

# SOMETHING MUST BE DONE

“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”

— Leo Tolstoy

“The greatest mistake of the movement has been trying to organize a sleeping people around specific goals.  
You have to wake the people up first, then you’ll get action.”

— Malcolm X

“Our masters have not heard the people’s voice for generations and it is much,  
much louder than they care to remember.”

— Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta*

“Dogs are the leaders of the planet. If you see two life forms, one of them’s making a poop,  
the other one’s carrying it for him, who would you assume is in charge?”

— Jerry Seinfeld

“Better a good journalist than a poor assassin.”

— Jean-Paul Sartre

“I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand.  
It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what.”

— Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

“You’re sitting at your computer working on something really important. And then you think, Man, I wonder if *Home Alone 2*  
made more money than *Home Alone 1*. I gotta look into this. NOW.”

— Aziz Ansari

“A poet’s work [is] to name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments,  
shape the world and stop it from going to sleep.”

— Salman Rushdie

“He who sees a need and waits to be asked for help is as unkind as if he had refused it.”

— Dante Alighieri

“Everything’s amazing right now, and nobody’s happy.”

— Louis C.K.

“Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some.”

— Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

“And oftentimes excusing of a fault doth make the fault worse by the excuse.”

— Shakespeare, *King John*

“Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.”

— Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

“If you can’t fly then run, if you can’t run then walk, if you can’t walk then crawl,  
but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

“I’m capable of living in the moment. And I’m especially capable of living in the moment of sitting  
on my sofa and watching other people’s moments.”

— Samantha Bee

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 of academic rigor that encourages exciting and vibrant discussion among its community. Each year approximately 200 outstanding freshmen from all majors participate in a 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 **Something Must Be Done** to be presented as part of a panel. Each panel is composed of five to six students, with a faculty member serving as the panel's chair and respondent. A question and answer session follows the presentation of papers in each panel. Topics are reflective of students' various disciplines and interests and focus on issues ranging from politics to popular culture. Possible themes include revolution; progress; protest; power to the people; crisis; stagnation; -isms and -ologies; fixed/fluid identities; aid; self-help; intervention; evolution; war and peace; conflict and resolution; political, social, cultural, and artistic movements; rise and fall; procrastination or go-time; law and justice; revenge; courage; technology; love and lust; truth and revelation; lies, white or otherwise; the press and media; sustainability and alternatives; the final countdown. . .

This conference is a call to action, a shout for change. To be, or not to be, right?

## **Student Conference Coordinating Committee**

Remaya Campbell  
Jinny Choi  
Mary Coates  
Aisha Counts  
Caleb Hudson  
Amy Hutto  
Christine Jarjour  
Kevin Jiang

Amanda Keys  
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Michael O'Krent  
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Shanelle Sua  
Alyssa Tsenter  
Rachel Udabe  
Madeleine Vogel

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

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## Tuesday, April 12, 2016 - USC University Club at King Stoops Hall

4:00 p.m.	<p><b>“Something Must Be Done About Us”</b>  <b>Keynote Address</b> by Steven L. Lamy                  Vice Dean for Academic Programs, Professor of International Relations  <i>Scriptorium</i></p>	
5:00 p.m.	<b>Dinner</b> - <i>Main Dining Room</i>	
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## Wednesday, April 13, 2016 - USC University Club at King Stoops Hall

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# One Size Fits All

Moderated by Professor Paul Lerner, Department of History

Tuesday, April 12  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Catrina Hacker**

## **Absent Parents, Ruthless Children: The Consequences of Parental Inaction in *Geek Love***

Sigmund Freud once said, “Children are completely egotistic; they feel their needs intensely and strive ruthlessly to satisfy them.” Today, most developmental psychologists agree that in early developmental stages children have an egotistical view of the world. They can only see things from their own perspective and lack the ability to truly communicate with others because they cannot understand other views of the world. The only means by which they can transition out of this egocentric worldview is by learning social norms, a responsibility that lies with their parents. These social norms provide a baseline for what certain behaviors mean and how to communicate corresponding feelings, so that we can overcome our egotistical minds and understand what others are trying to say. In her book, *Geek Love*, Katherine Dunn highlights the pervasive consequences that ensue when parents neglect to teach their children these social norms. The Binewski children helplessly struggle to understand others’ actions and to communicate their own. Ultimately, they suffer because their limited life skills keep them alienated from society and trapped by their need for instant gratification of their every whim. This estrangement is inherently destructive because their innate desire to belong to a group of similar people is left unsatisfied.

**Luiza Hauskrecht**

## **Hegemonic Masculinity During the Harlem Renaissance: The Limitations to Sexual Fluidity Found in Nella Larsen’s *Passing***

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement, spanned the 1920s and 1930s and was marked by new visions of social and economic opportunity, and greater fluidity in sexuality and gender constructions. Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* is narrated by Irene, an African American woman living during the Harlem Renaissance, and revolves around her relationship with her friend Clare, an African American woman “passing” for white. While scholarly work on this novel often focuses on Irene’s sexualized relationship with Clare, I will be exploring the potential for homosexuality during the Harlem Renaissance by applying Raewyn Connell’s theories of hegemonic masculinity to Brian, Irene’s husband. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the cultural practices that promote the social dominance of heterosexual males, through actions that “embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, [requiring] all other men to position themselves in relation to it.” Although the term is most frequently used to describe the submissive female role, I will use it in reference to the subordinate social position of homosexuals during the early 20th century. At first Brian appears to adhere to the norms of hegemonic masculinity, yet it is possible to identify homoerotic subtext centered on Brian’s sexuality. By doing this, Larsen urges the reader to recognize the instability in Brian’s patriarchy caused by the wave of new ideas brought upon by the Harlem Renaissance. But what is Larsen’s intention in doing this and what is she trying to say about gender hierarchy and the potential for sexual exploration during this time period? By analyzing Brian’s deviations from the masculine cultural norms along with the negative attitudes towards homosexuality found in the novel, I will argue that Larsen is critiquing the limitations to sexual fluidity caused by heteronormative social constructions.

