

The Department of English invites you to join us for our

2021 Honors Thesis Presentations

Thursday, April 29th at 12pm PST

<https://usc.zoom.us/j/94348710237>

Exploitation of Feminine Labor: How mid-twentieth century working class women writings engage and critique *The Feminine Mystique*

In the 1963 study *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan noted that post-World War II suburban housewives were largely unsatisfied with the empty reality shrouded by the dream of domestic tranquility sold to women. The dream proliferated by media and advertisements equated feminine fulfillment with a married woman's role as seeking satisfaction in raising children and maintaining a tidy home. There was a tension between the dream sold and the reality of the drudgery of housework. Many college-educated middle-class women fell victim to the insidious beliefs and institutions that undermined women's confidence in their intellect and forced them to assume domestic labor. Friedan's research, however, largely excluded the lived experiences of minority and working-class women who labored to survive. In the present thesis, I examine working-class women characters in *Yonnondio*, *The Street*, *Like One of the Family*, *The Dollmaker*, and *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. These characters engage and nuance the generalized aspirations of the American woman as described in *The Feminine Mystique*. I will demonstrate how their class-consciousness shapes their aspirations for upward mobility and their tenacity to survive.

Presented by Valerie Burgess

Faculty Advisors: Rick Berg, PhD, Associate Professor (Teaching) of English & Professor Brighde Mullins

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Quod Me Nutrit Me Destruit:

Food, Community, and the Inversion of Nourishment in Early Modern English Witch Drama

“You are what you eat” is an adage that has existed throughout time. In early modern England, it manifests in a set of conundrums. When food supply is in decline, the few choices of what can be eaten create a culture of vulnerability. The issue, therefore, is what might become of you when what you have eaten has the potential to harm you? This anxiety over food acquisition and alimetal consequences is a constant in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. This thesis will investigate the proliferation of food iconography in early modern witch dramas. Traditionally, consuming food is a form of communal building and stabilization. This particular period of time, however, in which food is precarious and politicized reveals fissures in the early modern community. These plays pinpoint the danger of witchcraft in the manipulation of communal food. Food that is enchanted by witchcraft deprives a community of nourishment, thus making it susceptible to the devil’s unraveling. A starved community will look for nourishment where it can find it. Witchcraft disrupts communal bliss, but it unites a community around a disdain for the accused. At this moment of communal instability, early modern witchcraft provides a covert nourishment that food cannot: a scapegoat.

Presented by Jonathan Chang

*Faculty Advisers: Rebecca Lemon, Professor of English & Thea Tomaini, Professor
(Teaching) of English*

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Beyond "Little Brown Brothers": Tracing Inherited Trauma Across Generations of Filipino Americans

In this thesis I examine the racism and xenophobia faced by Filipino immigrants to California since the 1940s, exploring how the effects of this trauma endure to the modern period. I compare two main works: *America is in the Heart*, written in 1943 by Carlos Bulosan after his immigration to California; and *America is Not the Heart: A Novel*, written in 2018 by Milpitas-born Elaine Castillo. For Bulosan, America represented new beginnings and a reunion with his beloved brother. Instead he found intense loneliness, persecution and “otherization” as he struggled to orient himself in a society that simply did not want him. “It was a crime to be a Filipino in California,” Bulosan writes. Elaine Castillo, from her modern perspective, sees America as years of broken promises and exploited labor, a constant yearning to better one’s circumstances while being held down by ingrained, unjust circumstances. While Filipinos in Bulosan’s time were barred from naturalization by anti-Asian immigration laws, Filipinos of Castillo’s time are citizens who have settled into established Filipino communities within California.

Presented by Katrina Coglitore

Faculty Advisors: *Thomas Gustafson, Associate Professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity & Adrian De Leon, Assistant Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity*

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Girl of the Gilded West: Topophilia and Self-Reflexivity in Joan Didion's Revised Frontier

In *The White Album*, Joan Didion notes that “A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image.” Journalist Michiko Kakutani writes a decisive response to this passage in a *New York Times* review: “California belongs to Joan Didion.”

In my thesis, I use Yi-Fu Tuan’s theories on topophilia — or “the affective bond between people and place or setting” — to question the implications of the preceding statements. What does it mean, I ask, for an author to “own” a particular landscape? Focusing on Didion’s Sacramento novel *Run River*, and her later memoir *Where I Was From*, I evaluate Didion’s role as the introspective storyteller of a shifting West, a storyteller whose own narrative enterprise is based on the frontier myths she learned growing up as a “daughter of old California.” Looking at the fusion of setting and lore, this thesis explores how Didion both revises and upholds the traditional “code of the West” as she scrutinizes its development. In so doing, I will address the questions: To what extent is one’s environment contained in the personal? Can one ever fully separate themselves from the landscape that formed them?

