difference. Just as we embrace the world, we find a damaging need for it to first embrace us.

**Ishani Gupta**

## **Femininity and Fastballs: Performance and Subversion of Gender in *A League of Their Own***

*Every girl in this league will be a lady.*  
—Ira Lowenstein, *A League of Their Own*

In *A League of Their Own*, knocking it out of the park is not the only focus the women in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League must have: the players also constantly have to adhere to traditional femininity for their audiences. *A League of Their Own* follows the story of multiple female baseball players playing in the first ever women's baseball league in the United States and portrays the patriarchal policing of women's femininity. The film's depiction of gender roles enforced on women establishes the societal pressure the players were facing. Although it may initially appear that *A League of Their Own* upholds societal norms placed on women and women athletes through its emphasis on appearance and domesticity, an analysis of gender performances using Judith Butler's theories and examinations of supporting characters reveals that the film is not as conformant to traditional femininity as it may seem. In fact, *A League of Their Own* subverts conventional gender roles without entirely alienating conservative audiences, allowing the film to maintain popularity and widespread influence.

**Katrina Hernandez**

## **Don't Wanna Be All By Myself: The Effects of Social Isolation on Mental Illness and the Dismantlement and Rebirth of Identity in *The Body Artist***

Is our sanity truly dependent upon the presence and attention of others, or is that precisely what may be holding us back from discovering our true selves? In Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*, protagonist Lauren Hartke struggles with her mental stability and personal identity following the death of her husband. While other scholars have focused primarily on Lauren's fixation on birds, her skewed perceptions of reality, and the destruction of her identity, they have failed to note the confounding influence of Lauren's extreme social isolation and how it applies to all of the aforementioned subjects. In this paper, I open a new inquiry into *The Body Artist* by examining Lauren's mental state, as well as her identity collapse and eventual reconstruction through the lens of her social alienation.

Isaac Lee

**Last Man on Earth(s):  
Sir Alfred, “The 15 Year Layover,” and Geography’s Exhortation to Inhabit Two Worlds at Once**

Consider that the home, city, or even country you inhabit has two aspects: 1) the physical structures and individual locations—its objects, and 2) the sentiments it induces, memories it creates, and human interactions it facilitates—its spirit. These distinctions, recognized as “space” and “place,” respectively, are foundations of contemporary geographical theory and the groundwork of my paper. I will build my argument upon the work of various contemporary geographers. Specifically, I apply geography to the life of Sir Alfred, an exile who is stranded at Terminal 1 of Charles De Gaulle Airport as documented in Michael Paterniti’s article, “The 15 Year Layover.” I critique Sir Alfred for manifesting excessive individualism and descending into nihilism, and I contest that these tendencies are linked to his perception of the airport as purely space. I argue that, had he viewed the airport as place, he would have resisted nihilistic inclinations. However, I also consider how Sir Alfred’s unique, space-oriented perception of the world carries moral nobility. I thus conclude that while viewing the world as place clarifies concrete purpose and meaning for the beholder, place can also become stagnant. Space, on the other hand, leaves room for nihilistic tendencies, but also lets humans utilize their creative faculties and visualize what the world could become. Thus, I conclude that humans have the responsibility of living in both worlds at once.

Peter Simpson

**Estrangement Comes to Town:  
Social Relations in *The Stranger***

Who are the strangers of our society? Who transgresses our norms? And, most importantly, what do we do with those “outsiders”? These questions are interrogated by Albert Camus’ 1942 novel *The Stranger*, but the answers it provides are not as obvious as they first appear. The novel follows a dispassionate protagonist, Meursault, as he listlessly glides through life, violating many of society’s sacrosanct conventions along the way. Historical scholarship has remained entrenched within the individualist existentialist paradigm, stifling considerations of interdependence between Meursault, society, and the world itself. However, my analysis uses a relationship-focused framework based on Camus’ philosophical work and Karl Marx’s theory of alienation to analyze the complex social interactions underlying the novel. This analysis produces a range of interesting and sometimes counterintuitive conclusions, highlighting the “strangeness” of those we usually use as a benchmark for normalcy and suggesting the potential for productive insight arising from supposed outsiders.