**Julianna Keller**

## **“Hi, Mom. It’s Me”: Coming Out as a History of Self Reevaluation**

Do you define yourself, or does society define you? When do you become the most indicative iteration of yourself? What is gender and how does it compare to sexuality? In the creative personal essay “Gender Trouble

on Mother's Day," Jord/ana Rosenberg shows the process of coming out to their mother as comparable to reading and understanding Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. This parallel expresses that Rosenberg's sexual identity and the content of *Gender Trouble* merely required time and repeated reevaluation for Rosenberg to discover their true natures. In this presentation, I look at Rosenberg's journey towards their mother's recognition as it relates to their repeated close reading and ultimate comprehension of *Gender Trouble*, using a passage from *Gender Trouble* itself. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler proposes that gender is a performance to embody unachievable norms, and that identity, or the illusion thereof, is the history of the changing attempts to perform gender. Through the lens of this passage, we see Rosenberg's search for understanding Butler's work and an embodiment of their own sexual identity as similar performances of interpretation within the seemingly definitive boundaries of *Gender Trouble*.

**Katlyn Lee**

### **When Content Rebels against Form**

Modern architects often adhere to the principle of "form follows function," where a building's shape mirrors its purpose. Similarly, this basic concept is also applied in literature when writers craft form and voice to supplement or intensify the content of their works. However, in her novel *The Tropic of Orange*, Karen Tei Yamashita deviates from this convention and creates a dissonance between content and form—that is, between the characters' experiences in the novel and the voice they carry in their respective narrations. Specifically examining Gabriel Balboa and Emi, a couple in the novel, this essay explores how each character's ending in *The Tropic of Orange* clashes with the distinct language associated with each character. The discord that Yamashita employs in her work not only grabs the reader's attention, but also alerts the reader of a pressing need for individualistic malleability and dynamism in society.

**Jade Matias Bell**

### **Lethal Voices: Narrative as Weapon in *The Handmaid's Tale***

This paper examines voice as a crucial element of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, presenting the novel as a series of competing spoken narratives and citing the act of storytelling as one of both rebellion and oppression. Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality is also analyzed as a narrative in its own right, and the subjugation of women by patriarchal ideals is reimagined not as a series of brute actions but as a complex story woven into the fabric of a society. By conceptualizing *The Handmaid's Tale* not only as a series of "Handmaid's Tales" vying for the authoritative status of fact but as a narrative that challenges our ideas of who can speak, on what, and why, the essay studies the power our voices have to challenge, subdue, and silence each other.

**Neal Mulani**

### **I'm Not Your Princess: Queering Heterosexual Norms and Expectations in *Ex Machina***

A societal and cinematic norm, the "damsel in distress" stereotype, as well as its overarching patriarchal ideology, has become ubiquitous in modern American film. The film *Ex Machina* initially makes use of this trope by creating the notion that A.I. model Ava is dependent upon protagonist Caleb to escape from the home of her creator, Nathan. However, my paper, in conversation with Frederick L. Greene's applications of queer theory, argues how through precise visual means (composition, lighting, and mise-en-scène), the film deconstructs this ostensible endorsement of patriarchal norms. By creating a cognitive dissonance between our patriarchal expectations and the reality of the film, *Ex Machina* encourages a "tension between...the style and the substance"; in other words, while most of the film's literary elements play into the belittlement of women by presenting Ava as imprisoned and subjugated, the film's subversive visual design empowers her, reaffirming her authority over her male counterparts before the film culminates in her deceitful escape. My paper demonstrates not only how this tension between the literary and visual elements queers the validity of male power and heterosexual norms, but also how it almost forces us to see these constructs as "problematic."

# One Way or Another

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

Tuesday, April 12  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Carnegie

**Catalina Acebal-Acevedo**

## **The Cheater's Guide to Love: Commitment, Infidelity, and Female Objectification in *This Is How You Lose Her***

This essay will explore the theme of infidelity prevalent throughout Junot Díaz's book *This Is How You Lose Her* by comparing it to literary scholar Judith Butler's essay "Performative Reflections on Love and Commitment." Butler's ideas are centered around the vague concept of the renewability of commitment, one that may initially make sense but avoids factoring in the idea of cheating and how it complicates this renewability. The men in Díaz's work appear to follow Butler in that cheat and then renew their "commitment" to their wives and their girlfriends on each consecutive occasion. This investigation into the idea of commitment and infidelity within the minds of these male characters unveils a dangerous paradox that allows them to avoid ownership of their actions and results in the dehumanization and objectification of their female counterparts.

**Sarah Berry**

## **Violence against Women in Kate Atkinson's *When Will There Be Good News?***

Kate Atkinson's *When Will There Be Good News?* explores the aftermath of violence against women through the character of Joanna Mason. Although Joanna witnessed her family's murder as a child, Atkinson does not portray her as a victim. Instead, Atkinson creates a character who has not only overcome incredible adversity, but who has used that adversity to make herself stronger. Joanna is a woman who is capable of saving herself, a woman who has created a successful life after her trauma. Or so it would appear. Under this façade of success, evidence of Joanna's trauma permeates all aspects of her being. Her conscious effort to defy her role as victim, and therefore overcome the violence of her past, instead confirms the continuing effects of trauma on her. These effects endure, and although the victims of such violence are incredibly strong, these women will be defined by their traumatic experiences for the rest of their lives.

**Jonathan Horwitz**

## **Baseball: Church of Numbers**

After a trip to the ballpark, we will never forget seeing amazing feats of athleticism: a home run, a strikeout, or a diving catch. These flashes of brilliance draw fans through the gates time and again, year after year. All the while, data analysts are reducing all of these athletic showcases to numbers, supposedly to field better teams. The result is baseball's delicate equilibrium between stories and numbers, art and science. In this paper, I explain the history of baseball's balancing act, and I lay it side-by-side with Henry Waugh's dice game from Robert Coover's 1968 novel *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (UBA), a league Waugh exclusively invents, manages, and patronizes. While the UBA at first appears to have striking similarities to real baseball, it unravels to reveal a rotten core of secrecy, exclusivity, corruption, and chance. The critical social experience that is going to a ballpark or watching a game with friends is non-existent. The vital statistics are manipulated and misused. I explain why the UBA fails and why baseball will not. Essentially, baseball cannot be reduced to a dice game; at its crux, it is a social endeavor. No matter how much we may want to reduce baseball to its core quantitative features, social endeavors simply do not condense this way. When we think we can do so, we overlook a crucial part of baseball.

Rachel Krusenoski

**Prescribing Pathology:  
Mental Illness in a Society Obsessed with Labels**

This essay analyzes the uncanny similarities between cosmetic body modification and mental illness. Susan Bordo's "Material Girl" and Chuck Palahniuk's *Survivor* both identify deceptions in the way we think about body modification, mental illness, and the success of their respective treatments. Looking at a person's cosmetic procedures as isolated conditions distracts from realizing how they may connect to a larger problem. The same can be understood for mental illness. Palahniuk's satirical critique of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* calls to light a serious lack of treatment for patients who are cheated by this approach to mental health in modern psychology. The crucial force behind both Bordo's and Palahniuk's explanations of this problem is the culture within which people are forced to function. Labels give a false sense of security and a sense of normalization. Finding happiness or a treatment, then, has less to do with the body modifier or mental illness patient, but rather with a need to do something about their environment.