Presented by Ryan Fawwaz

Faculty Advisors: William Handley, Associate Professor of English & David Lawrence Ulin, Associate Professor of the Practice of English

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"Their Own, Sometimes Subversive, Purposes": *Tipping the Velvet*, *The Persian Boy*, and the Possibilities of Historical Fiction

Some see historical fiction as a staid, worthy, and “literary” genre. Others view it as bastardized history, wantonly misleading readers about what the past was really like. To explore the possibilities of this much-debated genre as a tool for reexamining, reimagining, and rewriting the past, I investigate Sarah Waters’s 1998 novel *Tipping the Velvet* and Mary Renault’s 1972 novel *The Persian Boy* as case studies in historical fiction. The former a joyful romp through the lesbian circles of late-Victorian London, the latter the tragic love story of Alexander the Great and a Persian eunuch, both novels subvert the traditions of historical fiction as they strive to intervene in the past to establish a historical lineage for their contemporary queer readers. Waters and Renault have differing beliefs about the ethics of love, the nature of queerness, and the proper role of historical research, but the two authors are connected by their shared earnest engagement with those issues. They are also connected by a one-sided intellectual relationship—the PhD dissertation Waters wrote on “lesbian and gay” historical fiction devoted most of a chapter to Renault’s works. My analysis of *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Persian Boy* will also consider the metatextual questions at the heart of historical fiction as a genre, including how authors, in speaking through characters from the past, can compellingly address the concerns of the present.

Presented by Sophie Hammond

Faculty Advisors: Hilary Schor, Professor of English, Comparative Literature and Law & William Thalmann, Professor Emeritus of Classics and Comparative Literature

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Womanly Wiles: An analysis of violent women in Victorian literature and society

In my thesis I analyze the characterization of violent women in Victorian literature and in the greater context of Victorian society. I focus my analysis on five critical texts: *Jane Eyre*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *The Lifted Veil*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Bleak House*. All five of these works contain a female character who is either murderous or violent. The goal of my thesis is to focus on both the similarities and differences in the ways in which these authors portray women committing violent acts. In some of these texts, the women are characterized as beautiful and childlike, while in others they are described as barely human. I analyze the portrayal of these murderesses, how they are received by other characters within the texts, and the outcome of their murderous behavior. The resolution for each woman is unique and provides key information to understanding Victorian femininity. While Bertha Mason jumps from the roof to her death at the end of *Jane Eyre*, Bertha of *The Lifted Veil* lives out her old age admired and respected. Along with this analysis of literary portrayals of murderesses, I will analyze the portrayal and reception of actual murderesses of the Victorian period: Maria Manning and Madeleine Smith. Through my analysis of fictional and real-life murderesses of the Victorian era, I look to demonstrate the complex and often contradictory definitions of Victorian femininity.

Presented by Lucy Kenig-Ziesler

Faculty Advisors: *Erika Wright, Assistant Professor of Clinical Medical Education & Hilary Schor, Professor of English, Comparative Literature and Law*

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The Work of Want: Interracial Desire and Contemporary Literature, 1962-2020

Since the landmark ruling in *Loving v. Virginia* struck down anti-miscegenation laws in 1967, the purported freedom to “love who you love” has become something of a truism in the United States. And yet, in the face of such a utopic fantasy of multicultural harmony, minoritarian writers have refused to cast interracial desire in a depoliticized and colorblind light. “The Work of Want” is about that refusal. More specifically, this thesis mobilizes affect theory, queer of color critique, and postcolonial studies to consider the efficacy of interracial desire as a practice of psychic repair, queer solidarity, and decolonial praxis. By examining a wide range of contemporary literature (from James Baldwin’s *Another Country* to Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, and from Bryan Washington’s *Memorial* to Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt*), “The Work of Want” explores the dual capacity of interracial desire to reinstall and reimagine race relations. Ultimately, this thesis concludes that ambivalence—far from being a non-posture or a passive state—constitutes one mode of interracial relationality through which individuals might reckon with, rather than reconcile, difference.

Presented by Ryan Nhu

Faculty Advisors: Viet Thanh Nguyen, University Professor, Aerol Arnold Chair of English and Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity and Comparative Literature

&

Margaret (Maggie) Nelson, Professor of English

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"Our Small Forever": Law, Justice and Voice in Louise Erdrich's Coming of Age Novel, *The Round House*

In my thesis I investigate how Louise Erdrich uses the temporal linearity of a *bildungsroman* in her novel *The Round House* (2012), following the path of her protagonist from early adolescence to maturity, as a structure to unfold the remnants of settler colonialism that permeates U.S. tribal nations and their people. In her Afterword, Erdrich directs her readers' attention to this statistic: "1 in 3 Native women will be raped in her lifetime." This statistic echoes the genocidal rape when Europeans first settled in the Americas, and these atrocious acts still occur. We need conversations, works of literature, and movements that prioritize missing and murdered Native peoples

My thesis focuses on how tribal communities contend with the aftermath of social injustices, specifically sexual violence against Native women on American reservations. Erdrich combines legal commentary with the didactic "coming-of-age" novel, and in my analysis I turn to works by Indigenous feminist scholars. Their focus on decolonization and sovereignty are pivotal to discussions of systemic change on American reservations. I will explore how literature can improve resilience in the face of lingering injustice in Indian country.

Presented by Hunter Wilkinson

Faculty Advisors: David Treuer, Professor of English

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