

FALL OUT

TWENTY-THIRD ANNUAL
THEMATIC OPTION
RESEARCH CONFERENCE

APRIL 22 & 23, 2020

My dynamite will sooner lead to peace than a thousand world conventions. As soon as men will find that in one instant, whole armies can be utterly destroyed, they surely will abide by golden peace.

— Alfred Nobel

We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita; Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."

— J. Robert Oppenheimer

These fragments I have shored against my ruins.

— T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.

— James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

No one is willing to acknowledge a fault in himself when a more agreeable motive can be found for the estrangement of his acquaintances.

— Mark Twain

This was the trouble with families. Like invidious doctors, they knew just where it hurt.

— Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

Well, knowledge is a fine thing, and mother Eve thought so; but she smarted so severely for hers, that most of her daughters have been afraid of it since.

— Abigail Adams

I was told love should be unconditional. That's the rule, everyone says so. But if love has no boundaries, no limits, no conditions, why should anyone try to do the right thing ever? If I know I am loved no matter what, where is the challenge?

— Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl*

What is the appropriate behavior for a man or a woman in the midst of this world, where each person is clinging to his piece of debris? What's the proper salutation between people as they pass each other in this flood?

— Buddha

There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.

— Nelson Mandela

A person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn and not easily mended.

— Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

When you light a candle, you also cast a shadow.

— Ursula K. Le Guin

One minute of reconciliation is worth more than a whole life of friendship!

— Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father; prepare to die!

— Inigo Montoya, *The Princess Bride*

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, *Fallout*, to be presented as part of a panel. Each panel is composed of four to five 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 consequences, intended or unintended; estrangement and falling out; aftermath and backlash; response; residue, debris, and traces; mutation and transformation; protection and safeguards; opportunism; war and defense; detente; mutually assured destruction; hope; falling in and out of love; familial conflict; weapons and weaponizing; scandal; retribution and revenge; reconciliation; karma; collateral damage; the butterfly effect; prophecy; disruption; cause and effect; half-lives; natural and unnatural; apocalypse; survivors and survival; discovery vs. application; physical and mental health; side effects that vary; or the student's own unique interpretation.

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

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Colonial Consequences

Moderated by Professor William Handley
Department of English

Wednesday, April 22
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m. PST

Carol Esperanza Alata

Colorism Through the Lens of *Passing*: A Discussion on Gendered Racism and Its Global Implications

Zulena, a small mahogany-colored creature, brought in the grapefruit.
—Nella Larsen, *Passing*

Not all colorism, gendered racism, and its implications are explicit. They can range from microaggressions to systematic forms of oppression to blunt forms of discrimination. The 1929 novella *Passing* brings into discussion these themes by allowing characters such as Brian and Irene to reveal their own ignorances and misconceptions of their world and the outside world. This paper will target Brazil and how it was utilized in *Passing* as a utopia free of racism, when in reality it was the last country to abolish slavery in the Western Hemisphere. Furthermore, it will target how colored and gendered characters throughout the novella are subservient while white passing individuals expose their ignorances and the consequences of attempting to assimilate to Eurocentric culture. Utilizing Sylvanna Falcon's mestiza-double consciousness theory, I intend to delve into the racist ideologies that are embedded in both American society and around the world. This will be tied into gendered racism that occurs in Latin America as a way of connecting this issue to the world, thus expanding the setting beyond the United States and highlighting the nuanced ways they slightly differ.

Himani Boompally

A Brave New World: Humanism and Utopianism in Jamestown

According to the contemporary educational narrative of American history, although Jamestown stands out as the first successful English colony, it can hardly be considered a utopia. The colony is often overshadowed by its Northern descendent, New Plymouth, and perhaps rightly so considering its history of genocide, starvation, and slavery. Despite this, in her podcast *Nice Try! Utopian*, Avery Trufelman frames Jamestown as a utopian attempt. While modern textbooks call Jamestown an English economic venture, recent scholarship has returned to analyzing the humanist underpinnings of English colonization and the concept of utopia. Humanism evolved from its initial conjectures about the inherent goodness and value of humans to holding Western Civilization as the gold standard of peak human achievement. Therefore, in the face of colonial expansion, humanism urged the New World's indigenous population to embrace Western culture. While few scholars have studied this perspective, even fewer have discussed it specifically in relation to Jamestown. In this paper, I build upon this scholarship to further the discussion of how humanism affected Jamestown's interactions with Native Americans and enslaved Africans. Alongside the historical importance, this reasoning raises questions that still affect us today, and help us understand the lasting influence Jamestown has on America's troubled history with minorities.

Sarah Kim

Ghosts In The Suburbs: The Absent Figure of Black and Native Presences in *The Virgin Suicides*

What makes the suburban dream so appealing? For many, the aesthetic of sparkling clean homes and neatly trimmed lawns harbors feelings of safety, homeliness, and bliss. In Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, the white suburban community of Grosse Pointe similarly regards its neighborhood as clean and pleasant. But when the suicides of the Lisbon girls strike the community, their deaths leave a tragic smear on the otherwise deathless and peaceful suburb. What the white community cannot see, however, are the ghosts that have existed in that space all along, whose presences on the land are continually marked with violence. Drawing on settler colonial studies and Black studies, I argue that certain racialized entities haunt the margins of the novel, sparsely appearing before quickly disappearing into the background. While Black and Native presences make possible the spaces that white suburban residents

occupy, they simultaneously must be erased and forgotten. The ghostliness of Black and Native existence in the novel illuminates society's larger impulse to turn its head away from the ongoing violence towards racialized bodies that the modern world necessitates.

Liam Tsao

**Forgotten Pasts, Remembered Futures:
The Photograph and Post-Colonial Identity in Junot Díaz's "Monstro"**

If I know anything it is this: we need the revelations that come from our apocalypses—and never so much as we do now.
—Junot Díaz

We typically view the photograph as an objective way of seeing the world. After all, it captures a scene out of reality, depicting something as it actually happened. But what exists outside of the lens? Is the subject of the photo dependent on bias? And more troublingly, can these seemingly objective portrayals of life represent a new colonial power structure? In this paper, I aim to explore the symbol of the photograph and the character Alex in Junot Díaz's short story "Monstro" through a post-colonial lens. Instead of merely a representation of the lasting impact of colonialism, I contend that the photograph represents a symbol of the complexities of post-colonial representations, showing both the lack of a collective national identity as a result of colonialism and the worrying potential for neocolonial ideas of race and class. Situated within Aíme Césaire's and Franz Fanon's notion of post-colonial development seen in the texts *Discourse on Colonialism* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, we might be tempted to characterize the photograph in "Monstro" as a preliminary step toward reclaiming a pre-colonial Dominican identity. But when confronted with Alex's status as a light-skinned, wealthy man, the idea of the photograph becomes more complex. In this paper, I attempt to reconcile these two approaches to literary criticism, arguing that Díaz's photograph has an inherently dual meaning that situates it within both the post-colonial and intersectional discourses.

I Can't See Clearly Now

Moderated by Professor Anthony Kemp
Department of English

Wednesday, April 22
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m. PST

Sagan Gor

Symbolism, Visual-Verbal Language, and the Duality of Interpretation: Attempting to Evaluate the Postmodern Fabric of *Watchmen*

*Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same.
More than one person, doubtless like me, writes in order to have no face.*

—Michel Foucault

Watchmen is an incredibly complex and fascinating piece of art. By stretching the limits of the medium of the graphic novel, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons provide a postmodern superhero comic that brilliantly manipulates the idea of time, perception, and self-reference. I use some comic theory based on the works of Scott McCloud as well as Moore's own concept of under-language—the unique relationship between text and imagery—to illustrate how *Watchmen* is extensively relevant to a postmodern reality. On the surface, *Watchmen* is a superhero comic featuring an alternative fictional American history in a Cold War world. Depending on the reader's interpretation, in itself an important theme, suddenly more complex questions come into play. Is a memory so different from imagery combined with interpretation? How can one even define meaning? Wait... what? These questions and more come into play within my paper. To provide an anchor point, I focus on the red-stained yellow smiley symbol found on the cover and throughout the comic as an example of the unstable nature of interpretation. The unsure and deconstructed nature of the *Watchmen* universe challenges readers to question their own reality.

Tammy Gorokhov

Forming Communities through Alienation: Examining the Paradox of Absurdism in Camus' *The Plague*

*If there's one good thing that might come out of this crisis, I think it's that,
in this seemingly divided nation, people are doing their best to protect the country's well being.
Everywhere you look, people are looking after each other.*

—Stephen Colbert

For Albert Camus, absurdity can be defined as the “divorce between man and this life,” specifically referring to the sudden alienation experienced when all previous illusions of life disappear, such as when one is forced to come to terms with their inevitable death. And in his novel *The Plague*, as a deadly plague progresses in Oran, we see citizens forced to face this existential crisis, becoming physically alienated from the rest of the world and each other. However, in their continual resistance against the effects of the plague, as Dr. Rieux adamantly does his duty to fight against death and others attempt to form a community despite the plague's spread, the plague magnifies the effects of existence itself; all the events that take place in the novel are various reactions to the existential crisis it elicits. The plague destroys all previous notions of meaning, but it is also one of the few things that instills meaning, forcing individuals to understand what is truly significant in life and creating communities, while also isolating members of society. We see here two contending notions: the plague as both the bane of humanity and the sole purveyor of meaning to humanity, and it is this paradoxical dual nature of the plague, and consequently existence itself, that I explore in my essay. Extending this understanding to modern day, I examine what it means to form communities through inherent isolation.

Emma Gronstad

**No Rhyme to Reason:
On the Rationality and Power of Names in Vandermeer's *Annihilation***

In a world without names, what does it mean to have a name? In Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation*, four women—their names withheld from us by our narrator, the biologist—embark on an expedition into the strange Area X. With the government's encouragement, the biologist refers to each of her team members by their occupation. This is all the biologist knows. She knows categories, taxonomies, and thus applies them to her counterparts. But what happens when they fall out of that category? What kind of relationship does this foster? Why, in a world where rationality doesn't apply, must they leave their identity behind? The biologist has multiple encounters with names and named objects that put her out of her comfort zone. Why? With the help of Vandermeer critics and Immanuel Kant, I venture into how rationality works in correlation with nomenclature, and through the journals of the biologist, I uncover the true power in a name.

Tate McCardle

**Where Is Your Shangri-La Now?:
How *Taxi Driver* Voids Narrative Coherence for Absurdism**

A timeless film of the combined genius of Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader, *Taxi Driver* has captivated generations because it defies something we all have in common: the need to understand. As Robin Wood, a notable film critic, puts it, "The drive to understand and, by understanding, to dominate experience must always represent one of the deepest human needs." Wood uses the term "incoherence" to define films like *Taxi Driver* that defy our drive for order. While Wood's definition may appear an unsatisfying cop-out which merely emphasizes misunderstanding, absurdist philosophy validates Wood's unconventional schema by asserting problems can be solutions. Albert Camus, the father of absurdist philosophy, defines absurdity as "a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared [but] their confrontation. [...] The Absurd is not in man nor in the world, but in their presence together." Essentially, Camus' absurdism lies in the clash within man's desire to understand an irrational world; properly perceived, the conflict of incoherence and absurdism are the same, except that absurdism supplies the satisfaction Wood was missing. Within this paper, I will be merging Wood's incoherence and Camus' absurdism to construct a framework by which *Taxi Driver* can finally be satisfyingly understood.

Moral Compass

Moderated by Professor Megan Luke
Department of Art History

Wednesday, April 22
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m. PST

Catherine Kim

The Garden of Eve in Hell: Earthseed and Utopia of *Parable of the Sower*

To be God is to be autonomous. To be God is to be self-governing. To be God is Change. Earthseed, the alternative religion in Octavia Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*, focuses on the idea of God as not an authoritative figure, but instead a tangible figure that is shaped by the people's self-will and wishes. As the founder of Earthseed, Lauren Olamina and her band of followers move to the North to establish the first Earthseed community, Acorn, which emphasizes diversity and hope in a larger post-apocalyptic society characterized by violence and destruction. In my paper, I will analyze the significance of Earthseed through the lens of Afrofuturism. While the mainstream science-fiction genre has mainly ignored elements of race and inequality, Afrofuturism serves to fully incorporate and tackle the prominent issues and concerns of the status quo affecting the African-American community. Especially as the first African-American science fiction novel with an African-American woman protagonist, *Parable of the Sower* establishes a place and vision for African-Americans in a futuristic society. Therefore, I will discuss how Earthseed expands upon the religious emphasis of Afrofuturism by creating a realistic utopia within a state of dystopia. Specifically, I will not only focus on how Earthseed effectively challenges Afrofuturism's existing emphasis on orthodox Christianity, but also explain how Earthseed's core verse of "God is Change" carves out a pragmatic form of utopia disparate from the "traditional" utopias focused on ideal happiness and escape from reality.