Divya Sripathy

**Tearing Apart the Patriarchal Fabric:  
The False Truth of Social Constructs in *The Descent of Alette* and "The Laugh of the Medusa"**

Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette* illuminates the need for women to discover their own identities in order to dismantle the patriarchal values that monopolize society's formulated standards; this self-discovery is exactly what Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" encourages women to pursue through writing. But in a world that is filled with social constructs that define the woman's identity, what does it take for a woman to discover herself for who she truly is and rightfully reclaim her own place in society? This paper examines the process of discovering and developing the woman's identity outside the patriarchal sphere of influence. That crucial step of introspection is what gives her the inner strength and empowerment to confront the patriarchal world and successfully demand the respect and autonomy that she deserves.

# Power Surge

Moderated by Professor Daniel Richter, Department of Classics

Tuesday, April 12  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Gutenberg

**Kyra Brown**

## **Race, Rights, and Revenge: Racial Profiling in Richard Price's *Lush Life***

This essay discusses the highly sensitive and controversial subject of racial profiling in police departments, showing how its practice can be both extremely helpful and extremely horrific, depending how and when it is used. The novel *Lush Life* brings this issue to attention using two opposing sets of police officers—one pair who uses racial profiling to effectively help find a murderer and one pair who uses it as an excuse to harass undeserving minorities who have committed no crimes. This problem spans far beyond fiction, and prevails extensively in our world today. My essay recognizes this controversy, and suggests that perhaps it is not the convention of racial profiling that is the problem, but rather its execution. Further, I argue that police departments should reform the practice of racial profiling in order to maintain equality without sacrificing security.

**Maddie Hengst**

## **Crisis in Language: The Politics of Gender Identity and Linguistic Practice in *The Descent of Alette***

This paper seeks to interrogate the relationship of identity politics and linguistic practice relating to gender in Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette*, and is informed by analysis of Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender* and Riki Anne Wilchins' *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender*. While Butler and Notley both critique the lack of a distinct and essential womanhood, Wilchins challenges the necessity of such an identity, and even goes as far as to question identity itself as a restrictive construct. While ultimately *The Descent of Alette* reveals that a distinct female linguistic identity cannot be attained within current conventions of language, it is through these texts that we discover a problematic linguistic practice within heteronormative patriarchy: the reliance upon "the deviant" in order to define and maintain the exclusive "norm."

**Niaje Morgan**

## **American Crime: Born While Black**

*It was the last day of school, and I was walking with my dad, preparing to leave. Suddenly, he paused, looked at me intently and said, "Son, you're a black male, and that's two strikes against you." To the general public, anything that I did would be perceived as malicious and deserving of severe punishment and I had to govern myself accordingly. I was seven years old.*

— Robert Stephens, Jazmine Hughes' "What Black Parents Tell Their Sons About the Police"

Though African Americans account for approximately thirteen percent of the U.S. population, on average they make up roughly forty percent of the nation's prison population. In 2015, over one hundred African Americans died at the hands of law enforcement—nearly two a week. These statistics are not the result of a criminality inherent to the Black community; rather they are disgustingly indicative of a system resolved in the vilification of melanin and the preservation of a white-supremacist status quo. In short, the assertion that America has transitioned into "post-racial" is mistaken at best, willfully ignorant at worst. Yes, the President of the United States is Black, but so are the plethora of unarmed, lifeless bodies lining the nation's streets. In the wake of Ferguson and Mizzou, Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice, John Crawford III and Eric Garner, White America, the authoritative voice in the nation's narrative, must acknowledge the label of "post-racial" for the fallacy that it is. Using the Obama era as the sole measure of racial progress in America, as so many often do, is not only invalidating the struggles of African



American community but also unbecoming of a nation proclaimed to be dedicated to forward progress. Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* is a coming-of-age tale of a young Black male's journey through self-execration and anti-Blackness to reach racial validation. The protagonist, Gunnar Kaufman, moves from the "zinc-oxide" whiteness of Santa Monica to the "suffocating ghetto" of Downtown Los Angeles, and is forced to confront the reality of his Blackness—to reconcile that, in this society, blackness is often stereotypes, inferiority, and injustice at the hands of those sworn to protect. Through highlighting such circumstance and placing Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* in conversation with Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, I aim to facilitate discussion about the current state of race relations in America, particularly between Black America and an increasingly militarized Police Institution. By closely examining how hyper-criminalization of African Americans acts as both cause and consequence of a mass incarceration system that disproportionately targets them, I raise questions as to where society's markers of progress lie. From heavier policing to heavier sentencing, what assumptions are really to be made when the only options for the Black community seem to be the school-to-prison pipeline or memorialization in a hashtag? As this country confoundingly moves into a future reminiscent of a haunting past—or perhaps a past that was never left, but is slowly being unveiled—my paper will attempt to add discourse to the ongoing discussion of just what it means to be a Black person in American society.

**Sama Shah**

**One Race, the Human Race?  
Xenophobia and Haunting in *White Is for Witching***

Helen Oyeyemi's novel *White Is for Witching* comments on race and racism in England through the xenophobic views of 29 Barton Road, the house in which the white main characters reside. The novel depicts the haunting racism that the secondary characters, primarily Ore, an African adoptee, and Tijana, a Kosovan refugee, experience in relation to the largely ignorant white characters. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon asserts that haunting "is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life." For Gordon, haunting is when memories of an oppressive and inescapable past are brought into mainstream consciousness, producing a something-must-be-done response. However, Oyeyemi's novel reveals that these "abusive systems" have always been felt by the communities being oppressed, being haunted, thereby rendering Gordon's views more focused on the consciousness of the oppressor rather than the experiences of the oppressed. With minority groups left to struggle with these terrifying and repetitive "abusive systems," with those in power remaining ignorant and untouched, Oyeyemi's novel leads us to question: What does it take to get people who need to be haunted, haunted? What does it take to inspire change?