Michael Tseng

**The X-Men’s Misunderstood Mission:  
The Dangers of Glorifying a Multiculturalist Society during the Cold War**

After the 90th Academy Awards, Francis McDormand went viral for advocating an “inclusion rider,” which refers to “a clause that an actor can insist be inserted in their contract that requires cast and crew on a film to meet a certain level of diversity.” Since then, it seems that the entertainment industry has demanded and worked towards a utopic multicultural world. But, does this method promote a multicultural society? Diversification of characters has been present for decades, as evidenced by the original *Giant Size X-Men, Vol. 1*, whose 1975 release became a trailblazer for multicultural representation in entertainment, itself being an allegory for the repressed marginalized groups of society. From that year on, multicultural representation of minority groups has been an integral part of media success. However, some scholars have advocated for further representation that borders on glorification, and dangerously strains relations between minority groups. Thus, this paper will explore how the comic mirrors Cold War ideologies and United States relations of the era. My paper will prove that highlighting ethnic differences is harmful to a true multiculturalist society, and that modern scholars have mistaken the purpose of multicultural figures in entertainment, citing progressive views of race and gender, when its purpose was to reflect Cold War racial ideologies.

# Shaking Things Up

Moderated by Dr. Ali Pearl  
Thematic Option Honors Program

Thursday, April 18  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Gutenberg

**Sophia Arnao**

## **Remaining (Wo)men Together: Male Hysteria and Appropriations of Femininity in *Fight Club***

*Fight Club* is not a chick flick. Considering its lack of female characters and glorification of masculine violence—not to mention its bizarre obsession with testicles—the film seems about as “unfeminine” as one can be. Interestingly, it is only because of a woman that the Narrator adopts his misogynist alter-ego and establishes an underground organization dedicated to wholesome, manly violence. However, *Fight Club*'s male-exclusive membership starts to work against itself, and soon, consciously or unconsciously, the men adapt to fill the void of femininity they have created. Although they maintain their macho exterior throughout, the men are feminized in costume and character within the film, as well as on a larger scale through societal and cinematic tropes. Applying the works of Tania Modleski and others, I will explain how the men of *Fight Club* appropriate femininity to expand their power, oppressing women while ironically subverting the traditional gender system that created such inequality in the first place. In some ways, *Fight Club*'s portrayal of these transgressive male bodies marks a positive step toward breaking down gender barriers. However, by removing women from the picture altogether, the film ultimately undermines the very possibilities it opens up.

**Shwetha Ganesh**

## **Man v. Woman: How Sports Defines Gender Roles Through *Amateur* and Caster Semenya**

*It's only crazy until you do it.*  
—Nike ad

As the recent Nike ad claims, breaking boundaries in athletics is a concept that resonates with everyone. Although we now claim sports to be an inclusive institution, this inclusivity does not always apply to trans and gender nonconforming athletes. Using Thomas Page McBee's memoir, *Amateur: A True Story About What Makes a Man* and South African Olympic runner Caster Semenya's experience with gender verification, I will explore the effects of gender segregation in cisgender athletic institutions. As a transgender man, McBee reveals how boxing's rigid definition of masculinity impeded the exploration of his own gender post-transition. How, then, do sports demarcate male and female athletes? By segregating sports based on a gender binary, institutions and organizations are excluding people who do not subscribe to those societal norms. The stereotypes that we associate with genders affect performance and thus propagate gender segregation. This paper examines how the stakes of gender segregation in sports are represented in *Amateur* and how McBee's book might shed new light on Caster Semenya's and related cases.

**Maddie House**

## **Always the Villain: How White Supremacy Weaved Its Way into *Black Panther***

Movies, superhero films in particular, are often based on white supremacist or colonialist narratives, which is a large part of why *Black Panther* has been such a huge success. *Black Panther* received praise for the nearly all black cast, the anti-colonialist beliefs of Killmonger, and the powerful and intelligent depiction of black people throughout the film, all of which disrupt the colonialist narrative that dominates the media. But, in the end, the peaceful and privileged T'Challa (the Black Panther) defeats Killmonger, the voice of black power, causing many to argue that Killmonger is in fact the real hero of the film. In my presentation, I will argue that Killmonger is portrayed as cruel and bloodthirsty, clarifying his role as the villain. By villainizing Killmonger while explicitly condemning colonialism, *Black Panther* exists as a colonialist film that disguises itself as anti-colonialist. In doing so, the film makes



revolutionary strides but do not escape the framework of white colonialism, causing us to question whether or not a movie can exist entirely independent from the white supremacist systems in place.