Angela Liu

Revamping the Vampire: How the Roots of the Modern Vampire Lover Emerged from a Shift in Morality in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there was a part of him... that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.
—Bella Swan, *Twilight*

What wouldn't the quintessential teenage girl of 2007 give for a vampire boyfriend who sparkles in the sunlight, stops moving cars with his bare hands, and loves you till the end of time? They might, however, give considerably less for Edward Cullen's vicious 1897 predecessor, Dracula. Yet the foundations laid by this bloodsucking Gothic monster has paved the way for the vampire heartthrob, namely by emphasizing Dracula's ambiguously gray morality. Stoker's usage of gray morality has established the vampire's potential to be redeemed, suggesting that Dracula's actions may not be completely of his own volition, but instead a consequence of his vampiric nature. Modern media has capitalized on the idea of salvation through love to make that final transition from "gray" to "good," which has allowed the vampire to be perceived as a romantic figure instead of just a sexual one. With the power of love, vampires are able to overcome their "demonic" nature and reconcile with their "human" side. However, that love comes at a price. Dependency on the reader's savior complex and stripping of the vampire's agency reduces the vampire's status; they become a safety net for the reader to project their romantic fantasies onto.

Joey Patrick

Behind the Masks: Examining Heroism and Justice in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*

What does it mean to be a hero? The classic graphic novel *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons deals with this question by challenging us to analyze our preconceptions of justice. In doing so, this text takes us across the whole spectrum of justice, from Rorschach's moral absolutism to Dan Dreiberg's traditional morals to Adrian Veidt's consequentialism. *Watchmen* points out different ways in which Rorschach and Dan are disconnected from society, which results in their heroism being seen as less valuable. Conversely, Veidt no longer hides behind his mask and devises a revolutionary plan to save the world. However, are any of these characters true heroes? Countless secondary

sources discuss this idea, but *The Superhero Costume: Identity and Disguise in Fact and Fiction* by Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon and “Winthrop and *Watchmen*: Liminality, Transformation, and American Identity” by Jennifer Heinert and Katie Kalish resonate with me the most. By studying the relationships between these different texts, I will determine which of these characters *Watchmen* presents as the true hero in their world.

Syrah Vaswani

**The Trial of Dr. Jekyll vs. Mr. Hyde:
Prosecuting Evil in R.L. Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde***

The classical archetypes of any story have always demanded a hero and a villain; a dual morality locked in a conflict as old as time. Yet who can condemn a villain? Certainly perception cannot be the sole and utterly impartial jury. Culpability must be examined, consequences must be enforced, and justice must be exacted. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* chooses to forego the burden of criminal responsibility in favor of moral perception as Mr. Hyde assumes the role of the villain whereas Dr. Jekyll is lauded as the hero. By conforming to a disassociated morality, Dr. Jekyll frees himself of the stains of Mr. Hyde’s bloody acts. However, my essay intends to measure Dr. Jekyll against the precise nature of criminal law. In examining the scope of Dr. Jekyll’s responsibility, I further intend to expose a discrepancy between the author’s choice and the jury’s choice. Dr. Jekyll is legally guilty, yet R.L. Stevenson says otherwise. Through analyzing this dichotomy, I intend to question the role of morality in dictating human action and, ultimately, judging it.

Peren Yesilyurt

**The Uncovering of Jeffrey’s Hidden Desire:
A Comparison of *Blue Velvet* to Freudian Dreams**

I’m seeing something that was always hidden. I’m in the middle of a mystery...
—Jeffrey Beaumont, *Blue Velvet*

The mystery that Jeffrey, the innocent yet confident protagonist of David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, is talking about deals with dangerous gang members, illegal drug deals, and abuse. Yet his motivation to investigate such crimes remains unclear throughout the film. When in conversation with André Bazin’s theory about how film, like our dreams, bears a latent when it comes to desire, this motivation can be illuminated. I argue then that Jeffrey has a desire for the darker world, filled with entities far from his mundane life, because Lynch portrays this world like a Freudian dream. His use of lighting and composition in scenes involving the dark underbelly are oblique and indirect, thus leading me to the conclusion that they actually reveal Jeffrey’s subconscious desire to be immersed in it, as a dream would. This paper will use the works of Bazin, critic Laura Mulvey, and scholar Jane Preston to explore how Lynch’s artistic choices not only indirectly reveal Jeffrey’s desire, but that *Blue Velvet* is evidence that both dreams and films have the capability to tell a story about something subconscious, something unavowable or non-declarable.

Outclassed

Moderated by Professor Hector Reyes
Department of Art History

Wednesday, April 22
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m. PST

Anna Greer

Erica Jong's Heelprint: Questioning Intersectionality in *Fear of Flying*

What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman's face?
—Audre Lorde

The current conversation surrounding Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* considers the feminist nature of the novel, particularly in terms of sexuality and independence. While some literary scholars argue that Jong's unfiltered stream-of-consciousness and humor shape her identity as a feminist author, other scholars feel that protagonist Isadora Wing's constant sexualization may demonstrate a lack of independence. But what these scholars often fail to consider is how Jong's feminism reflects on anyone other than heterosexual middle-class white women. In my paper, I will argue that not only does Jong ignore the struggles of women of a differing race, class, or sexuality, she even employs racist language, indicating a narrow feminist perspective. I will dissect excerpts from *Fear of Flying* to demonstrate the implications of this language and its relationship with humor and her stream-of-consciousness. More pointedly, I will analyze Jong's prose through the lens of Audre Lorde's intersectional feminist theory—which argues that the fight for feminism should be interconnected with the fight against other forms of discrimination—to explore how it is that Jong's charged language leaves marginalized women out of the fight for equality, and thus acts as a “threat to the mobilization of women's joint power.”

Andrew Kanovsky

***Passing and Progress:* The Dark Side of the Harlem Renaissance**

Everyone knows what it feels like to be insecure. Whether it comes in the form of financial instability, sexuality, or racial identity, insecurity has the ability to drive even the most level-headed individual to the point of insanity. In Nella Larsen's *Passing*, we are presented with a model of just how dangerous this feeling can be as Irene's relationship with Clare devolves from one of admiration to one of lust and eventual hatred. But the message drawn from *Passing* depends on the interpretation of exactly where this jealousy stems from. In contrasting analyses from professors Jennifer Devere Brody and Claudia Tate, I conclude that the true source of Irene's insecurity is the ease with which Clare surpassed her class status simply by passing for white. I expand this claim with theory from Cheryl Harris's “Whiteness as Property” to conclude that Larsen's true message in *Passing* is to present the practice of passing itself as a threat to economic development, known as uplift, by undermining the stability of economic growth in the African-American community and feeding the established racial disparity which the Harlem Renaissance sought to break down.

Hannah Lee

“I'm Not needy”: An Analysis on the Futility of Individual Struggle Against Capitalism in *Parasite*

Capitalism is more than an economic system—it drives and defines human relationships. And that's only the start of its vast influence. In Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite*, the Kims, a poor family, con the Parks, a wealthy family, for employment in an effort to move up the social ladder. In their attempts to maintain their new jobs, the Kims act in their self-interest only, viewing their relationships to other people through a lens of economic relations. Bong Joon-Ho demonstrates the dangers of the Kims' thoughts by pointing to loss, death and the further re-entrenchment of capitalism as the consequences of such thinking. But how do individual actions such as acting in self-interest spill over to reify structures of power like capitalism? This paper will analyze how efforts to subvert class hierarchy within a context of self-preservation and an absence of class solidarity lead to the failure of individual rebellions against capitalism. I will also examine the role of capitalism within the film and how it influences characters' relationships.

Hayley Moss

**Writing is Power:
Written Documents and Power Dynamics in *Kindred***

Octavia Butler forces the brutality of American slavery to center stage with a uniquely contemporary lens in her 1979 novel, *Kindred*. By using time travel to juxtapose the past and present, readers are shown history as cyclical and lacking in true progress. Unequal power and the role of written documents are two intertwined aspects of the novel that relate the antebellum South and present-day Los Angeles. Textuality is a commonly recognized motif in *Kindred*, though scholars vary in their interpretation of it. This paper analyzes the influence that written documents have on the complex power struggle seen between the main characters, Dana and Rufus. Furthermore, I explore the real-life implications of Butler's novel regarding text and power. Despite modern technology supposedly granting widespread access to documents and information, manipulation and biased control of information remain forces at work. *Kindred* is a still-relevant work that demands readers understand the value of documents and information, especially in light of ongoing issues with misrepresentation and underrepresentation of minority groups.

Cat Tang

Spacing Out: "Aye, and Gomorrah" and Bodily Capitalism

Through biotechnology, people can integrate themselves with tech, melding man and machine. For example, during the British Industrial Revolution, it was noticed that "the 'natural' capacities of the body have been turned into instruments for production, redefining both human labor and human bodies." In this sense, labor today demands that we work not only with but also as new technology, creating severe implications with classism and identity. Samuel Delany explores the interaction of technology, labor, and the body in "Aye, and Gomorrah," envisioning a world in which the government, motivated by capitalism, modifies people into "spacers" whose bodies are transformed so they can produce economically crucial extraterrestrial services. While critics such as Guy Davidson have begun discourse with Delany's writings and their relationships with classism, I will argue "Aye, and Gomorrah" expands this dialogue to a biopolitical level; the spacers are an extension of a reality where capitalism drives bodily modification. Furthermore, tying bodies with occupation ties identities with occupation in a way far more permanent than what we've seen before. And extending our occupations into a permanent element of identity leads to an ever-growing classism that permeates every facet of our lives.

The Others

Moderated by Dr. Corinna Schroeder
The Writing Program

Wednesday, April 22
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m. PST

Shana Brindze

Man or Monster?: *The Immortal Hulk* and Dissociative Identity Disorder

Like all comic characters, that of The Hulk has evolved tremendously over time. *The Immortal Hulk* acts as the final link in that chain, a biopolitical examination of mental health that mythologizes The Hulk as a physical representation of how society views people with mental illness, forcing us to examine how we categorize people as human in the first place. This article places *The Immortal Hulk* within the context of comic history, identifying the mythological role of comics in American society and how fear shaped the character of the Hulk, which in turn shaped fear of mental illness as a whole. Using Robert Doak's list of common ways Dissociative Identity Disorder is represented in media, we can identify how *The Immortal Hulk* subverts these tropes and wrestles with its own complicated history. As Sami Schalk states, placing disability front and center alongside inhuman aspects forces readers to consider what shapes human identity. *The Immortal Hulk*, then, acts as both a historical examination of its own history and a biopolitical view of disability, contemplating how we define humanity through the lens of science fiction.

Kiran Krishnamurthi

Deus Ex or Deus Est Machina? Assessing Technology as the "Unnatural" Human in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Are we enslaved by technology or do we enslave it? Humans created technology, but its expanding role is replacing the work once thought to be only achievable by humans as it is now involved in nearly every step of our lives. Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* explores the contentious relationship between humans and technology in an evolved society where both groups share similar capabilities. In his novel, humans are disrespectful and abusive towards androids despite being virtually identical. Does the demonstrated power imbalance suggest that when the lines between technology and humanity blur, humankind is assumed as superior and therefore empowered to abuse their nonliving counterparts? Building on scholars like Jill Galvan, I will show protagonist Rick Deckard's mental evolution from abusive to respectful as he grows to appreciate not only the work done by robots but the android itself. Rick's realization raises an important consideration for a future defined by humans and equally capable artificial intelligence: should we treat technology as we do fellow life, even though we are its creators?

Holly B. McCauley

It's All Relative: Poverty and Family in Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*

Celeste Ng's second novel, *Little Fires Everywhere*, quickly rose to the rank of bestseller after its 2017 debut. The novel, set in Ng's teenage hometown of Shaker Heights, Ohio, tells the story of two families living nearly opposite lifestyles. Through Ng's depiction of these two families and the differences between them, she is able to use Shaker Heights as a backdrop on which to explore racism, income inequality, and what it means to be a mother. While the income of each family affects how they relate to one another, Ng also portrays a difference in the closeness between members of each family. My presentation will apply the work of literary scholar Barbara Korte to understand how income inequality affects the relationship between the two main families based on themes found in contemporary literature between upper-class and lower-class characters. I also examine Scott R. Mackenzie's *Be It Ever So Humble* to analyze the imagery of homes and how they symbolize the families that live inside them. Together, my project is a culmination of all three texts, using literary theory and close reading to better understand Ng's characters.

Alayne Morrel

**Why Everyone and Their Dog Should Be Concerned for Our World :
The Disappearance of the Human-Animal Dichotomy in Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation*:**

In Jeff Vandermeer's novel, *Annihilation*, published 2014, we follow an expedition of four women, none of whom are ever named, into an enigmatic environment known as Area X. The story is narrated by the biologist as she encounters the "deeply unnatural" evolution of an environment, which includes the confusion of human and nonhuman organisms. Vandermeer's novel blatantly disregards the tenets of humanism, which declares that humans are unique creatures capable of emotion and reason, but why? According to Finola Prendergast, Vandermeer uses these part-human creatures in the context of horror tropes to highlight the underlying anxieties we feel about according nonhuman animal lives the same value as human ones. But why do we even need to consider how much value we give nonhuman animal lives? I will argue that Area X may hold the answer. Within Area X, only the part-human, part-something-else creatures survive, and Area X is continually expanding. At this point, it becomes not a question of whether we should accord animal lives the same value as ours, but when we will in order to survive a changing environment.

Samihha Reza

**Mental Illness, Community, and Criminality:
Cottard's "Symptoms" in *The Plague***

"Come in, I've hanged myself." Written in red chalk on the door of his apartment, these are the first words we read from Cottard, a known criminal in Albert Camus' *The Plague*. Rapid personality change, paranoia, and suicidal ideation—Cottard's behaviors throughout the book are similar to commonly recognized symptoms for mental illnesses. Most analyses of Cottard don't continue farther than an immoral foil used to juxtapose what not to do during a time of despair, such as a quarantine. However, nothing during an epidemic is truly black-and-white. Cottard craves human connection, but due to bias against criminals and mentally ill individuals, he never properly integrates into the community and lacks healthy relationships, pushing him further from a chance of rehabilitation. In this paper, I will illuminate an alternate analysis of Cottard and show how Cottard's criminality represents the circular fallout of untreated symptoms and an unsupportive community.