**Jessica Tang**

**"That Little Bitch Marla Singer":  
Manifestations of Misogyny in *Fight Club***

Knock knock! Who's there? Velvet lips. Burning cigarette. Translucent skin. It's Marla Singer from *Fight Club*. What is it about Marla that makes her so bad? *Fight Club* is a dark film in which the narrator, Jack, forms an underground fight club with his dangerous, violent, imaginary friend, Tyler Durden. To Jack, Tyler is the pure embodiment of a patriarchal status quo, and femme fatale Marla Singer poses a threat to their relationship. I argue that Marla is more than a threat: Marla is the sole catalyst behind all of the themes of *Fight Club*. While many critical analyses of *Fight Club* focus on the themes of existentialism, capitalism, and masculinity to explain Jack's psyche, I engage in an ongoing dialogue with critic Clare Davis's "Embracing Alterity: Rethinking Female Otherness in Contemporary Cinema," to contend that such obvious themes are simply side effects of Jack's anxieties about women. In order to cope with his misogyny, Jack invents Marla—femininity—and immediately invents Tyler—hyper masculinity—to combat Marla. I argue that the solution to Jack's insanity is his dissolution of Tyler and embracing of Marla. Jack is searching for something to silence his demon that is Tyler Durden; but, little does he know, that something is as simple and as complicated as "That Little Bitch Marla Singer."

# Separation Anxiety

Moderated by Professor Bruce Smith, Department of English and  
School of Dramatic Arts

Tuesday, April 12  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

Jocelyn Clancy

## **Motherhood, Alienated: The Separation of the Physical and the Emotional Aspects of Motherhood in *Aliens***

In the movie *Aliens*, directed by James Cameron, the characters face parasitic creatures that seem completely inhuman in the way they inhabit and grow inside of human beings. But isn't this, as one character states, "where babies come from"? What are the differences, if there are any, between this alien intrusion and human pregnancy and childbirth? This paper attempts to compare the emotional, often nurturing aspects of motherhood with the physical, often horrifying aspects of labor in the context of the movie *Aliens*. The stark differences between the two speak to Adrienne Rich's work *Of Woman Born*, in which she explores how societal influences cause women to be afraid of their own biological processes. This paper examines the implications of something so close to pregnancy being depicted in a horror setting, and what this shows about how society views female bodies and the life that they can create.

Lauren Clarke

## **Lost in Translation: How Love and Language Resist Change in Díaz's *This Is How You Lose Her***

It is because of the body's ability to exist in the spoken word that language and love must exist as the last defenses against the dominant culture. Without something to say and someone to listen, people will no longer be able to retain their cultural identity and will, in a sense, lose themselves. Looking at Junot Díaz's *This Is How You Lose Her*, this paper will address the significant roles that love and language serve in the preservation of cultural identity. In a world that often prides itself on slavish adherence to cultural norms, love and language allow the characters in Díaz's short stories to preserve elements of their Dominican culture while living in a strange, unfamiliar place. I will be using literary scholar Judith Butler's characterization of love and language as forces that have the ability to define and alter the body to argue that love and language must remain vestiges of cultural identity in a world of mass assimilation.

Bowen Du

## **Building Homes: Extremes of Vigilance in *White Is for Witching***

*[This house] is a monster.*  
— Helen Oyeyemi, *White Is for Witching*

In her article "The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space," anthropologist Mary Douglas describes home as a "pattern of regular doings," organized both spatially and temporally. To achieve this organization, we must exert "vigilance" to maintain our homes and to prevent subversion of them. The sentient house at 29 Barton Road in Helen Oyeyemi's novel *White Is for Witching* exemplifies this vigilance, and it, rather than its inhabitants, is the active agent in crafting itself into a home for the Silver family. Its actions, however, take Douglas's ideas to an extreme that she could not have envisioned. The house's patterns of organization revolve around whiteness and the matrilineal side of the Silver family, and it takes violent action against both black outsiders and the Silver women, whom the house wishes to keep close. In the end, the house's racist, xenophobic violence, which mirrors larger trends of social violence in the novel, only undermines its own vigilance, and in this way Oyeyemi implies the eventual destruction of the Silver family. Thus, Oyeyemi indicates that something must be done to counter vigilance that has gone awry, lest our homes, both domestic and national, be torn apart.

**Julienna Law**

**Are You Not Entertained:  
The Violence in Vision and Minority Misrepresentation**

How do we represent minorities truthfully? Have we really stopped thinking of them as freaks? In my paper, I examine Coco Fusco's documentary *The Couple in the Cage* as a critique of stereotypical Western perceptions of minorities and indigenous people. Reminiscent of circus sideshows and human zoos, Fusco and fellow artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña pose as Amerindians in an ethnological museum exhibit—cage included—to gauge audience reactions to their exaggerated portrayals of native people. Through Donna Haraway's theory of vision, I argue that these Western viewers are comparable to the "unmarked," those typically "Man and White," who exercise their colonial gaze to assume power. Establishing vision's potential for violence, Fusco then goes a step further and reverses this gaze of power by parodying Western interpretations of minorities. Ultimately, with the dehumanizing cage performance, Fusco calls for viewers to confront their role as conqueror and leave their freak show mentality towards minorities where it belongs: in the past.

**Kiran Parwani**

**Are You Still Watching Me?  
The Easy Alienation of Community Members**

What is "normal"? If the majority of people share a characteristic, is it considered normal? Are the minority then deemed "abnormal"? They are deemed different by the majority. Although the practice of looking is primitive and innate, it can be harmful to others. In *A Complicated Kindness*, Nomi has lived her life under the close watch of her fellow Mennonites and American tourists. Both groups of people expect her to follow the doctrines of the Mennonites; if she does not, she is scrutinized. The constant watch she feels from her Mennonite community and those outside their town, "Americans," becomes a form of control and makes her feel like an outsider, and in a similar situation to that of a prisoner in a panopticon as described in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. The only way she feels she can let go is by rebelling against the values of her community, creating an endless cycle of unwanted attention and unconscious control. Nomi's alienation by the immediate and larger community leads to her ostracization and the cultivation of indirect control highlighted by the similar control described in *Discipline and Punish*.

# The View from the Top

Moderated by Professor Bruce Zuckerman, Department of Religion

Tuesday, April 12  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

**Meghna Chakraborty**

## **Reinvention on the Road: Channeling Self-Change by Breaking Societal Barriers in *Thelma and Louise***

Simply put, changing the world begins with changing oneself. Changing oneself, however, is much more complex and seemingly nonviable, especially for those with low self-esteem or low socioeconomic status. In the film *Thelma and Louise*, eponymous character Thelma becomes a fugitive, and is initially impetuous and childish, having faced limited opportunities her entire life. The “Social Theory of Disability” suggests that life choices are driven by people’s upbringing and perceived place in society, but that when these societal barriers are removed, they realize the capacity for choice and control that they have over themselves. Likewise, Thelma undergoes self-determining behavioral changes after facing compromising situations on the road that cause her to understand how her actions impact not only her own life, but the lives of those close to her. This paper argues that with exposure on the road, people are no longer confined by their socioeconomic backgrounds and are able to reinvent themselves by finally assuming control. Mobility acts as a force that deconstructs people’s notions of their societal statuses and therefore breaks down the psychological barriers causing their “disability.” This paper also discusses how prejudiced attitudes towards those who are socioeconomically “disabled” sustain the barriers preventing self-change, and how these attitudes themselves can, and must, change.