**Kevin Lu**

***Wall-E as the Anti-Consumerist: Autonomy from the Automaton***

In Andrew Stanton's Pixar animated film *Wall-E*, we see the culmination of all of our gluttonous desires: excessive consumerism and environmental neglect. Forced to flee Earth on a spaceship called the Axiom, humans are showered with luxurious facilities, from flying automated robochairs to fattening foods all served in a cup. A sociological nightmare disguised as paradise, the Axiom is the epitome of consumerism gone rogue. What is interesting is how the robot Wall-E, a side-product of human consumerism, has transcended his programmed state to develop a sentient identity amid his isolation and loneliness. Meanwhile, humans aboard the Axiom, although doused in endless amenities and services, appear identical, each resembling the same baby-like figures in the same colored jumpsuits, a community with little diversity. Referencing academics such as Christopher Anderson, Sean Mattie, and Hugh McNaughtan, I will argue that *Wall-E* not only criticizes post-modern consumerism, but also critiques the ways consumerism denies an individual's agency and freedom of thought. This moral flaw has far-reaching implications in the realm of human self-determination, and it is proven through the little robot who knows a bit better.

**Christopher Meyer**

***Capitalism, Dictatorship, and the Odorous Workplace  
in Woolf's *Three Guineas****

Equal pay for equal work. This phrase has been subject to much debate. In her series of essays in *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf demands equal pay for equal work while attacking the atmosphere of the male-dominated workplace. Woolf describes the atmosphere as odorous to reinforce her idea of female oppression and compares the male worker to a male dictator, a "creature who believes he has the right to dictate how others live." So what happens if the daughters of educated men seize control of the atmosphere and dominate the workplace? While some gender scholars have addressed the "war between the sexes" that Woolf implies in her "atmosphere" metaphor, socio-political scholars focus on Woolf's description of the dictator as male. In contrast to their readings, I will show that Woolf's description of the "atmosphere" of the workplace suggests that once women enter it, they will also become dictators. I argue the real dictator in Woolf's book is not man but capitalism, which forces workers to oppress one another and allows those on top to dictate how the bottom should live. With this idea of capitalism as the dictator, we can readily see why "equal pay for equal work" remains debated decades after Woolf's publication.

**Rachel Sanchez**

***The Monstrous Female:  
A Look at Femininity in Stephen King's *It****

Sewers, orgies, and best friends. Suspense, horror, and sexuality. In his 1986 classic *It*, Stephen King exposes and entertains ideas of sexuality, femininity, and agency as he follows the lives and relationships of a group of seven "Losers" in their battles against adolescence, adulthood, and demons. The Losers—Bill Denbrough, Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak, Ben Hanscom, Mike Hanlon, Stanley Uris, and Beverly Marsh—tackle their childhood fears while confronting their town's resident fear-eating female demon, Pennywise. The six boys are riddled with fears of abandonment, clowns, and germs (the classics), whereas Beverly, our sole female protagonist, is affronted with the fear of her own sexuality. As an eleven-year-old girl, she is subjected to the horrors of abuse and misogyny that leave her as a vessel for male development. In this presentation, I will bring these ideas of sexuality and femininity into conversation with the small amount of scholarship that exists on *It*, which has primarily focused on male relationships to boyhood. I will expose and examine the implications that gendered language and sexism have on the female, which work together to make a monster out of femininity.

# Thou Shalt Not

Moderated by Professor Hector Reyes  
Department of Art History

Thursday, April 18  
7:15 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

**Eli Gruen**

## **Krueger versus Reagan: The Most Terrifying Political Race of 1984**

1984 was a year of much turmoil in the United States. Ronald Reagan was campaigning for his second term as President, and after four years under his administration, the country was facing the crises of the War on Drugs and the AIDS epidemic. In a decade dominated by the ideals of one man, few would suspect that a valid political opposition could be found in the actions of a horror movie villain. However, Wes Craven provided this very voice through the dream-hopping Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Craven's socio-political insight, which he established in *The Last House on the Left* and *The Hills Have Eyes*, lies at the core of the film, where its horror targets the values of President Ronald Reagan and his followers. I see Freddy Krueger's promiscuity, overblown personality, extreme violence, and Satanic attributes as an amalgamation of the anxieties that Reagan and his administration attempted to combat. Through the lens of these anxieties, I explore how Craven both called the actions of our nation's leader into question and threatened the American mindset.

**Karan Menon**

## **"All the Animals Come Out at Night": The Fetishization of Urban Danger in *Taxi Driver***

New York City in the 1970s was not the family-friendly tourist destination we know today. Populations were declining, money was running out, and the streets were notoriously rampant with corruption, crime, and unbridled sex. Throughout this decade, negative images of New York in the media were a strong influence on the public opinion that the city's crime needed to be cleaned up. One such piece of media was Martin Scorsese's critically acclaimed film *Taxi Driver*, in which the protagonist Travis Bickle echoes many residents' disgust for New York's filthy streets and wants to clean up the city once and for all. While Bickle's hellish view of New York has been widely politicized by various groups looking to make renovations to the city, there is another group of residents who bemoan these cleanup efforts, arguing that they actually preferred the excitement of living in the more gritty, dangerous, and sexualized New York of the 1970s. In this presentation, I will examine this phenomenon of the "fetishization of urban danger" in *Taxi Driver* in order to explore whether Travis Bickle is really the champion for change that critics, audiences, and politicians have considered him to be for decades.