Everything's Under Control

Moderated by Professor Jennifer Greenhill
Department of Art History

Wednesday, April 22
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m. PST

Cari Spencer

**From Exhibit to Exhibitionist:
Unconventional Agency in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides***

[B]ut whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself.
—Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

What would you do if you realized your home was a museum display? That your body and bras, your bloodied tampons and bedroom, were all special exhibits for scrutinizing eyes? For Lux Lisbon, one of five sisters in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, this realization leads to her public displays of sex and an almost theatrical suicide. After a childhood and adolescence of objectification by the neighborhood boys—who narrate the story years later in attempts to understand who the sisters were and why they all committed suicide—Lux takes advantage of the audience she never chose. Drawing on the works of feminist scholars, I will argue that Lux's visceral actions are actually strategies for obtaining agency. By encouraging readers to read beneath the male gaze of the collective narrators, I demonstrate how Lux redefines the space of her home, from a museum where she and her sisters are unwillingly on display, to a stage where she directs her own performances as well as the boys' gaze. She turns their voyeurism into her own exhibitionism, rewriting and redefining her body and space. However, this begs the question: why did it have to come to that in the first place?

Echo Tang

**Inside Their Mind to Outside Your Own:
Inside and Humanity's Need to Control Others**

The game *Inside*, depicting a boy's descent from human to non-human, challenges the role of agency in defining humanity by exploring the roles of both agency and physical control over others' bodies in our perception of the self. If agency, as defined by theorist Roland Blicke, is the "ability to influence the environment," *Inside* argues that no matter how disturbing it is, control defines humanity, not our agency. Drawing from depictions of unwanted mutilation of the body in 1980s body horror cinema, *Inside* uses involuntary graphic deaths and unidirectional movement to drive players' feelings of helplessness and fuel personal identification with the avatar as distinctly human. Therefore, *Inside* posits that a lack of agency can also define the human. By using social parasitism to control mindless laborers' movements, particularly to solve puzzles by moving objects and each other to his favor, the boy suggests that physical control over others is crucial to reassure himself that he is different from them, and still human. By understanding how we constantly strive for any semblance of control, I will demonstrate that manipulation over others is not necessarily a troubling facet of the self, but rather a means for us to prove that we are human.

Vivian Wu

**Surviving, Not Living:
Exploring Generational Repetition in *Go Tell It on the Mountain***

In James Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, levels of repetition correlate highly with degrees of control. Baldwin introduces distinct characters Elizabeth and Gabriel Grimes who ironically undertake a life of repetition. Next in line, their son John can either repeat the past or invent a future, and he chooses the latter. When faced with devastation, Gabriel hits mercilessly, Elizabeth reacts passively, and John observes independently. But because the actions of Gabriel and Elizabeth are imitations of the past, their control of their reality becomes questionable. The couple follows their parents' footsteps in efforts to achieve the bare minimum of survival, whereas the next generation John takes initiative over his own life by embracing his individuality. Between survival and independence, how does one determine which to prioritize? Why do individuals who pursue the past not reach a future of their own? In this presentation, I will argue that generational repetition in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is a trap that benefits the characters' present experience but diminishes their control of the future.

Vincent Xu

**The Nobility of Choices and Reasons:
Camus's Morality Theory in *The Plague***

Would you judge someone for being selfish and not taking social responsibility in a worldwide pandemic? Society might say yes. To challenge such an idea, Camus introduced his ideology regarding morality by creating the paradoxical and seemingly insignificant character, Rambert. Describing the generosity Dr. Rieux provides for Rambert's selfishness, Camus conveyed the message that all decisions, especially individual demands, should deserve equal respect. Through Rambert's fight against the plague, Camus illustrated that although Rambert prioritized personal aspiration, he had the potential to become a contributive person since he would fight for his family. Camus used Rambert's example to argue that decisions shouldn't be judged morally due to different purposes. Based on the scholarship of historian Prince Gerald and humanist Davis Colin, I will further analyze how Rambert's characterization would resonate with Camus's anti-communism political viewpoints, his personal experience of quarantine and the symbolism of rats in the novel. Presenting the conflicts between individual happiness and social welfare, Albert Camus redefined morality as something vague and subtle by showing readers that the moral absolute couldn't be achieved.

Maggie Zhao

**Here Comes The Sun:
Nature's Power in "The New Atlantis"**

*Little darling, the smiles returning to the faces
Little darling, it seems like years since it's been here
—The Beatles, "Here Comes the Sun"*

Imagine two children playing on a seesaw. Gravity dictates that as one comes up, the other must come down: a balancing act. In Ursula Le Guin's "The New Atlantis," a sunken continent rises up and experiences sunlight for the first time in ten thousand years, while the entire United States simultaneously sinks down into the dark sea. Set in a futuristic dystopia, Le Guin's descending world is not quite the United States we know today. Mirroring the Atlantis depicted by Plato in his parable, the futuristic United States has been corrupted to its core by an imperialistic conquest of nature. As a result, nature sinks the old Atlantis into darkness, and brings the titular new Atlantis into the sunlight. The gradient of sunlight's conspicuous presence and absence in both narrative sections marks a transition of power between the two worlds orchestrated by nature. Le Guin sets up a power dynamic in which nature, as an entity with agency, presides over mankind's fate, subverting existent anthropocentric attitudes towards nature.

I Will Survive

Wednesday, April 22
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m. PST

Moderated by Dr. Karin Huebner, Academic Director of Programs
USC Sidney Harman Academy for Polymathic Study

Armand Akbari

So, When is the Game Over?: Storytelling and Death in *Playdead's Inside*

It may seem contradictory for a video game to value storytelling over gameplay, but that is exactly what *Playdead's Inside* does. However, *Inside* is void of instructions and narrative detail. So, how does a player focus on the story when they have no idea what they are playing? The key is simplicity. *Inside* retains the simple movement of a traditional puzzle-platformer, with the basic controls being discovered through rudimentary trial-and-error. However, this simplicity allows the game to rely on its mechanics and aesthetics to uniquely immerse the player within the world of *Inside*. By incorporating *Inside's* usage of audio looping as a means to maintain continuity, *Inside's* embracement of “permalife,” or permanent life, as it relates to Michael Foucault's theory of life and death power relations within biopolitics, and the symbolism of the alternative ending of the game, I will discuss how *Inside* defies traditional expectations of storytelling and death in video games. I will also explore how the game's degradation of the meaning of death devalues the human tendency to value the physical body over the mind.

Luke Scorziell

A Perfect Genome?: What Octavia Butler's Portrayal of Genetics in “The Evening and the Morning and the Night” and “The Book of Martha” Can Teach Us About Bioethics

What would you change about you? Maybe the color of your eyes? Your short temper? Or maybe something more serious, like a genetic disorder? With the advent of genetic engineering technologies like CRISPR, the opportunity to create a “designer genome” seems closer than ever. Octavia Butler's *Bloodchild and Other Stories* includes several short stories that investigate fundamental ethical questions regarding changes to an individual's genome. “The Book of Martha” explores the unintended consequences of playing God, while “The Evening and the Morning and the Night” explores the lives and thoughts of several characters suffering from a potentially life-threatening genetic disorder. In this paper, I draw on research from ethicists such as Ronald M. Green, Aline Kalbian, Lois Shepherd, and Jonathan Glover, placing their work in dialogue with Butler's stories to demonstrate the potential downsides of a genetically modified humanity. I hope to leave readers questioning what role, if any, we should play in crafting our genetic future.

Natalie Grace Sipula

The End of Texas as We Know It: The Human Animal and Survival in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*

We will now discuss in a little more detail the Struggle for Existence.
—Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

The human mind, under conditions that threaten its survival, is an intense entity. In *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, director Tobe Hooper asks viewers to consider what happens when our very means of existence are threatened, not by nature, but by society and the civilized world. In the film, the forces of capitalism and advancements in agricultural technology have rendered Leatherface and his family jobless. However, their strong will to survive drives them to subvert the toll society has taken on them by adaptation through violent means. Ultimately, they both transgress societal boundaries and resort to becoming a kind of human animal to maintain their way of life. The will to survive is an incredible thing, something Hooper showcases through the terrifying torture and chase sequence of Sally Hardesty by Leatherface. Because the human survival instinct is an intense and uncontrollable force, viewers are asked to contemplate what happens when our will is threatened by society. By localizing the film not only to Texas, but to America as a whole, viewers are forced to wonder if transgressions of this nature, catalyzed by societal problems and unease, are occurring right next door to us. We must ask: is it already too late?

Grace Sumitro

**Save this Seedy Earth:
Redefining Religious Purpose through Earthseed in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower***

Jesus who? In Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, strong-willed protagonist Lauren Olamina thinks nothing of spiritual beings or typical monotheism. Instead, in the midst of a dark dystopia filled with burning towns, murderous thieves, and man-eating dogs, Olamina finds relief in her own belief system: Earthseed, a powerful "religion" centered around the acceptance of change and instability. Olamina creates—or, in her words, discovers—verses to live by in her book, *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*. With the intention of progress and an ultimate destiny to "take root among the stars," Olamina's religion seems to be more than simply another orthodox belief system; rather, instead of finding meaning in the heavens, Earthseed's nature-based foundations humble the human believer to find their roots in the earth. As Olamina presents these Earthseed verses, I argue that her spiritual beliefs double as a movement towards environmental progress and against the human decisions that are burning Olamina's world to ashes. Through zeroing in on Butler's usage of metanarrative, realism, and the nature-bound human essence, I will focus on how Olamina's Earthseed leads followers away from relying on spiritual deities, toward confronting human agency on nature, and into the forward progress of fixing a corrupted world—something our own world might benefit from.

Putting It All Together

Wednesday, April 22
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m. PST

Moderated by Professor Roberto Diaz

Departments of Latin American and Iberian Cultures and Comparative Literature

Riley Carlin

Noh-One Behind the Mask: Using Noh Theatre Traditions to Explain the Ignored Rape in Kurosawa's *Rashomon*

Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon* is often praised for its ambiguities...except the ambiguities surrounding the rape of Masako. Why, in a film about a rape and murder, is there barely any emphasis on the rape? While this may be a legitimate question worth exploring, Western scholars seem to view this Japanese film through a Western lens and assign Western meanings to confusing aspects of the movie; this overlooks the cultural heritage Kurosawa was working in. So I analyze *Rashomon* from a new angle informed by Noh: a popular—but sometimes confusing—traditional style of Japanese theatre. Other Kurosawa works have been compared to Noh, but rarely *Rashomon* and not like this. Using the traditions and purposes of Noh masks to interpret the characters' testimonies gives us a new angle of viewing the issue of the missing rape. I demonstrate how film elements such as movement, emotions, and shots create genre/stereotype "masks" for the witnesses. Masako and Takehiro's avoidance of the rape is explained by how these "masks" present the witnesses as Noh caricatures rather than fleshed-out film characters.

Gloria Chang

Wolf Packs and Wilin' Out: Damaging Media Portrayals of African Americans Reconstructed with Music in *When They See Us*

Scratches, bruises, and violent beatings: director Ava DuVernay captures a world filled with physical violence in the Netflix miniseries *When They See Us*, but more importantly reveals the societal and systemic prejudice that so often injures young black men far worse than any punch could. Based on the real life tragedy of the Central Park Five, *When They See Us* follows the story of five young black and brown boys falsely accused of and coerced to confess to a heinous rape in 1989. DuVernay digs past the layers of outward violence to arrive at the root of such appalling legal outcomes—perception. Upon sociological analysis, media scholars and critics have observed that television, radio, and newspapers brutalized and criminalized the boys, creating widely accepted justifications for prejudiced mistreatment. To counter these dehumanizing narratives, DuVernay utilizes hallmarks of African-American culture, like rap and hip hop music, to depict the range of emotions and suffering that the African-American teenager may experience—using culture to humanize and affirm their racial identity. Her storytelling places the viewer squarely into the shoes of the boys' themselves, creating empathy that was lost—but very much needed—in 1989.

Adam Jackman

The Science of an Archive: How *Dracula* Encourages a Methodological Reading

Why would the story of a five hundred year old, undead, blood-sucking vampire focus on science? In fact, vampires' existence is proven to be a scientific impossibility and therefore does not require a methodological explanation. However, Bram Stoker deliberately uses the most scientific and technologically advanced forms of contemporary record-keeping to make up his 1897 vampire novel, *Dracula*. Stoker's characters tell the story using advanced technology like phonographs and short-hand note taking with an acute attention to chronology and order. This seems extremely out of place in a novel whose central character is a vampire: a mythological farce, equivalent to a centaur or the abominable snowman. I propose that *Dracula* focuses on scientific and technological record-keeping while containing such outrageous subject matter to encourage readers to analyze the novel's structure methodologically. Just as the characters in *Dracula* use advanced methods to tell the story of a vampire, readers are doing the same. Readers are encouraged to pick up on small details—dates, names, characters, newspaper clippings and even the order of diary entries—as clues to advance and develop their understanding of the plot.