**Hanna Fahsholtz**

## **Inhumanity Inverted: The Function of the Uncanny in Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go***

Sigmund Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” defines the uncanny as something that is frightening or unnerving as a result of being simultaneously familiar and alien. In *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro deliberately weaves a sense of the uncanny throughout his book as he explains how cloned students are isolated from society and raised knowing that their ultimate purpose is to donate all of their organs. Initially, this sensation can be attributed to the clones themselves: they are virtually identical to naturally-conceived humans, but their artificial origins and emotional distance from themselves and their peers makes them seem simultaneously human and inhuman. However, this essay argues that when viewed through the lens of Freud’s text, the aversion ordinary humans feel to the clones actually results from their repression of their moral objections to cloning. By recognizing the ordinary humans’ repression of their own ethical misgivings, my essay demonstrates that the truly uncanny and inhuman entity within the book is not the clones but society itself. It also identifies the parallels that can be drawn between the exploitation of clones in *Never Let Me Go* and our own society’s similar exploitation of vulnerable groups.

**Zora Kidron**

## **Something Must Be Done: Social Violence, Haunting, and Urgency in Helen Oyeyemi’s *White Is for Witching***

In her novel *White Is for Witching*, Helen Oyeyemi tells the story of 29 Barton Road, a racist, xenophobic house that rejects its non-white guests and entraps its white residents. The cruelty that the house imposes on its occupants is reflected in the surrounding city of Dover, where immigrants fleeing parlous conditions are met with violence. The novel overlaps with and exposes flaws in sociologist Avery Gordon’s theory that haunting occurs when social violence that has “been in [one’s] blind spot comes into view,” thus “producing a something-to-be-done.” That is not

the case for Miranda and Eliot Silver, the twins who occupy 29 Barton Road. While they resist their socially violent house when it threatens the people they love, they scarcely react to the widespread social violence in their immediate community. I will analyze *White Is for Witching* to challenge Gordon's claim that mere awareness of social violence is enough to haunt and provoke a "something-to-be-done." Instead, I contend that, as Miranda and Eliot demonstrate, social violence must threaten one's personal relationships in order for a person to be haunted and inspired to take resistive action.

**Lauren Phillips**

**An American Religion:  
Capitalist Christianity in *Survivor***

Capitalism and Christianity are two of the most important ideologies that have shaped American values since our country's founding. However, these two sets of ideals have fundamental contradictions that somehow coexist in American society without actually being reconciled. Chuck Palahniuk highlights this essential value misalignment in his novel *Survivor*, the story of former suicide-cult member Tender Branson, who rises to prominence as America's most successful televangelist. My paper examines how Tender seeks to reconcile the Christian values he preaches with the capitalist methods he uses to promote those values. Specifically, I will be using social critic Jean Baudrillard's ideas about branding and the nature of advertising language in order to expose the gaps in Tender's seemingly unified ideology. Ultimately I believe these gaps reveal fundamental fault lines in our overall American ideology that we often choose to ignore.

**Terek Rutherford**

**The Hidden Disease:  
Uncovering Systems of Undisturbed Capitalist Oppression within Postmodernism**

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* follows Deckard, an L.A. police officer, as he attempts to track down and "retire" A.I.s—known as replicants—which have illegally come back to a dystopian, cyberpunk Los Angeles in the year 2019. While the film invites the interrogation of many issues such as race, culture, and gender differences, this paper will critically examine the ways in which the film reinforces the postmodern tendency, as elucidated in the writings of Fredric Jameson, to ignore the role of capitalism in shaping oppression. By specifically focusing on the character of Eldon Tyrell, the only true member of a landowning bourgeoisie of the film, I reveal how Tyrell's potentially immoral practice of selling human-like replicant tools which reinforce white, western domination are the end result of a system of capital accumulation. Further, this examination allows for an effective critique of modern political movements which often acknowledge that something must be done without critically examining whether their solutions are superficial. In this way postmodern thought, both in literature and in action, ignores the root evil of capitalism and creates ways in which it can elude revolution and reform by hiding behind superstructural forms of oppression.

# Barriers to Entry

Moderated by Stephen Pasqualina, Department of English

Tuesday, April 12  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Angela Chen**

## **The Seventh Session: Male Gaze and Othering in *Ex Machina***

How do pervasive storylines in films reinforce the marginalization of women? Claire Davis, feminist theorist, argues that the patriarchy tries to neutralize women by “Othering” them: reducing them to objects instead of developing them as people. This forms the basis for the premise of the film *Ex Machina*, in which Caleb, the film’s protagonist, is tasked with assessing the humanity of Ava, an A.I. android. Although it would seem that being granted personhood would be empowering, Caleb’s attitude towards Ava suggests that women are just as powerless against exploitation by hegemonic masculinity as mere objects are. At first, it seems like the film uses the same sexist “damsel in distress” plot that we have come to expect from Hollywood. However, the film ultimately reverses those tropes with Ava’s final triumph, and forces us to examine the extent to which Caleb, and we as viewers, are complicit in Ava’s exploitation. I will examine how *Ex Machina* exposes the lingering stereotypes of women in media in order to criticize the toxic limitations of imposing identities upon women, thus highlighting the need for female characters that exist as fully fleshed-out people instead of as vehicles for male character development.

**Ritt Givens**

## **The Risk of Righteousness: Replicants and the Implications of Advanced Humanoid Technology**

In Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, humanoid replicants are portrayed as not only having sentience, but emotions. When Roy Batty, a replicant that has continually exhibited cold indifference, suddenly displays a level of self-awareness and empathy, viewers are challenged to assess the treatment of these beings we create. Through Roy Batty’s character in particular, I argue that the uncanny responses anticipated by the film are central to broader considerations regarding the advancement of artificial intelligence. As A.I. technology becomes stronger and the potential for sentient non-human beings develops further, the film continues to be timely in its ability to articulate the many issues regarding new beings we are now close to being able to create. Does sentience require autonomy? Are humanoids endowed with the same unalienable rights we hold so dear? Roy was constructed to be superior to humanity both mentally and physically and if given full control of his life is it possible that he would undermine the society that he was constructed by? If these questions are left unanswered or answered foolishly, I argue that we may find ourselves travelling along a slippery slope on which the development of technology leads to the subversion of humanity.