**Deven Patel**

## **Colonization Beyond the Boundaries of Earth: A Warning of the Future in *The Martian Chronicles***

*We Earth men have a talent for ruining big, beautiful things.*  
—Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles*

The notion that humans could escape the bounds of Earth and colonize new worlds has been fantasized by authors for ages. Innate human traits—such as the desire for power and greed—shape our intentions and decisions, raising the question: in what manner will we colonize these fictional worlds? As noted in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, we humans "have a talent for ruining big, beautiful things." In his narrative, Bradbury poses a future in which humans colonize Mars, taking over the planet through the construction of elaborate cities and the imposition of Earth's societal standards and laws. Meanwhile, the native Martians on the planet die of human-rooted illness and Earth gets engulfed in all-out nuclear warfare. Effectively, advancement comes at the price of destruction. My essay, in conversation with other scholars, explores the ways in which Bradbury critiques the destructive tendencies of humanity in *The Martian Chronicles* through his series of short stories. Moreover, I point to the fact that Bradbury argues our future will be dark and violent unless we change our tendencies—ultimately, we will bring upon ourselves our own destruction.

**Logan Quessenberry**

**Moral Relativity in the Wasteland of *Fallout: New Vegas***

What is good is sometimes bad, and the opposite is often true as well. In everyday life, people are faced with choices or “what-ifs” that govern their actions. This is also true in *Fallout: New Vegas*. The retro-futuristic culture of the Cold War mixed with the post-apocalyptic climate of the Las Vegas area culminates with the designers of *Fallout: New Vegas* putting the player right in the middle of an ideological conflict that can shift to the advantage of whomever the player supports. This forces the player to make a moral decision: which ideology will they choose? In forcing the player to choose one of four strange, imperfect ideologies, the designers demonstrate that morality is relative to the context of a situation. This relatively new conceptual representation of relativity will be contrasted with the theories of Immanuel Kant (as summarized by Claire Devine) and his strict “categorical imperative” to show how humanity’s moralities have shifted over time with a look toward what might come in the future.

**Nishan Sohoni**

**The First Rule of Utopia:  
Women and the Creation of Dynamic Utopias in *Fight Club***

*It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything.*  
—Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*

By what means do we achieve a perfect society? How can we know when we have achieved one? David Fincher explores such questions in his cult classic film *Fight Club* through the depiction of various forms of “utopia.” Utopian scholar Olivia Burgess believes the film’s earliest fight clubs represent a more ideal, “dynamic” form of utopian thinking; the act of scarring and changing bodies during the fights allows for the constant exploration of new possibilities. My paper, however, points to a glaring oversight in her analysis: the fight clubs exclude women. Using the work of gender, film, and psychoanalytic scholars, I argue that women in *Fight Club* incite liberation and revolution throughout the movie. By analyzing instances of feminine symbols and characters who display gender fluidity, I prove that Fincher subtly displays women and feminine influences as “disruptive” forces in the lives of the men in the film. These forces create the process and change necessary for the dynamic, perfect, and truly “utopian” societies that men alone are unable to create.

**Victoria Westover**

**Fighting the “Politics of Stupidity”:  
*The Devil’s Highway* as the Solution to the U.S.-Mexico Immigration Crisis**

*In the desert, we are all illegal aliens.*  
—Luis Alberto Urrea, *The Devil’s Highway*

In his book *The Devil’s Highway*, Luis Alberto Urrea preserves the legacy of the Wellton 26, Mexican migrants who tragically suffered from hyperthermia while crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and the treacherous desert region of southern Arizona. In telling their story, Urrea uses free, indirect discourse to force his readers to assume the identities of the Wellton 26 and literally imagine their own gruesome death in the desert. Throughout his work, Urrea openly criticizes the “politics of stupidity” that rule the general chaos of the border and voices how ineffective political systems are to blame for the illegal act of border crossing and the thousands of deaths that follow. This paper will analyze Urrea’s use of free, indirect discourse to empathetically identify his American readers with the various agents involved in the complex dynamics of illegal immigration, specifically the migrants themselves. However, it is Urrea’s reversal of this identification, explained through philosopher Bakhtin’s theory of “exotopy,” that compels readers to embrace Urrea’s political criticisms and his solutions for change that serve to decrease migrant suffering and deaths.

# USC Dornsife

Dana and David Dornsife  
College of Letters, Arts and Sciences