Arantza Pena Popo

**History, Interrupted:
Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* as a Revisionist Family Album**

In the graphic novel *Fun Home*, comic artist Alison Bechdel is left to piece together the remnants of her dead father's mysterious past as a closeted homosexual. Through the inclusion of reproduced family photographs in her graphic novel, Bechdel assembles her father's fragmented history to find not only the truth—but also herself. Using Robert Zussman's article, "My Mother's Photos," I will explore Bechdel's manipulation of her family photographs to create a revisionist family album that advances her participation within her father's past. Moreover, by utilizing Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* as a framework for visual analysis, I examine the realistic artistic reproduction and strategic arrangement of photographs throughout the novel. I argue that through this meticulous copying of the photographs, Bechdel transforms into the authoritative mediator of her father's story by wedging herself between the reader and her family. Furthermore, by adding retrospective meaning to the past through reconstructive memory, I posit that Bechdel strengthens her bond to her father's homosexual identity, therefore allowing her to gain agency as a queer woman.

Pratik Thakur

**The Clandestine Rebellion:
A Criticism of Black Representation on Television in JAY-Z's "Moonlight" Music Video**

In television, the practice of colorblind casting shapes Black characters through the white gaze, thus not truly illustrating their culture. JAY-Z's "Moonlight" music video highlights this issue in the industry with its recreation of a scene from the iconic 90s sitcom *Friends*, but only with Black actors like Jerrod Carmichael. During a segment of this Black *Friends* remake, Carmichael begins to act strange and creates an eerie effect in the music video. Carmichael becomes what cultural critic Sara Ahmed calls an "imposition," meaning that he creates a "loss of the ease of informality" in his own head and to the music video's viewers. While Carmichael becomes an imposition, he introduces an apprehensive mood to the video and insinuates his rejection of the show's script because he realizes it does not truly portray Black culture, as *Friends* was written by white writers. Overall, Carmichael's role as an imposition underlines the flaws of having a racially diverse cast, in this case, a Black cast, if the script does not cater to their respective background and culture. Therefore, his actions are crucial toward criticizing the weaknesses of colorblind casting and the representation of Black individuals in the television industry.

Tracing Trauma

Wednesday, April 22
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m. PST

Moderated by Professor Olivia Harrison
Departments of French and Italian, Comparative Literature,
Middle East Studies, and American Studies and Ethnicity

Sarah Barhouma

No Pain, No Gain: The Duality of Trauma in *The Virgin Suicides*

Through the sea of sweaty treadmill runners and bulky weight lifters, you spot Arnold Schwarzenegger across your local gym. Two things run through your mind: one, why in the world is Arnold Schwarzenegger working out at this gym, and two, oh my word, Arnold Schwarzenegger is working out at this gym. Not only do the two of you later become workout partners, you quickly achieve your fitness goals, largely due to your partner's faithful repetition of the saying, "no pain, no gain." The mantra has often been used to motivate athletes and gym junkies; the idea is, if you are able to muster a bit of very temporary physical pain, results will follow. In *The Virgin Suicides*, Jeffrey Eugenides applies this same mentality to emotional trauma. With its gruesome depictions of five brutal suicides committed by fragile, unblemished, young girls, there's no question as to why the piece is known for its narration of a traumatic tale. However, the physical trauma experienced by the girls is not the only form of trauma present within the novel: a collective group of boys, from whose point of view the novel is narrated, experience severe emotional trauma as witnesses of the girls' suicides. Although the girls' suicides haunt them for the rest of their lives, the boys also undergo an incredible amount of maturity because of them. Examining the novel with the "no pain, no gain" mantra in mind exposes the value in emotional trauma that often goes unappreciated. In doing so, Eugenides sheds light on the duality of trauma's nature, and raises a thought-provoking question: how bad is trauma, really?

Dahlia Earleywine

Authorship, Grief, and Identity in *Fun Home*: A Life-Long Encounter with Loss

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is tied in a ribbon of loss. Loss, in this tragicomedy, is the force that propels Bechdel's identity formation throughout her entire life, as well as what allows for her continued interaction with her past. Bechdel's character deals with grief constantly, long before the actual death of her father. Adolescent Alison grieves her lack of masculinity as she grows into womanhood. She mourns her father's failure to represent the masculine ideal she craves for herself. She struggles with the loss of learning of his illicit sexual activity. Then he gets hit by a truck, and she deals with, gaping, capital D, Death. As David Eng and David Kazanjian explain in their "Loss: The Politics of Mourning," "[m]elancholia remains steadfastly alive in the present," and brings its "ghosts and specters" with it. They conclude that a genuine appreciation of loss is impossible without this melancholia, and that interaction with our histories allows us to rewrite our pasts and envision our futures. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel demonstrates just this—that the nature of our development is an interweaving of self-understanding, acceptance, and loss. They are always with us, clarifying in memory and in the present who we are.

Seth Ellington

"Everything Lives": Agency in Acker's Fiction

Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* isn't an easy text to decipher. In an almost plotless collage of literary and artistic mediums, Janey undergoes trials that no ten year old should. The audience is forced to watch in horror as her story unfolds, which begins with her incestuous and emotionally abusive relationship with her father and only goes downhill from there. It's easy to write off the novel as Acker's bleak take on life for this reason. However, this is far from the case. By close reading the illogical structure of the text and recontextualizing Janey's experience with the little we know about Acker's own mysterious past from Chris Krauss's biography *After Kathy Acker*, we find that *Blood and Guts* isn't as fatalistic as it appears. In fact, it's a novel about Acker overcoming her own troubles and fears in spite of how oppressive she finds the world. Disturbing as its content is, *Blood and Guts* highlights the infinite freedom that accompanies being human, even when the world seems to have lost any sense of reason or justice.

Komal Patri

**Some Kind of Tomorrow:
Exploring Trauma and Taste in *Beloved***

Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another.
—Sethe, *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a story of trauma. It is the story of Sethe's milk being stolen by Schoolteacher's nephews and Denver suckling on the blood of her dead sister. Often, Morrison embeds acts of ingestion amongst moments of trauma, and when these stories are retold, they are often done so in proximity to foodstuffs. However, this connection between eating and trauma is neither only literal nor coincidental. Upon the return of her dead daughter, Beloved, Sethe finds her child consuming all the food in their home, but also devouring traumatic stories of Sethe's past. Denver, Sethe's daughter, also finds herself attending to Beloved's needs, enraptured by the arrival of the newcomer. Eventually, Beloved manages to isolate both Denver and Sethe and they find themselves alone in their home with no food, trying to maintain themselves on stories of a painful past. Metaphorical eating, however, physically manifests itself by impregnating Beloved, but deteriorating Sethe. It is Denver who is able to withstand the hunger and break away from her mother and sister. She does not remain in isolation, but seeks help in the community, eventually repurposing orality, not as a form of pain, but as one of reclamation.

Jessica Zhu

Trauma, Resistance, and Growth in Octavia Butler's *Bloodchild*

*His body convulsed with the first cut. The sound he made...
I had never heard such sounds come from anything human.*
—Gan, "Bloodchild"

Gan, the protagonist in Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild," is traumatized after witnessing a man giving birth to alien grubs. How Butler chooses to address trauma and its effects has already been explored and discussed by scholars in relation to her depiction of slavery, centering around Butler's novel *Kindred*. However, these ideas are grounded in slavery, and Butler has explicitly argued in "Bloodchild"'s afterword that the story is, instead, a love story. I am interested in exploring how this scholarship plays a role in other forms of trauma, in particular trauma associated with a near-death experience and lack of agency. I argue that childbirth in "Bloodchild," with humans serving as hosts for alien babies, is gruesome and scarring because it physically represents the lack of human agency in this futuristic world. Additionally, I will argue that Gan's trauma is also what enables him to resist the alien overlords, the T'Gatoi, which offers a powerful illustration of resilience in spite of trauma, as well as the broader ongoing work of equalizing uneven power dynamics.

Who Do You Think You Are?

Wednesday, April 22
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m. PST

Moderated by Professor Edwin McCann
School of Philosophy

Neha Halebeed

Hey, Look, You're Not White: The Concept of a Racially Tainted Looking Glass in Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*

Lydia is a black haired, blue eyed byproduct of her first generation Asian American dad and her white American mom. However, she gets more than her physical appearances from her parents; she is burdened by their feelings of otherness. Lydia sees herself from the perspective her parents have of her as their biracial daughter. This paper will discuss Cooley's looking glass theory of self perception to understand how people are only given the choice to view themselves from other people's perspective. It will also discuss how Said's theory of Orientalism explains how people of Asian heritage feel othered in white American culture. Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* is only a quick snapshot into being a biracial minority in a culture that chooses to only honor uniqueness that stays within the confines of looking white.

Derrick Korponay

A Satanic Illness: The Immorality of Disfigurement in *Dracula*

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is potentially the most iconic story of vampirism. In it, readers can see the classic title villain thwarted by a group of devout Christian protagonists. As the fight between good and evil progresses and some of the protagonists are bitten by Dracula and infected with vampirism, what appears to be a clear fight against immorality becomes more complicated as the Christian protagonists become intolerant toward those infected. Once the symptoms of vampirism are visible and the victims acquire an abnormal appearance, the protagonists become less accepting of their afflicted loved ones. This intolerance portrays the Christians who see vampirism as immoral and evil as conflating the physical symptoms of the illness with the changes in personality and behavior that are the true evils that underlie it. Because Christians are a pervasive group in the real world, their behavior in *Dracula* is especially problematic, as many people who may read the novel may identify with Christians and align themselves with the intolerant behavior expressed toward those with physical abnormalities.

Pilar Luiz

Chasing Blow: Racial Implications of Asian American Drug Use in *Better Luck Tomorrow*

Eight-balls, lines, bumps, snorting, coke, dealing, dollar bills, railing, snow, and blow—all are aliases for or allusions to the highly addictive drug cocaine. But what if I told you that chasing dust had deeper implications than just a substance abuse problem? My paper explores the racial implications of Asian American drug use in Justin Lin's 2002 film *Better Luck Tomorrow*. Lin's film follows a group of Asian American teenagers as they descend from model minority students into murderous criminals with a nasty coke habit. Their struggle to mitigate the tension between their Asian and American identities precipitates their drug use, which symbolizes their attempt to become more "white," or American. Using evidence from the *Journal in Ethnicity in Substance Abuse*, I establish the relationship between ethnic identity and drug use in Asian Americans, then go on to explore the racial significance of cocaine in cinema and in its alias as the "All-American drug." Finally, in analyzing the plot and cinematography of *Better Luck Tomorrow*, the film can be interpreted as anti-Asian American, as the characters' use of drugs reinforces Hollywood's limiting and inaccurate portrayal of Asian Americans as stereotypical model minorities.

Benjamin Miller

**False Narratives and Wrongful Convictions:
The Impact of Institutionalized Racism in Ava DuVernay's *When They See Us***

They had only one goal: to smash, hurt, rob, stomp, rape.
—Pete Hamill, *New York Post*

In an attempt to add her own voice to the dissemination of the unjust story of the Central Park Five, filmmaker and director Ava DuVernay created her miniseries *When They See Us* to tell the story for those without a loud enough voice. The theories developed by police of how the crime occurred were riddled with contradictions, abounding with circumstantial evidence, and replete with systematic racism. In the course of this research paper, I will be entering an almost untouched field of scholarship about *When They See Us* by exploring the ways in which DuVernay illustrates the psychological and emotional impact of forcing a blatantly false and racially charged narrative on a group of innocent children. I utilize W.E.B. DuBois' theory of "Double Consciousness" and explore how false narratives inevitably lead to the destruction of self-identity. I also delve into Dan Flory's theory on "racialized disgust" in film to explain the cinematic choices made by DuVernay in her retelling of the story. This research exposes the impacts of false narratives and wrongful convictions on the alienation of self.

Jenny Weiske

**"Innocent but Not Naive":
A Blurring of Lines Between Protagonist and Antagonist in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"**

Each century tends to create or re-create fairy tales after its own taste.
—Angela Carter

Why do we root for fairy tale heroes? How do we know who is the villain? Fairy tales are the stories we grow up with, and they often serve as a way of developing a moral code. They are black and white in a world that is fundamentally grey. What happens when these distinctions are blurred to match the real world? This blurring is exactly what Angela Carter attempts in "The Bloody Chamber," her retelling of the classic Bluebeard story. While many scholars recognize Carter's attempts to transcend fairy tale archetypes in her work, this is largely under explored. Building on the observations of some of these scholars, I posit that Carter manages to subvert these tropes and create complex characters that exist more readily in the modern world. Good and evil don't pan out nicely in Carter's work, and the characters are not limited by strict rules placed on them by antiquated archetypes. I will also analyze the role this subversion plays in the reading experience: Carter's approach may resonate more with contemporary and grown-up readers than the original fairy tales.