**Jong Su Kim**

## **Between “I” and “You”: Distance and Love in Spike Jonze’s *Her***

With the simple words, “I love you,” the vast distance that separates two individuals is collapsed in an instant, and the gulf of difference between varying backgrounds and lifestyles, thoughts and opinions, is in that moment, bridged. Judith Butler, in her essay “Performative Reflections on Love and Commitment,” posits that love collapses the distance between “I” and “You” as “a modality that registers the full expanse of our relations.” Our common experiences—the laughs shared and the tears shed—can navigate distance, allowing widely disparate people to come together in love. But in Spike Jonze’s film *Her*, the distance between main characters Theodore and Samantha—whether physical, emotional, temporal or developmental—proves far too vast. He is a human, while she is a machine. And yet, it is not distance itself that breaks apart these two lovers. In Jonze’s film, we see that far, remote distances

can be navigated, but only through a common understanding of and a shared appreciation for Butler's "full expanse of relations." By viewing distance and love through Butler's theoretical lens, we can find hope for crossing the far-flung expanse, and, while Theodore and Samantha failed, perhaps we can succeed.

**Shea Macready**

**The Fall of the Fortress:  
Attacking Structural Oppression in Los Angeles**

*In this city, you have to risk your life; go farther, and pay more to be poor.*  
— Buzzworm, *Tropic of Orange*

As the character Buzzworm states in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, the lower class of Los Angeles must constantly fight for survival. As someone who grew up in South Central and is now an advocate for the community, Buzzworm can relate to the many hoops people must jump through. However, his key contribution to this community is serving as a liaison between the isolated world of the poor and the wealthy, often being the only voice calling for change. Why is it so difficult to enact reform in urban settings even with these calls for a better quality of life? I argue that there is a structural prejudice to cities, especially Los Angeles, that makes it nearly impossible to provide for the well-being of the impoverished, as Mike Davis explains in his essay "Fortress L.A." Davis merges social issues with the realm of city planning and development to establish a concrete framework as to why inner-city problems persist. If society is to progress, there must be comprehensive reform of current metropolitan government and city planning policies, as the current system is ill-suited for any form of urban improvement.

**Lilla Spanyi**

**"Homesick, Home Sick":  
The Experience of Being Unwanted in *White Is for Witching***

Being a ghost is being in-between; it means not belonging to one place anymore but not belonging to another place yet. Helen Oyeyemi's novel *White Is for Witching* explores this liminal state of being through the concept of home, a site of belonging and protection from "otherness." Set against the backdrop of the white cliffs of Dover, which are both a gateway to a new world and a guard against outsiders, the novel portrays its immigrants and refugees as ghosts who haunt England after rejecting their countries of origin, only to be rejected from their new home in return. According to sociologist Avery Gordon, haunting is a result of painful social violence, an occurrence in which people who are meant to be invisible show up without an intention to leave, and whose appearance produces an incentive for something to be done in those who are haunted. Yet, in Oyeyemi's novel, it is not only the ones who are haunted who call for action, but also those haunting. In this way, a set of competing "somethings-to-be-done" emerges. The desire of the British to expel the immigrants and the desperate need of these immigrants to stay and belong collide, ultimately making it impossible for the novel's ghosts to escape their perpetual state of unwantedness.

# Hello from the Other Side

Moderated by Michelle Brittan, Department of English

Tuesday, April 12  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Carnegie

**Edith Conn**

## **“I’m Going Down against Her”: Xenophobia and Vigilance in Helen Oyeyemi’s *White Is for Witching***

Social theorist and anthropologist Mary Douglas defines home as “a pattern of regular doings,” and she argues that the home’s spatial and temporal organization is created by “those committed to the idea of home” who must “exert continual vigilance in its behalf.” While Douglas is thinking of the domestic home, in Helen Oyeyemi’s novel *White Is for Witching*, both 29 Barton Road and Great Britain itself function as homes according to Douglas’s definition—and disturbing ones at that. Spatially and temporally organized, protected with misguided vigilance, both the Silver family’s house, 29 Barton Road, and Great Britain are marked by anti-immigrant sentiments and attacks, revealing the xenophobic and violent dangers of “home.” This vigilance is assisted by the apathy of other British characters who ignore the xenophobia and violence in their homes because it does not directly impact them. Only when our main character, Miranda, wants to free herself from 29 Barton Road’s controlling grasp does she decide she is “going down against” her home. From the anti-immigrant sentiments and attacks in Britain and in 29 Barton Road, Oyeyemi illustrates that home can be dangerous, and, ultimately, someone must decide to do something to stop it.

**Rachel Perry**

## **A New Breed: The Portrayal of Humanity in *Never Let Me Go***

What does it mean to be human? How can this definition serve as a means of division instead of unity? Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* depicts an alternate reality that diverged from ours after World War II, in which some humans are raised for the purpose of becoming organ donors later in life. Their lives are an augmentation to the typical human existence; they are alive as vehicles to safeguard the vital organs that will eventually be required by “real” humans. I propose that Ishiguro’s novel serves as a warning against our anthropocentric tendencies. In other words, not only are humans the center of our universe, but some humans command more attention than those excluded to live on the periphery. Ishiguro plays with this idea of our tendency to arbitrarily categorize some humans as “sub-human” as a tool to justify their marginalization. However, I believe that this categorization is merely a performance and has no concrete basis, thus we can alter it to avoid the future that Ishiguro’s novel presents.

**Christian Shearer**

## **When “Looking” Could Kill: Langston Hughes and the AIDS Crisis**

What if every illicit encounter could include a kiss of death? During the AIDS crisis, this possibility faced many people on the fringes of society. Using the AIDS crisis as a lens, the film *Looking for Langston* fuses poetry, film, and history to reexamine Langston Hughes as a black, gay man. This reimagination allows the fusing of the Harlem Renaissance with the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, creating a unique intersectional narrative. This paper uses Kimberle Crenshaw’s definition of intersectionality to examine the film and argue that the effects of intersectional identities on black gay men severely affected the rates at which they contracted HIV, a problem that persists to this day when an estimated 50% of black gay men will contract HIV during their lifetime. This issue must be faced with a perspective that stems from intersectionality as it cannot be solved solely through the single lens of sexuality or of race. Only through intersectional examination can we begin to save lives that have historically been written off as already lost.