Define Normal

Thursday, April 23
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m. PST

Moderated by Professor Andrew McConnell Stott
USC Dornsife College Dean of Undergraduate Education and Department of English

Rachel Cassar

Define “Human”: A New Approach to Posthumanism, Transhumanism, and Human Rights via Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

If asked to explain what makes you human, what would you say? Is it your DNA? Your intelligence? Your ability to experience empathy, emotion, spirituality? Many leading scholars on the topic of distinguishing the human from the nonhuman would argue that the answer is all of the above. Some even go further to claim that the lack or alteration of one or more of these defining human traits places an individual outside the realm of the human altogether. Philip K. Dick, author of the science-fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* seems to take issue with this approach. In my paper, I plan to highlight how Dick’s novel emphasizes the humanity of individuals who do not meet all of the above criteria and underlines the legal and social injustice such individuals suffer because of their nominal exclusion from the realm of the “human.” While modern scholars almost exclusively label the androids in Dick’s story as posthumans, meaning “beyond the human,” I believe *Do Androids* offers a compelling warning against the current scholarly urgency to categorize individuals as either distinctly human or nonhuman, instead encouraging readers to consider the benefits of broadening the category of “somewhere in between.”

Maria Lentz

Is it Gay to Kiss the Homies?: The Repression of Sexual Otherness in *The Virgin Suicides*

Is it gay to kiss the homies? No homo. Why are these phrases so common in popular culture? Specifically, why are they so common amongst straight boys? Linguistic scholar Joshua Brown, in his paper “No Homo,” argues that the purpose of these phrases is for the speaker to deny any connotations of homosexuality within his relationships to other boys. By doing so, the speaker separates himself from an “abnormal” group of gay boys and solidifies his place as one of the straight boys. Jeffrey Euripides’ 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides* personifies how this group identity of straight masculinity plays out through a uniquely plural narrator, analyzed by literary scholars such as Debra Shostak and Martin Dines. Rather than a single person “I” narrator, the collective “we” voice of the neighborhood boys tells the story. The novel then uses this representation of male collectivity to literally test the phrase “Is it gay to kiss the homies?” In a scene where many of these boys kiss each other, the narrators all refuse to acknowledge this moment’s homoerotic undertones. Why do the boys deny this scene’s obvious homoeroticism? And how does the novel’s narration style connect this moment to masculinity in teenage boys?

Kabir Malhotra

Long Live the New Flesh: Self-Creation and *Videodrome* in the Digital Age

A man sits in a decrepit room watching a television. It flickers to life, revealing the same man shooting himself in the head, proclaiming “Long live the new flesh” before exploding, intestines falling out of the television set. The man looks at it for a moment, then mimics the movements he just watched. Long live the new flesh. Cut to black. This scene, the last of the movie, is a microcosm for the entirety of David Cronenberg’s 1983 film *Videodrome*, a movie that is obsessively concerned with the intersection between man, body, and media, as well as what living in a hyperconnected world truly means. Cronenberg depicts a world in which every situation exists on several dimensions, often represented by physical screens. Much like in our everyday life, while watching *Videodrome* the viewer has to parse through screens within screens within screens in order to understand the frames. This all builds to Max Renn’s proclamation at the end: “Long live the new flesh!” The ending of the film is not simply Max killing himself, but also Max ending the film/his diegetic reality, and ascending to be an actual, fully-formed piece of media, not just one component in a layer of media. I argue that, in a sense, he is escaping the battleground of the video and

becoming a media object, as real as he possibly can be, the new flesh then being the self as a media object on multiple levels—salient commentary on the many levels of self-creation each and every one of us find ourselves partaking in the modern, hyperconnected world. Down with the Videodrome, long live the new flesh.

Grace Scheg

**“The Blood Is the Life!”:
How Transformed Blood Transforms Female Life and Female Martyrdom in *Dracula***

“The blood is the life!” exclaims Dracula’s follower, reveling in his master’s quest for self-rejuvenation and proliferation of the broader vampire population through the means of blood acquisition. Indeed, in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, blood not only sustains life like Dracula’s own, but blood also holds potential to alter the very nature of the life it is taken from—most often leaving female life transformed. Through blood-sucking, Count Dracula makes victims and martyrs out of the novel’s two female protagonists, Mina and Lucy, altering their lives in ways unthinkable within the rigidly gendered context of Victorian England. Stoker introduces behaviors and qualities—Lucy becoming a sexually aggressive vampire and Mina simply exercising what one character deems a “man’s brain”—that deviate from the sexually innocuous, passive “angel in the house” ideal Victorian woman. And yet these women don’t veer entirely into the camp of the “fallen” Victorian woman either, at least in their male friends’ portrayal of them. Both Mina and Lucy advance an alternative between the diametrically opposed extremes of Victorian female labels, and furthermore, an alternative to the religious motives of the female martyr trope. Mina and Lucy’s unique martyrdom becomes, at least for Mina, self-driven and emblematic of the paradox they occupy: women exercising their own intuition, rather than succumbing entirely to female expectations, and yet still honoring a martyr’s holiness and “angel in the house” respectability.

Vera Shan

**Fearless Queer and Family Chaos:
Tracing the Generation of Noncompliance with Heteronormative Family in *We the Animals***

Easier to sink than swim.
—Paps, *We the Animals*

Defending homosexuality in a heteronormative culture features the rising of individual integrity among homogeneity. Justin Torres’ novel *We the Animals* centers on a mixed-race, first person narrator in upstate New York, whose queer identity is confronted by hostile rejection from his abusive and homophobic family. As the narrator strives to uphold his homosexuality under a profoundly dysfunctional household, this paper will identify those moments of heteronormativity in relation to gender roles and patriarchy, and examine how they shape the narrator’s noncompliance with societal expectations of his sexuality. Further, as traces of a violent family imprint on the narrator are often interwoven with his rebellion against heteronormativity, I will also demonstrate how family empowers and defines individuality through turbulence and chaos. In *We the Animals*, Torres urges our recognition of a family that is both empowering and confining, which implies the inseparable relation between individual and family identity, while propelling a discovery of freedom that rises from exile.

Gendered

Thursday, April 23
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m. PST

Moderated by Professor Natania Meeker
Departments of French and Italian and Comparative Literature

Sarah Berger Maneiro

Pornographic Representation: How *Videodrome* Emphasizes the Porn Industry's Degradation of Women

Cronenberg's *Videodrome* grapples with multiple taboo topics that have become a part of everyday life. In this paper, a focus on the film's depiction of pornography—specifically how it alters human behavior and female representation—will act as a reflection of the degradation and humiliation women experience due to the porn industry. Nicki Brand, acting as a personification of women's depiction in pornography, as well as Max Renn's evolution throughout the film, will serve as crucial evidence of the effects of porn itself. In analyzing both the radical feminist and sexual empowerment arguments surrounding porn in the 1980s, *Videodrome* becomes a compelling example of the ongoing discussion of female subjugation. By illustrating the influence patriarchal desires and hierarchies exert within our modern society, *Videodrome* manifests how overwhelmingly porn has become oppressive of women, whether that was Cronenberg's intention or not.

Rachel Heil

Clichés Can Kill! How Ari Aster's *Midsommar* Challenges Gender Roles in Horror

There are certain rules that one must abide by in order to successfully survive a horror movie.
—Randy, *Scream*

The slasher films of the 70s and 80s gave rise to a universal female horror trope that Carol Clover refers to as “the Final Girl.” The utilization of this figure across the horror genre makes it worth applying to Ari Aster's 2019 folk horror film *Midsommar* and its female protagonist, Dani. I will argue that by viewing her through the lens of the Final Girl, Dani initially meets the basic characteristics of Clover's archetype. However, in analyzing the ways that Dani deals with the effects of emotional trauma in her romantic relationship, I assert that Aster actually upends her characterization as a Final Girl and redefines the trope. Additionally, Aster both aligns and subverts the archetype of the toxically masculine “killer” with Dani's boyfriend, Christian. Aster's redefinition of these two traditional gender roles in horror films complicates the familiar Final Girl and our conventional identification as viewers with this female “victim-hero.” Ultimately, I argue that Aster's subversion of this figure exposes the dangers of indiscriminate audience identification with the Final Girl in horror films.

Aidan Martin

Guilt, Innocence, and the “Protected” Heterosexual Male Space: An Analysis of the Complex Paradox of Women With AIDS in *Philadelphia*

While much of the film *Philadelphia* chronicles the AIDS discrimination case of Andy Bennett, a lawyer who was allegedly fired from his firm for his homosexuality, a hidden aspect of the film is its treatment of HIV-positive women. In fact, at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, many women were categorized as “innocent victims” of the fallout of a disease that was synonymous with the homosexual male community. As I will show, however, the infection of women challenged the traditional AIDS model—a model that stigmatized, alienated, and often guilted victims. Ultimately, because of the dominance of the heterosexual male perspective, the needs of HIV-positive women were overlooked both in the film and in reality.

Lingaire Ofosuhene

**Are Cooties Even Bad Anyway?:
An Inside Look Into Everything Wrong With the Teenage Boy in *The Virgin Suicides***

What do teenage boys think about? From the lens of *The Virgin Suicides*, they apparently fantasize about young women “bleeding between their legs” and “defecating openly.” The novel gives us an unfettered and candid look inside the minds of several teenage boys. As they recount the events leading up to the deaths of the Lisbon sisters, they display a strong attraction to every part of the Lisbon girls. They yearn deeply to gain access to every cavity and bodily secretion the girls have to offer. Yet, wouldn’t society have us believe that their desires are reprehensible, or at the very least, incredibly peculiar? Aren’t teenage boys supposed to be most averse to the functions of the female body that are supposedly “gross”? Join me as I uncover how narrative, collective framing, and historical grounding contribute to the perverted tendencies of these particular teenage boys. And hopefully, together, we can uncover another truth: are these boys truly weird and disturbed or are these the natural thoughts of any teenage boy unaffected by societal restraints?

Soham Saxena

**Angry Young Man:
A Modern Look at Travis Bickle**

Famous film critic Pauline Kael wrote in her review of *Taxi Driver*, “The anonymity of the city soaks up one more invisible man; he could be legion.” In an eerily prophetic manner, Kael states that New York City is the perfect breeding ground for a dangerous man like Bickle due to how easy it is to slink into the dark shadows of the dirty city. Bickle’s initial loneliness turning into vengeful violence has many parallels that can be drawn to the real world. In fact, Kael’s statement has turned out to be somewhat prescient, as the dark corners of physical places like New York and digital places like the internet have proved to be popular with people like Bickle who struggle with “conforming” and with their own masculinity. This paper will explore the anonymous “legion” which the character of Travis Bickle has inadvertently created. It will also examine current conversations about young men, mental health, and violence and how they reflect the nature of the character of Travis Bickle.

Humans Being

Moderated by Michaela Telfer
Department of Comparative Literature

Thursday, April 23
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m. PST

John Atwood

The Iguana Complex? A Freudian Reading of *The Drowned World's* Dream Sequences

What are we as humans? Are we as unique as we make ourselves out to be, or are we just another type of animal? Have we made ourselves who we are, or are we the product of forces beyond our control? J.P. Ballard's 1962 novel *The Drowned World* presents a radical answer to this question, arguing that humans are merely another part of the natural world, and that biological and climatic forces are the true governors of the mind. Ballard frames this argument through a story of climate change, of the world reverting to a primordial jungle and awakening ancient "genetic memories" buried within our DNA, the memories of mammals which lived in fear of dominant reptiles and which begin to manifest themselves as recurring nightmares within the minds of Ballard's characters. These nightmares possess a profound effect on the characters' minds, causing them to abandon civilization and flee into the untamed jungle. Analyzed through Freud's perspective of dreams as repressed desires, this creates a story of buried non-human memories, brought to the forefront by a changing environment, which have always been a part of the human psychological makeup and have immense power over our supposedly rational minds.

Joanna Ge

Dependence on Technology, Surrender of Humanity in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

I can't dial a setting that stimulates my cerebral cortex into wanting to dial!
—Iran, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

"Dial 888... the desire to watch TV, no matter what's on it," said Rick Deckard to his wife Iran. In the apocalyptic world described in Philip K. Dick's futuristic novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, technology not only decides the moods for humans but also mechanizes their thinking as they could only refer to their emotions with digits. There is an ongoing scholarly conversation around the alienation of humanity under the dominance of technology. However, the scholarship has mainly focused on the alienation in physical expression of work. In my paper, I will expand the consideration of this alienating effect particularly on human spirituality. I will analyze the examples in *Androids* where technology robs humans of their subjectivity and dissolves the border between the actual human emotions and the simulated physical manifestations. Once humans start to overly depend on technology, it would play a significant role in controlling human minds and thereby demand the ultimate surrender of humanity. This could happen in the real world if we stick to our current path. So where should our subjectivity reside? In the heart that beats, or clangs?

Madeline Hood

True Crime as a Commentary on Grief: How the Style of *In Cold Blood* Explores the Effects of Trauma

What makes trauma so compelling? What is it about the effects of tragedy that keep a reader entranced? How do deliberate choices by an author make these things so clear? These are questions central to the 1965 book *In Cold Blood*. When diving into the world of 1950s rural Kansas, Truman Capote's style and portrayal of the people of Holcomb, Kansas comes across as undoubtedly unique. Divided into four parts, the first two parts of the novel are spent showing the reader the minds of the victims and the aftermath of their deaths. The audience gets to see how the townspeople, and the world, react to the murder of an innocent and unsuspecting family. However, the nature of the nonfiction narrative causes this to be done through the eyes of the author. Using literary critique of Capote's work and psychological concepts, I will examine how Capote's stylistic choices illustrate the complexities of grief and reveal his role as the sole witness. Specifically, I will analyze how these integral choices allow the reader to see deeper into the lives of the characters and see the effects of grief and tragedy from Capote's perspective.

Urban Seiberg

**Control, Alt(er), Delete:
The Collective Unconscious Online**

We are all now connected by the internet, like neurons in a giant brain.
—Stephen Hawking

What would life be like without the internet? No social media, Google, Netflix, or Zoom. This very conference would not be happening without it. It is nearly impossible to imagine modern life without the internet, yet that is the reality in Mark Doten's post-apocalyptic America in *Trump Sky Alpha*. Though the loss of the internet raises many problems, this paper focuses on the implications brought about by viewing the collective unconscious as integrated with the internet. Birdcrash, the deranged rebellion leader, shut down the internet to free himself and his fellow citizens from the “damaged” parts of their brains. His actions of shutting down the internet in order to help fix this “damage” implies that there is a connection between the brain and the internet—a connection this paper proposes is the collective unconscious. In the face of a global crisis, as we now are in, access to the collective unconscious becomes even more important. It provides a basis for people to connect over, regardless of their language, culture, or nationality, which allows for a sense of global unity not possible in any other way.

Ethan Zhang

**Human Hiveminds in the Videogame *Inside*:
Their Symbolization of Tribalism in the Digital Age**

Alone, weak, and able only to run, the boy protagonist in *Inside* can only use his wits to escape a mysterious organization wielding tech capable of reducing humans to mere puppets. Although this appears to be yet another bleak dystopian outlook of the future that Playdead Studios has built, the universe is chock-full of warnings concerning the increasing control technology has offered to social groups. While you, as the boy, run from the technology that threatens your freedom, you must also use this mind control to solve puzzles and bypass obstacles otherwise insurmountable, until finally you reach this blob of flailing limbs and flesh. This literal hivemind of bodies was your goal, and without realizing it, you've merged with it and become invulnerable. It becomes apparent your freedom feels falsified; you notice how the organization directs the hivemind by controlling the objects you interact with. The organization has effectively invaded your mind and actions, you have no choice but to continue progressing at their whim. This paper will be about how this control stems from technological manipulation of information; corporations select what information we become exposed to and suggest content and people that we would most likely mesh with. The path of the boy into the hivemind demonstrates the loss of individualism and the resulting tribalistic social structure that modern technology facilitates. I will analyze this alarming, yet obscured issue that has taken deep root in social development and introduce possible solutions.

In Context

Moderated by Professor Emily Anderson
Department of English

Thursday, April 23
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m. PST

Hannah Brecher

Bang! Smash!: Bronze Age Superheroes and Post-Modern America

"It's a bird...it's a plane...it's unprecedented collateral damage and judicial intervention!" Americans have long been obsessed with the idea of the "super," the being who can save us all because they are more than human, leaping tall buildings with a single bound. Yet Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Brad Bird's *The Incredibles* don't treat caped crusaders in this way. Instead, the superhuman or vigilantes of these works are ostracized by society as normal people and the government come together to banish them from their midst. Both are set in the Bronze Age of Superheroes (1970-1986), an age of comics characterized by character conflict and contemporary political issues. Filtered through the events of that era, comic books depicted heroes in a postmodernist light, going against the government in "order to do what is right." I will cite Marxist philosopher Althusser and Nietzschean theorist Schotten to argue that the characters Rorschach, the Comedian, and Ozymandias of *Watchmen*, and Mr. Incredible and Syndrome of *The Incredibles* subvert the idea of what it means to be superhuman in their representation as outsiders who push back against the government in their attempts to "save the day" through their own means and particular sense of justice.

Hunter Hinson

The Catharsis of Horror: A Socio-Historical Commentary on *The Exorcist*

Horror films don't create fear. They release it.
—Wes Craven

With audiences reportedly screaming at the top of their lungs, vomiting, and having seizures, *The Exorcist* certainly wasn't made for the faint of heart. And although *The Exorcist* may not be frightening for many of us today, it definitely was for viewers in the 1970s. *The Exorcist*, directed by William Friedkin, follows the story of Father Karras, a Catholic priest recruited to save Regan MacNeil, a 12-year-old girl who's been possessed. Besides the in-theater hysterics, the psychological effects of *The Exorcist* followed many viewers home, resulting in prolonged paranoia and anxiety. Psychologist Jim Kline, who personally suffered lengthy trauma after watching *The Exorcist*, and communication scholars Thomas Frenz and Thomas Farrell all discuss how *The Exorcist* reflected cultural anxieties and societal fears of the 1970s, allowing viewers to see themselves in its characters. I argue that this process of recognizing one's reality in the film's horrifying fiction forced viewers to face their inner demons head-on. Furthermore, I contend that this painful and confusing process of self examination and emotional reflection, ignited by viewing horror films like *The Exorcist*, results in a cathartic experience that ultimately allows individuals to find freedom in expelling their past insecurities and trauma.

Gisselle Soto Rivas

The Apocalypse Comes in Waves: Environmental Injustice in Junot Díaz's "Monstro"

How do you imagine the apocalypse? Junot Díaz's "Monstro" provides an interesting take on it. A mysterious disease, termed "La Negrura," emerges in the Caribbean, turning its victims into zombie-like creatures, and making the threat of the apocalypse real upon its spread. Through his use of the zombie and its historical roots in Haiti during colonization, Díaz alludes to the issue of environmental injustice. Michael Young discusses the apocalypse as a medium of revelation, expressing how the narrative of the apocalypse can be used to expose a truth. Engaging in a discussion of the zombie's colonial history in Haiti and the purpose of its role as the driving force of the apocalypse, I will demonstrate the role of "Monstro" as a call to action. Díaz's outlook in "Monstro" is pessimistic; he foresees impending doom for humans as a result of environmental degradation. However, he also focuses on the consequences

of ignoring issues of environmental injustice, revealing the importance of accounting for everyone in the search for a solution. How will we heal the Earth? Will science and technology be of any help if only the richest have access?

Tingying “Talia” Tao

**“She Was Supposed to Look Inviting”:
Exploitation of the Female Material Body in Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust***

The devil is in your heads. Stop hiding it under the veil of a woman’s body.
—Josef von Sternberg, *The Devil is a Woman*

Everything in California has a price. That’s good news for some, as love doesn’t matter if you can have it for 30 bucks a night. Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*, published in the aftermath of the Great Depression, illustrates the pinnacle of material worshipping. Bodies are simply commodities. Through an unconventional focus on historically marginalized characters, West introduces readers to Faye Greener, the novel’s most prominent female character, who juggles a string of suitors to pave the way for her dreams of being an actress. In my paper, I place Faye in the larger context of a Hollywood that, after the Great Depression, reinforced a sexually-objectifying image of women; one to satisfy the public sentiment for healthy bodies amidst extreme poverty. Throughout the novel, Faye is encouraged to take advantage of her physical beauty to compensate for her barren mind, while also being sexualized as a dangerous and superficial seductress. In this way, West perpetuates the vicious cycle of Hollywood’s exploitation and objectification of the women on screen, and underscores the timelessness of both Faye and *The Day of the Locust*.

Dottie Yu

***Philadelphia*’s “Pity Hot Potato” Game:
A Lose-Lose Situation for Minorities**

No character undergoes a more striking transformation in Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia* than African-American lawyer Joe Miller. Over the course of the film, Miller’s initial repulsion to gay protagonist Andrew Beckett develops into compassionate pity for the injustices that Beckett faces. In fact, pity is at the core of *Philadelphia*—from harrowing shots of Beckett’s lesion-covered body to his blatantly homophobic employers, the film solicits the viewer’s pity to advance its intended message of justice. This begs a critical question: how effective, really, is pity in driving social change? Social theorist Joseph Stramondo offers insight: he explains that pity inherently represents a power imbalance whereby the pitier dominates the pitied. I posit that *Philadelphia*’s haphazard use of pity severely compromises its message of justice. Miller only pities Beckett to elevate and empower himself, as if pity is an unwanted “hot potato” to pass off. In my presentation, I will use the metaphor of the “pity hot potato” to analyze the relationship between Miller and Beckett, concluding that the film’s use of pity results in a slew of unintended ramifications that exacerbate the power stratification between minorities and the heterosexual, white, male majority.

Parts Unknown

Thursday, April 23
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m. PST

Moderated by Professor Erin Graff Zivin
Departments of Latin American and Iberian Cultures and Comparative Literature

Ammar Dharani

“You Never Really Own Shit”: A Transcendental View of *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*

*A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively...
loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image.*

—Joan Didion

From the gentrification of San Francisco in the 90s to mandates forcing university students to leave campus, it is no secret that much of our identity is infused within the places surrounding us. In director Joe Talbot’s 2019 narrative film *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*, protagonist Jimmie Fails III struggles to reclaim ownership of his lost childhood Victorian home. In the midst of gentrification and loss of black community in San Francisco, his identity is fixated on the lost home and the false narrative that his grandfather had built the house. Unlike Jimmie, his best friend Mont delocalizes himself from any place or possession, using art as a way to deeply connect to others and develop his identity. In my paper, I will use transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson’s lens in *Self-Reliance* with a psychocultural interpretation of space and identity formation to argue that Talbot believes there is a beauty in delocalizing your identity from any particular place or object as artist Mont does. However, through the internal conflict in Jimmie, Talbot also challenges Emerson’s belief to argue that grounding oneself to a physical place, though not favorable, is often needed to survive in times of turbulence or narrative dissonance.

Terry Lee

Toxins, Ruins, Decay, in All Their Beauty: The Post-Apocalypse of *Nausicaä* and the Unique Power of Science-Fiction

Forget humanity; there are more interesting matters at hand, especially when it comes to Hayao Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. A film with a clear theme of the human-nature relationship, *Nausicaä* is at the center of much scholarly discussion, but discussion always from the human vantage point. Despite the film’s unequivocal focus on its natural world, current scholarship rarely discusses *Nausicaä*’s nature itself, focusing instead on the film’s human characters, whether it be on the interactions between humans or on how humans regard nature. In my essay, I will engage with *Nausicaä* from a different lens, by forgetting humanity, and asking questions about how *Nausicaä*’s natural world treats its own denizens and how this nature responds to the post-apocalypse. By considering *Nausicaä* in this fashion, I will reach a new interpretation of the film, one promoting nature as a powerful, beautiful entity that should humble humankind, and challenging our concepts of “apocalypse.” Furthermore, beyond *Nausicaä*, the idea of “forgetting humanity” is also related to the science-fiction genre itself, leading me to the conclusion that science-fiction holds a unique power to create worlds that have “forgotten” humankind, yet still draw meaning from them that applies especially to today’s society.

Andrew Overing

***Inside the Tank:* Control and Meaning in Simulation**

*[W]e want to be ... a certain sort of person. Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob.
There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has long been in the tank.*

—Robert Nozick

What is the point of a game with no dialogue, muted colors, no text? Playdead’s *Inside* only gives the intuitive baseline videogame goal—move right and reach the end—as instruction for the player. What unfolds is a dystopic narrative of society collapsing under the weight of absolute authority. My paper argues that the game challenges its medium to be political, not purely entertaining. The main character, a young boy, navigates environs filled with

guards and non-sentient “husks” of people. The game allows him to control the husks, exploring postmodernist themes of control and simulation, which is epitomized by the ability of the boy to unplug and himself become one of the husks. I argue that unplugging helps reveal a core message in favor of a hunt for meaning by asking, what is the point of a game at all? Answering—and warning—that it is to escape into simulation, and urging players to find their own value outside of the game.

Noah Somphone

**“Mama, Am I a Real Korean?”:
Rootlessness in the Transracial Adoption Memoir, *All You Can Ever Know***

Finding belonging isn't something to be taken for granted. In the memoir *All You Can Ever Know*, Asian-American author Nicole Chung undergoes a journey that exceeds her expectation of family. This paper examines the concept of rootlessness throughout Chung's memoir, especially when facing isolation and racism in her predominantly white community. To pinpoint another community that Chung belongs to, my paper also discusses individuals who were also adopted and able to resonate with Chung's feelings towards adoption—her “other” family outside of her nuclear one. Chung's simultaneous use of first-person and third-person pronouns to tell her story is also discussed, as she constantly switches back and forth between the two. In doing so, she builds upon the feeling of rootlessness, allowing her audience to float between these varying dimensions of prose. Finally, my paper concludes with an analysis of Chung's newfound feelings of belonging through the embrace of her new, extended family.

Jessica Yuan

**Tentacular Future:
Dark Sea Imagery in Ursula Le Guin's "The New Atlantis"**

*To know the abyss of the darkness and not to fear it,
to entrust oneself to it and whatever may arise from it—what greater gift?*
—Ursula Le Guin

Ursula Le Guin's novella "The New Atlantis" is set in the distant future, where, while the dystopian western coastline of America is sinking, a potential Utopia is rising from the ocean floor. The rumor of it goes viral among the desperate people who are oppressed by authoritarian regimes, and the narrator Belle is one of those dreaming about this new continent and new future. Le Guin utilizes a harmonious structure alternating between Belle's narration and the mysterious message from the residents of the new Atlantis, with dark sea imagery as a predominant thread that connects across different sections. Here, Le Guin creates what sociologist and novelist Donna Haraway, in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, calls “tentacular thinking.” Just like an octopus stretching its tentacles, tentacular thinking patterns thoughts into a complex connection of lines, opening up a multitude of interpretations. My paper contends that Le Guin creates such tentacularity by using the dark sea as the murky medium that casts the narrator into a tangled web of space-time: multiple worlds exist, different media communicate with each other, distant voices are heard, and from the abyss we can see hope.