**Morgan Spencer**

**“Colored People Aren’t Mascots for Your Political Attitudes”:  
Storytelling, Empathy, and Respect for Communities of Color in *The White Boy Shuffle***

Human stories bridge gaps between human identities. This presentation will aim to identify and analyze moments in Paul Beatty’s novel *The White Boy Shuffle* in which the act of storytelling generates empathy between characters of hugely varied racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, creating moments of connection between gang members in the minority-dominated Hillside, California and upper-class Boston University students. Our protagonist, Gunnar Kaufman, chronicles his life as a young black man in Los Angeles and his time in university through a series of almost parabolic stories, each bearing a fresh indictment of the nature of race relations in the United States. I will argue that *The White Boy Shuffle*’s appeal to storytelling to communicate the reality of being black in Los Angeles, and more broadly in America, is indicative of two things: first, the power of stories to engineer human connection, and second, the importance of good fiction written by marginalized peoples. Ultimately, this paper will argue for the power of a well-told story as a tool in generating empathy in conversations around race and in addressing painful realities in communities of color with authenticity and respect. A morally responsible academic community must learn to do so without turning members of minority communities into “mascots for our political attitudes.”

**Audrey Trieu**

**The Dehumanizing of Robots:  
An Examination of Abuse in *Ex Machina***

“If I’ve invented a machine with consciousness, I’m not a man. I’m God,” declares CEO Nathan Bateman in *Ex Machina*. Nathan resides in his large country estate, creating robots and then locking them up, abusing them sexually, and killing them when he decides he wants another. On the other hand, employee Caleb Smith visits Nathan’s estate and is horrified at Nathan’s treatment because he views the robots as his equals, or even higher, declaring them the race of “gods.” Through Hegel’s “Master-Slave Dialectic,” this paper examines the humans’ relationships with the robots—Nathan’s remorseless abuse and Caleb’s empathy—based on their perception of the robots’ humanness. While Nathan never views his robots as equal to himself—though he believes they think, feel, and have consciousness as humans do—Caleb views them so highly that he falls in love with one. But should it matter how human we think robots are, or should we treat them all well regardless?

# Pick Your Poison

Moderated by Darby Walters, Department of English

Tuesday, April 12  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Gutenberg

Ashley Busenlener

## **Is It the Cult Life For Me? The Allure of Cult Life in *Geek Love***

Sometimes the only way to escape emotional pain is to cut off your limbs. In Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* people join the cult of Arturism, in which people slowly cut off their limbs to achieve happiness and escape the intense emotional pain they feel at not belonging in society. However, what makes Arturism more frightening is that the people who join the cult cannot be regarded as mentally unstable. Seemingly normal, everyday people find the cult to be a better reality than being part of a community that causes them so much anguish. Though society sees them as victims who should be helped, it is hard for society to affect people that do not trust it, especially once they have turned to cult life. Something must be done to help society hear their pain before they begin to see that joining a cult is the only answer.

Kali DeCambra

## **The Appearance of Women in *Ex Machina*: The Surveyed Becomes the Surveyor**

According to essayist John Berger, a woman is constantly being surveyed and watched by men so she must also continually watch herself. He writes that because women are “watch[ing] themselves being looked at” they turn themselves into something that only “appears” and does not act. However, in the film *Ex Machina*, the main female character, Ava, a test android, uses this objectifying mindset to gain more power over her male creator. Ava eventually manipulates Caleb, a young programmer sent to test her, by pretending that she is in love with him. Alex Garland uses the reflections in Ava's glass container to demonstrate Berger's idea that within every woman there exists “two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity.” Because Ava is constantly watching herself, and is aware of being observed, she is able to filter what she shows to Caleb and what she does not, or what “act” she shows him. It is this ability to be a sight or an image that helps her to fully control Caleb. Thus, while Berger is correct in asserting that a woman must “survey herself continually,” *Ex Machina* illustrates that woman can actually use this duality to give themselves more power over their male counterparts and to accomplish their own goals.

Rachel Fricke

## **Out of the Woods, Into the Bulldozers: Environment or Individual in *Housekeeping* and *Cadillac Desert***

Can we coexist with the natural world? Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* tells the tale of Ruthie, a girl raised on the shores of Lake Fingerbone, to whose dark waters both her mother and grandfather lost their lives. With the constant lapping presence of her familial inheritance overshadowing her daily existence, the lake is presented as a more developed character than Ruthie herself. Reciprocally, William Mulholland of Marc Reisner's biographical *Cadillac Desert* embarks on a quest to bless the Los Angeles Basin with water—from 300 miles away. By doing so, he initiates a cycle of taking from the environment whatever society needs, with little thought toward the long-term impacts of this decision. Keeping in mind the individual's innate desire to impact society, as well as society's overall need to progress, can humans continue to sustain both the natural environment and ourselves? Or are we ultimately destined to destroy or be destroyed? This paper will argue, through analysis of Robinson and Reisner's characters, that a compromise between these two extremes exists. However, it is only feasible through individual and societal concessions.

**Lawrence Liu**

### **Banking on the Impossible**

*That only happens twice in every three games, Lou! Don't you see? Anything can happen now!*  
— Henry Waugh, Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*

Many Americans have a fanatical obsession with sports, and this fervent enthusiasm frequently spills out into everyday life. As members of the USC community, this is certainly no surprise. Sports, however, are usually not an isolated affair; for example, gambling and sports often intersect, with heavy betting on the outcome of a sporting event—the typical relationship we perceive between them. However, gambling and sports have a closer connection than one might expect. Through an examination of Robert Coover's novel *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, I explore the link between sports and gambling. In the novel, Henry creates his own version of a baseball “board game” based on dice throws, and increasingly becomes immersed in its inner workings, ultimately having a huge impact on his personal and social life. Here, the distinction between the sport and the statistical mechanisms of gambling becomes blurred. Consequently, our understanding of sports fanaticism complements our understanding of gambling addiction, and vice versa, enabling us, perhaps, to see what could be done about their more problematic aspects.

**Angela Sarkisian**

### **Escaping Confinement: A Look into the Power of Movement Through *Thelma and Louise***

Discontent with the static nature of life? Instinctively, we run. We use movement and travel as an escape, a method of erasing the path and establishing a new direction. This idea is not universally accepted, however. Alexandra Ganser, for instance, argues that despite movement, people will always be “confronted with special limitations” that will act as a barrier and inhibit the use movement as an escape. While Ganser's claim may hold true for many road narratives, I argue that Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* challenges the idea of “confined mobility.” As the movie progresses, both Thelma and Louise undergo a role reversal. Due to the strong correlation between their travels and the exposure of their true selves, I am claiming that we can attribute the revelation of said new personalities to their movement and the experiences they encounter on their journey. While I believe their being on the road brought about these personality transitions, I do not believe their new traits developed on the road, but were rather innate. In my paper, I address the reasoning behind how physical movement holds such an immense power when it comes to reconstructing lives through close reading and examining the ideas of alternative critics like Mikhail Bakhtin who argue that people “of all social classes, estates, religions...” can meet and “interweave with one another.”