Damn the Man

Moderated by Krishna Narayanamurti
Department of English

Thursday, April 23
6:30 p.m. - 7:45 p.m. PST

Britney Castillo

The Suggested Male Unconscious and the Portrayal of the “New Woman” in *Dracula*

What are you thinking about? No, what are you really thinking about? While we may know about our conscious thoughts, Sigmund Freud’s theory of the unconscious mind proposes an alternative perspective about our thoughts and actions. His theory provides an explanation for the system behind our primal behavior and/or intentions. Surprisingly, his theory was popular in Victorian England literature before he formally introduced it in publications. Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* became a part of the collection of novels that utilized the popular Victorian England literary trend of the primitive human psyche in their narratives. Not only did Stoker implement an element of the suggested unconscious in his male characters, such as Jonathan Harker, but he also used the concept to mirror the social criticism surrounding the “New Woman” movement in Victorian England. Academics have presented separate arguments about *Dracula* representing the unconscious of the characters and the role of the “New Woman” being embodied in the female characters Mina Harker and Lucy Westenra, but I will be discussing the connection between the embodiment of the male’s suggested unconscious mind and its direct effect on the portrayal of the “New Woman” in *Dracula*.

Yixuan Chen

Feminism out of Misogyny: Carter’s Empowerment of Women in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*

*Carter envisions the possibility of a ‘moral pornographer’
who would use the genre as a critique of current relations between the sexes.*

—Robin Ann Sheets, “Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber”

Adapted from traditional folklore and fairy tales, Angela Carter’s short story collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* features her extravagant, macabre style of writing and her wild depiction of Gothic horror, romanticism, and sexuality. Carter uses many misogynist plot elements such as violence, pornography, and the trafficking of women. As critiqued by some feminist scholars, much of Carter’s work was thought to ultimately succumb to patriarchal stereotypes. However, in this essay, I will argue that Carter actually proves herself to be a feminist by depicting many powerful, independent woman characters. These women are able to convert the misogynist tropes at work against them into strength, and finally defeat the patriarchy’s control over their destiny. Further, I will propose that Carter also contributes to the discussion surrounding feminism as she complicates the over-simplified, binary definition of sexuality and explores the tension between gender roles.

Ashley Hutchinson

Fear of Independence: Is Isadora a Truly Independent Role Model?

*A really independent woman would go to the mountains alone and meditate—
not take off with Adrian Goodlove in a battered Triumph.*

—Isadora Wing, *Fear of Flying*

Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* is accepted as one of the most famous feminist novels during the midst of the sexual revolution in 1973. With its scandalous cover page and explicitly sexual content, *Fear of Flying* has reached millions of readers and has been pegged by many as a “trashy” romance novel. In response to the novel’s success, critics have debated over whether or not Isadora Wing’s relationship with two different men, husband Bennett and paramour Adrian, is encouraging sexual freedom, or perpetuating the oppressive prioritization of seeking out men over professional success and personal independence. I will argue that through Isadora’s romantic conflict, Jong is able

to intertwine Isadora's more important journey of discovering self-worth. It is through the positioning of *Fear of Flying* as a low-brow romance novel that Jong was able to reach a large audience of young women, and through her candid and witty critique about societal expectations for women, present a greater message about achieving personal independence.

Kenneth Kim

**Suburban Pixie Virgins:
The Suburban Gothic Pastoralism of Manic Pixie Dream Girls in *The Virgin Suicides***

What do you call the alternative girl with an air of mystery that makes her both enigmatic and charismatic at the same time? In literature and film, this has taken shape in the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, or MPDG—a character described to “exist solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures,” according to film critic Nathan Rabin, who coined the term in 2007. This term has since been developed and expanded upon in pieces of media such as John Green's *Paper Towns* and Marc Webb's *500 Days of Summer*. In Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*, the five young Lisbon sisters do ultimately carry many traits that are reminiscent of MPDGs, with the narrator, a group of young boys with a collective voice, being fundamentally shaken by the lives and eventual deaths of these girls. However, it is through concepts such as suburban gothic, the pastoralism that this inspires in the suburbanites, and the oppressive sense of ennui that permeates the collective that the Lisbon sisters exist as a subversion of expectations surrounding MPDGs. They function instead as their own, wholly unique character type.

Carina Williamson

**The Horror!:
David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* Is Pornography of the Male Protagonist**

It would be ludicrous to assert that a critically acclaimed film such as *Videodrome* could be seen as analogous to erotica, but that is exactly what I believe Cronenberg intended. *Videodrome* enters into a decades-long debate around the role of women in porn and the potential for real violence against women driven by the degrading stereotypes. In order to prove how dangerous pornography is, Cronenberg flips the sexualized gaze of the camera onto the traditional male protagonist, Max Renn. To advance his analogy of Renn as the subject of pornography, Cronenberg illustrates Renn's transition into a woman in three ways: physically, through a pulsating stomach vagina; mentally, through subjugation to female counterparts; and socially, through the sexualization of the camera. Once Renn's transformation is complete, Cronenberg subjects him to the normalized horrors of pornography that women live through every day, including seduction, penetration, and terror. But why? I argue that *Videodrome* forces men to consider both their own position in society, just as Max Renn does, and the treatment of women in pornography, making the film into a horrific encounter for the blissfully unaware.

Family Matters

Moderated by Dr. Amy Braden, Associate Director
USC-Huntington Early Modern Studies Institute

Thursday, April 23
6:30 p.m. - 7:45 p.m. PST

Connie Deng

Land of the Freak, Home of the Brave: A Marxist Study of *Freaks* and the Acceptance of the “Other”

*Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience.
Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats.*
—Dianne Arbus, *Dianne Arbus: An Aperture Monograph*

Tod Browning's *Freaks* is regarded as one of the most controversial films of all time for its inclusion of real-life “circus freaks” as main actors, and its subsequently ambivalent audience receptions. Throughout the 20th century, Browning's unprecedented employment of real disabled actors landed *Freaks* in the reject pile of horror films in the 1930s, yet later, designated the film a cult classic during the Cold War. The film directs attention to not only the existence of the “Other,” but also the solidarity of that oppressed “Other” as a projection of a Marxist society. In my essay, I will discuss the role of avant-garde art in connection with late twentieth-century American counterculture, and more specifically, what scholar Robin Blyn coins as the “freak-garde”—art which requires an unignorable identification and leveling with the “Other.” While *Freaks* is undeniably Marxist in its sympathy to a revolutionary underclass, I assert that real progression towards an inclusionary utopia is intrinsically impossible in America, a society founded on capitalism. Ultimately, I argue that our dissociative reception of *Freaks* reveals the inability of mainstream audiences to resonate with progressionist messages, exposing the futility of art like *Freaks* as an effort to create foundational change in society.

Celine Maia Mendiola

Children Will Listen: Denver's Rebirth in the Stories of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

...she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her— and a heartbeat.
—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

In a novel centered on motherhood, one of the recurring stories in *Beloved* is that of how Sethe gave birth to Denver. That is the story Denver begins to tell Beloved in the epigraph above. But why does Morrison portray this moment as if Denver is giving birth herself? I argue that it's because this moment illustrates Denver's rebirth, as a woman of empathy. Prior to retelling this story, Denver had no sympathy for her mother's emotional turmoil. But, primarily drawing upon Priborkin's psychological criticism, I will closely read some key scenes in which Sethe's stories help Denver to develop a “theory of mind,” or the knowledge that Sethe's experiences are different from her own. This newfound empathy empowers Denver to leave the comfort of her home, seeking help for Sethe as she faces Beloved's harassment. In the end, Denver's ability to recognize and empathize with people transforms her into a more mature person. In other words, *Beloved* demonstrates just how transformative a single story can be.

Neha Yadav

Life Beyond Death: Intergenerational Agency and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Motherhood in slavery was more brutal than the atrocious system of slavery itself. Children were snatched from their mothers' arms and never returned, stripping these mothers of ownership over both their children and themselves. Yet, despite these restrictive conditions, mothers still managed to find ways to express their agency. Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* traces the story of Sethe, a runaway slave and mother of four who slits her oldest daughter's throat in order to spare her from experiencing the horrors of slavery. Although at face value, this is an act of violent murder that completely ruptures the tropes of motherhood, it can also be interpreted as an assertion of agency within the rigid confines of structural oppression. In my paper, I will analyze the dynamics of Black motherhood and its relation

to power within and without the context of slavery through a lens of situational agency as posited by Anne Anlin Cheng. Using this lens, I will develop the concept of “intergenerational agency”—the idea that a mother’s rebellion is influential in determining the range of freedom of future generations—through an analysis of the matrilineal chain of Sethe, her mother, and her two daughters in *Beloved*.

Chenyi Zhao

**Family is Burning:
Non-Conventional Family in *Paris is Burning***

Paris Is Burning is arguably among the most influential cultural works that have expanded public awareness of underprivileged communities of trans and queer people of color. This 1990 documentary made by Jennie Livingston follows prominent members in the Harlem ballroom communities and introduces the audience to different “houses,” intentional family units built out of mutual care instead of blood ties. The film establishes an ecology wherein individuals, being denied by their blood families because of their gender and sexuality, establish nonconventional communities to substitute for denied social relations. However, a “house” is also a unit of competition: houses battle each other for the legendary status in the ballroom, and individuals prove their economic values to enter a legendary house. My analysis will present how conventional family roles are performed in nonconventional house-families and how production and competition, aside from mutual care, also define the dynamics within a house. Under Livingston’s narrative, nonconventional queer houses operate within capitalist standards of a traditional family, and the economic and political motives behind these social units complicate our understanding of “house” as a series of family relations.

Zoe Zhou

**Horrible Parents?:
Surveillance, Objectification and the Parental Gaze in *The Virgin Suicides***

Have you ever met parents who are demanding but not very responsive to their children? There are many of them in the world, maybe even including your own parents. In Jeffrey Eugenides’ novel *The Virgin Suicides*, the Lisbon couple, who are authoritarian parents from a middle-class suburban family, ultimately end up with five sequential suicides of their daughters. Narrated by a group of boys in the neighborhood, the novel depicts the mystery of the adolescents’ suicides and draws discussions on the potential causes. One possible explanation could be that despite how demanding the Lisbon parents are, they also seem not very responsive to their children. While only a few have written about parental control, no one has particularly acknowledged the existence of the “parental gaze,” which is no less important than the “male gaze.” I argue that the book depicts interesting parallels between parental gaze and the male gaze, which reflects the complicated nature of parental control: objectifying the kids. It demonstrates the consequence of neglecting the psychological health of children and the harm of parental surveillance. In this paper, we will explore the reasons why the Lisbon household ends up with tragedy and discuss the boundary between caring for and controlling the kids.

From Where I'm Standing

Moderated by Professor Paul Lerner
Department of History

Thursday, April 23
6:30 p.m. - 7:45 p.m. PST

Tahira Baig

Lost in Translation: Bechdel's Search for Closure as Manifested in *Fun Home*

Alison Bechdel's father, Bruce, is an enigma to his children and dies an enigma. Although Alison is able to build somewhat of a connection before his death, it never reaches the level where Bruce can speak to his daughter about his sexuality, a topic Alison believes can bridge their relationship together. Following his passing, Alison discovers a photo of one of her father's former male lovers. It compels her to uncover who Bruce Bechdel was in order to understand why he played an estranged role in their family dynamic. Her journey is documented on the pages of *Fun Home*, a graphic memoir. She weaves literary allusions and family archives together to find a deeper significance amongst the trauma she's experienced. However, Bechdel burdens herself with the responsibility of translating Bruce to an audience so far removed from the subject. How can we trust that the translation is accurate? If real life is spun into a perfect narrative, then something is amiss. I will argue that the obstacle in Alison's way of achieving closure is her romanticism. My presentation will examine the ways that Bechdel rewrites the history of her father's past to make sense of why they never shared the connection she aspired for and why his life ended the way it did.

Benjamin Blum

Illusionary Intimacy: Objective Subjectivity in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*

Taxi Driver is a rare piece of cinema, one which allows us to see into the internal life and struggles of protagonist Travis Bickle much more so than the typical film would. Paradoxically, however, we know far less about Bickle by the end of the movie than we would a typical protagonist. My essay will look into how director Martin Scorsese creates this illusion of intimacy in his film through objective framing and oblique dialogue. While the critical discussion of *Taxi Driver* has remained centered on how Scorsese uses subjective filmmaking to give us glimpses into Bickle's life, I contend it is the juxtaposition of these subjective peeks into his point-of-view, with objective framing inherently removing us from his perspective, that truly allows us to understand Bickle's disturbed mental life.

Sabrina Feng

Meaning Beyond Fictionalization: Capote's Dual Identity in *In Cold Blood*

Does a biased witness always lose the ability to be factual? To answer this question, we must look at the ultimate witness in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*—the author himself. Self-researched and written, *In Cold Blood* appoints Capote as both witness to events in and author of the book. This has become a point of controversy, specifically regarding the status of *In Cold Blood* as a pioneering work of the True Crime genre. Critics like Douglas Schaak deem Capote's work invaluable as result of his bias for his subject Perry Smith. However, I argue that these allegations result from improper evaluation of this bias. So, I will draw on the arguments of Trenton Hickman and Jack de Bellis to properly analyze each unique role and explore the relationship between the two. I ultimately argue that Capote's role as an author takes dominance over his bias as a witness and exposes his agenda to deliver his personal vision of the narrative. This is exemplified by the portrayal of Detective Dewey, around which a harmful manipulation of the facts ultimately resulted in irreversible real-world consequences. From this, we can take Capote's dual identity as a case study on a mutual exclusivity between bias and untruthfulness, and recognize the potential real-world consequences of taking artistic liberties.

Jenna Juma

**We Wanted More:
An Exploration Into Cycles of Violence and Isolationism in *We the Animals***

It is easy to see how the novel *We the Animals* by Justin Torres explores the impact that conditions of violence and racism have on a child. *We the Animals* is often noted for its unique narration by a faceless, nameless child. The author deliberately omits revealing the narrator's name, solidifying his loss of identity to cycles of violence and racism within the novel. This novel is delicately crafted into short chapters that revolve around the narrator's childhood memories. These memories consist of interactions between him and his two brothers, between him and his parents, and between his mother and father. As the memories progress in his life, the readers are able to track how his childhood conditions impacted his persona in comparison to his brothers'. Drawing on Amartya Sen's social and cultural theory surrounding violence and Johan Galtung's cultural violence theory, my paper seeks to understand how the narrative style of the novel highlights circumstances of social and cultural inequality between the mother and father, the parents and their children, and between the narrator and his brothers.

Bebe Katsenes

**“Who Had Known They Talked so Much,
Held so Many Opinions, Jabbed at the World's Sights With so Many Fingers?”:
The “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” Trope in Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides***

“Manic pixie dream girl?” Even if you've never heard this term, you've met her. She is Summer in *500 Days of Summer*, Ramona Flowers in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, and Sam in *Garden State*. She is born to be romanticized and fetishized while having no inner life of her own. She is the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides*. The novel is told from the perspective of a group of neighborhood boys who struggle to reconcile the suicidal demise of the five mysterious sisters. While many scholars have investigated the implications of this collective narrator, all have failed to make its connection to the “manic pixie dream girl” trope. I argue these narrators assume a sexualized male gaze, and ultimately portray the subjects as “manic pixie dream girls.” While seemingly recounting the sisters' narrative, the boys exploit them as a vehicle for their own self discovery, deaf to the voices of the girls. I contend that Eugenides manipulates this trope and complicates the damaging connotations generally associated with it to critique his own medium. “Who had known they talked so much, held so many opinions, jabbed at the world's sights with so many fingers?” Perhaps Eugenides did all along.

Molding Minds

Moderated by Professor Lucas Herchenroeder
Department of Classics

Thursday, April 23
6:30 p.m. - 7:45 p.m. PST

Gabrielle Broome

**Escaping His Father's Eyes:
A Comparison of James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Justin Torres, *We the Animals***

I tried to rip the skin from their faces, and when I couldn't I tried to rip the skin from my own.
—Narrator, *We the Animals*

Justin Torres' debut novel *We the Animals* begins with the sentence, "We wanted more." As mixed-race brothers with an abusive Puerto Rican father, the 'more' that is being sought is the desire to overcome the biases and poverty set against them. In both Torres' novel and James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, gay sons struggle to come to terms with their identity within abusive households. These two different takes on childhood memories contrast self-perceived inner animality with the escape route of spirituality. While comparing the abusive father-son dynamics within the context of racism, I will discuss the desire to escape through looking at the way Baldwin presents religion as both a generator of shame and potential space of self-acceptance.

James Huang

**"So Help Me God":
The Role of Theology, Spirituality, and Belief in *The Plague***

I want to believe that a voice for good will incessantly rise above the most bellicose volume that evil can produce.
—Craig D. Lounsbrough

In a world under the throes of a pandemic-induced quarantine, it's hard to find the motivation to do anything or believe that COVID-19 will eventually be over. Camus's *The Plague* has never been more relatable than now, as the citizens of Oran, a fictional French town, similarly deal with the human and disease-caused side effects of being "shut down" by an incurable plague. Fortunately, Camus's exploration of the human condition in *The Plague* offers a hopeful message that the collective good of humanity can overcome this seemingly insurmountable challenge. Through the lens of humanist scholars such as Jeanette Lowen, who argue that Camus' novel is an example of crisis-induced teamwork in humanity, I aim to analyze the unlikely alliance between Dr. Rieux, an atheist doctor, and Father Paneloux, a Christian priest. Additionally, my paper will also investigate how Father Paneloux and Dr. Rieux use each other as springboards to regain their faith in their individual belief systems. With this in mind, I explain how Camus's depiction of Dr. Rieux's and Father Paneloux's relationship in *The Plague* illustrates the true scope and meaning of being a "force of good" for humanity.

Ananya Shah

**Dear Diary, Today I Became the Prophet of My Very Own Religion:
Finding New Faith in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower***

*Ooh, baby, do you know what that's worth?
Ooh, heaven is a place on earth*
—Belinda Carlisle, "Heaven Is a Place on Earth"

While the journal of a teenage girl may not be the most typical starting point of a new religious order, Lauren Olamina, the protagonist of Octavia Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*, is not exactly a normal teenage girl. For one thing, she lives in a dystopia. For another, she suffers from a condition called hyper empathy, where she feels the pain and pleasure of those around her. Lauren's religion, Earthseed, is centered around the idea that "God is change." My paper explores why Butler would choose to create an entirely new religion, and the implications of that religion being handwritten by a hyper-empathetic teenager. Lauren's visions for Earthseed help reveal what distinguishes

it from other religions: Earthseed insists that a better future must be worked towards via community action, not waited for after death. And, as Professor Peter Stillman points out, by encouraging people to come together, Lauren decreases her own vulnerability due to her condition as she gains group protection. Her personal stake in the religion's success is atypical of most prophets, but I believe that it is Earthseed and Lauren's self-reliant, community-focused oddities that are the key to their success.

Carsten Søndergaard

**Everything but the Lightning Bolt:
The Implicit Social Commentary of *The Bad Seed***

If you've seen that three-minute-long, unavoidable "Shirley Temple Little Darling Collection" commercial on TV, then you likely understand that 1930s child superstar Shirley Temple has been America's little sweetheart, serving as a symbol of purity and childlike innocence, for much of the last century. Now imagine a film, released in 1950s America, about a little girl whose appearance and behavior is inextricably linked to that of beloved Shirley, but instead of singing pretty songs and saving the day, she commits a string of brutal, greed-driven murders. Mervyn LeRoy's 1956 film *The Bad Seed* gave Americans a spitting image of everything they had known as ideal, and told them that their understanding was completely wrong. This interpretation of the film, however, is essentially unique in existing scholarship. Criticism of *The Bad Seed* fails to give it credit for both its poignant social commentary and its significance in film history, as it boldly defied the fixtures in place trying to dilute its message. In this paper, I analyze how the film's content circumvented the censorship rules of the time in order to achieve its nuanced critique of American society, thus giving it the credit it deserves as an important piece of cinema.

Abigail Sullivan

**Art, Environmentalism, and Education
in Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind***

I would like to make a film to tell children, "it is good to be alive."
—Hayao Miyazaki

How do you cope with pending environmental disaster? For many in education, the response has been to shift the focus of our science classes to environmental studies. Though this is helpful, research suggests that empathetic approaches are most effective at inspiring ecological action. My paper explores how Hayao Miyazaki's film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* embraces the tenets of ecological motivation. I put his film in dialogue with Roderick Fraizer Nash's plan for an effective defense of nature, and engage with numerous studies exploring people's motivation for environmental activism. I propose tenets that focus on promoting and teaching empathy with the environment to argue that this is most effectively done through art analysis, especially in the form of film. Through presenting audiences with deep themes, arresting visuals, and a subversive message, *Nausicaä* engages students of all ages in discourse about how we can more empathetically regard and treat our environment, and potentially inspire world-saving ecological action. My paper assesses how fantasy, wonder, narrative, and character-building come together in *Nausicaä* to create a nature-narrative for the ages, and how fantasy and art may well be the key to ecological success.

Structural Flaws

Thursday, April 23
6:30 p.m. - 7:45 p.m. PST

Moderated by Professor Vanessa Schwartz
Departments of Art History and History

Dilay Akcora

Perfect Mothers Are the Loneliest Liars: Christine Penmark's Detrimental Facade in *The Bad Seed*

Is there any adult who hasn't lied?
—Leroy, *The Bad Seed*

What do you do with a child born to kill? Don't answer that. What would their mother do? Suicide and infanticide seem like the most suitable options in the Oscar-winning 1956 horror film *The Bad Seed*. We see the "hysterical" mom Christine Penmark dealing with her daughter's murderous instincts and actions on her own—almost as a solo act. Rhoda's dad is away for work, and the neighbors can only see purity and innocence when they look at pretty little eight-year-old Rhoda Penmark—who undoubtedly sustains the facade of perfection that both Christine and Rhoda are desperate to keep. Despite how the film practically dangles solutions for Christine's loneliness when solving her daughter's problem—friends, crime experts, her husband—she lies to them all and deals with the issue internally. American studies scholar Perin Gurel states that this dishonesty is sparked from the singular and two-dimensional definition of motherhood cemented in *The Bad Seed*. These constructs succeed in emphasizing the universal stigma that a mother only has power within the private and immaculate comfort of her home. Christine clearly cannot overcome this motherly loneliness, as she inevitably becomes possessive to save herself from public ruin—and, of course, stop her child who's born to kill.

Rane Bieker

Derealizing the Real: *RoboCop*, Ethics, and Consumerism

Imagine that you've been in a horrible car accident. The doctors tell you that the only way they can save your life is to replace your heart with an artificial organ. It seems like an easy choice to make, but would you accept if you had to lose your limbs, or some aspect of your mental capacity? Regardless of where you draw the line, however, you are being given a choice. You have autonomy. Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* explores a scenario where corporations have taken this choice away from the individual. Alex Murphy's death, transformation, and new "life" as RoboCop reflect the dangers and fears surrounding this lack of ownership of the body. While critics claim that the movie's conclusion is unsatisfying and undermines any possible statements it could have made, I will argue the exact opposite. *RoboCop*, ending and all, speaks to the dangers overpowered corporations pose to our physical autonomy.

Liz Moerman

Passing* for Understanding: The Feedback Loop Between Representation and Policy in Nella Larsen's *Passing

We often have trouble understanding the things we do not immediately experience, much like Irene, a black woman, often has trouble even considering "normal" Clare's decision to pass as white in *Passing*. The concept of "Dunbar's number" explains why, stating that, biologically, we are only able to comprehend 150 people in our lifetimes, making it difficult to understand people that fall outside our circles. To form our opinions about outside groups, we must depend on, and thus fall fairly susceptible to, the way they are portrayed in the media. This clear significance of representation leads me to add to the current conversation about why people pass, which only cites policy. I argue that policy and representation exist in a feedback loop that ultimately impacts the social circumstances that make people like Clare pass. My paper shows the way this loop influences the events of the novel and Clare's decision to pass, investigating how Clare's husband's racist attitudes are a product of the Jim Crow laws' impact on films like *Birth of a Nation*, and explores how *Passing* itself feeds into this feedback loop to help create the social change needed for her to no longer have to pass.

Maria Tsiao

**Woah, Asexual Space Prostitution:
How "Aye, and Gomorrah" Explores Transgressive Discourse**

How does asexual space prostitution become socially acceptable? One answer can be found in Samuel Delany's science fiction story, "Aye, and Gomorrah." The sexually mutated protagonist serves as forced labor in a radioactive government project. This mutation is then fetishized and exploited on Earth, developing into a global market for androgynous child prostitution. These unconventional elements in Delany's story can be identified as transgressions; ideas that develop beyond the status quo. Drawing parallels between his reality and fiction, Delany produces social commentary to bring significance to his transgressive ideas. He then introduces a second concept to layer with transgression: discourse. Focused on the limitations of specific language in communicating ideas, Delany subverts social acceptability through an exploration of literary boundaries. This weaponization of the normal constraints of science fiction enables him to dismiss traditional expectations of sexual desire, class hierarchy, and sexuality in his narrative. I will argue how Delany pairs transgression and discourse to form a vehicle for literary social change.

Ambrose Zhu

**Utopia Through Dystopia:
Hope, Fear and Moral Choice in Octavia Butler's "Amnesty"**

*...though we perceive no great unquietness in one or two men,
yet we may be well assured that their singular passions are parts of the seditious roaring of a troubled nation.*
—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

Dystopian tales are often regarded as warnings against undesirable progressions to society's future. However, Octavia Butler's dystopia in her short story "Amnesty," stemming from the invasion of Earth by shrubby-like aliens, known as the Communities, that are miraculously resistant to any human weapon, doesn't quite fit this mold. I posit that "Amnesty" reveals a deeper purpose of dystopia: to uncover what we truly hope for in utopia. Drawing on political analysis of Rousseauist and Hobbesian social contracts, applying them to literary utopias, and using them to offer a critique of the control mechanism of fear in "Amnesty," this paper will reveal the aspirations of both those in power and the subjugated populace in this dystopia. Butler's story serves as a perfect microcosm of how societies draw on humanity's core duality—of its highest hopes and deepest fears. "Amnesty" is a story about making moral choices in the bleakest situations, and reveals the purest form of the utopian quest in struggling for a better social contract. Rather than utopia as purely an unachievable no-place, my paper argues that "Amnesty" finds a real purpose for literary utopia in pointing the way for an achievable utopic endeavor outside of literature.