**Hannah Zhao**

### **“If You Figure a Way to Live without Serving a Master, Any Master, Then Let the Rest of Us know”: Trading Personal Agency for Productivity in Anderson's *The Master***

Despite America's emphasis on personal freedom and choice, the film *The Master* and Foucault's panopticon demonstrate the unlikely affinity individuals have towards control, control that allows the individual to achieve productivity through guidance and rules. In this essay, I follow Freddie Quell, a lost, impulsive war veteran struggling to mesh into post-WWII society, through his transition from unproductive freedom to controlled productivity. As Freddie falls under the control of a cult leader, he demonstrates how submitting to control can enable productivity while inadvertently causing the productive individual to abandon personal agency. Paralleling his personal transition is Foucault's panopticon, an interpretation of an architectural figure that revolutionized jails through the internalization of control. This architectural figure, traditionally used to effectively control inmates, similarly makes the inmate productive through means of control and loss of personal productivity. By drawing parallels between these sources, this essay seeks to question the very nature and plausibility of freedom and productivity.

# Standard Deviation

Moderated by Dr. Pernelle Von Helmolt, Thematic Option Honors Program

Tuesday, April 12  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

**Linnea Engstrom**

## **The Power of a Duo: Doubts and Decisions in *Eat The Document***

*She watched as everything came together. And then she helped it come together. This was the power of a couple—their doubts occurred at different times and canceled each other out, making them much more fearless than they would ever be on their own.*

— Dana Spiotta, *Eat the Document*

This essay examines how a course of action progresses when facilitated by a duo, through the character analysis of Vietnam-era activists Mary Whittaker and Bobby Desoto in Dana Spiotta's novel *Eat the Document*. By assessing how (and if) a couple balances each other out, I explore if one can ever really overcome his or her personal doubts, or if their weaknesses are simply concealed by the enabling of the other. The novel suggests that when it comes down to two people working together, one's fears can be canceled out by the fearlessness of the other, and, at some point, it seems impossible that their action will not be done. I read the text against its own theory, and argue that although the novel proposes that a pair can only make and drive a drastic decision together, a person is capable of acting on their own. We find that it was Mary who took the first step all along, despite the book initially presenting Bobby as the clear conspirator and Mary simply the accomplice. The question then becomes, why do we let others act for us? Fear of independence—and that is the weakness of a duo.

**Grace Gorman**

## **Rebellion and Recognition: The Inability to Escape One's Inheritance in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake***

Inheritance is passed on to us in many forms: a piece of land or jewelry, a legacy, or a name. The stories and experiences of those who come before us form what we inherit, and whether embraced or ignored, inescapably come to shape who and what we are. Gogol of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, and Telemachus in Homer's *The Odyssey*, both come to understand the responsibility they have to their name and inheritance primarily through their attempts to escape these aspects of their identity. Telemachus and Gogol both bear names given to them by their fathers in memory of their past experiences of triumph and trauma. For Gogol, every attempt to disconnect himself from his "pet" name and the story behind it only further connects him to his inherited name. It is through Gogol's active attempts to disconnect himself from his name that proves truly nothing can be done to dissociate oneself from one's name and all that is inherited with it. Through learning about the tragedies in their fathers' pasts, both Telemachus and Gogol discover the meanings behind their names. In the end, it is bearing witness to his father's history that enables Gogol to embrace his inescapable inheritance and identity.

**Jack McCarthy**

## **Fantasy: The Realist Thing of All in *The Illusion***

In this essay, I examine how Pridamant in *The Illusion* by Tony Kushner seeks answers about love through arcane and magical means. In seeking these answers through interactions with the intangible spirit world, Kushner allows the reader to see the power of theater through Pridamant's own eyes, allowing him to act as surrogate for the audience. Pridamant changes by witnessing and emotionally reacting to the visions he experiences, just as an audience may change by watching others from a third-party perspective. Intangible forces, however much we may rationalize or

deny them, have the greatest ability to motivate a person to change. Ultimately this paper will address how theater, by giving us a perspective on how others feel and react to each other, gives us a deeper understanding of the human condition.

**Marisol Salem**

### **Seizing Purpose and Evading Regret: If Not Now Then When?**

Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner* confronts the unavoidable crisis that all humans must come to face: we are all fated on a path towards death. Scott specifically engages the subject of living with a sense of urgency by focusing on the plight of humanoid robots called Replicants who dedicate themselves to prolonging their terminate four-year lifespan and delaying their impending "expiration date." This phenomenon is precisely what Fredric Jameson confronts in his work "Future City" as he argues that the only plausible way for humans to gauge history is "by way of imagining the end of the world." It is through this lens that this paper will demonstrate that although *Blade Runner* forces us to confront the nature of our own human transience, it also serves as a call to change and to treat each day as something truly precious. It is precisely in the way that Scott's Replicants ensure that no second of their waning existence is wasted that they become enthralling and inspiring, and serve as models that we see ourselves in, or rather, our ideal selves, for they live with an unparalleled exuberance that we know we ought to apply to our own lives.

**Lily Vaughan**

### **We Used to be Heroes: *Fight Club* and the Effects of Toxic Masculinity**

*We've been all raised by television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars, but we won't... and we're very, very pissed off.*  
— Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*

The men of David Fincher's 1999 film *Fight Club* are angry to be sure—but the problem is not consumer culture. Though it may seem counterintuitive, these individuals suffer because of the same male-dominated power structure that subjugates women even though they are men. The definition of masculinity imposed by patriarchal societies creates standards of identity that, in addition to being unrealistic and unhealthy, promote aggressive and destructive behavior. This phenomenon is known in gender theory as "toxic masculinity." The reactions of men against the social standards imposed upon them are harmful to their own health and well-being, but they are also detrimental to civil society as a whole. These ideas will be elucidated through an analysis of Fincher's *Fight Club*, taken together with gender theorist Judith Butler's ideas on the performance of gender identity. *Fight Club* presents to its audience a perfect example of the detrimental effect of toxic masculinity on modern American men. How are their violent actions indicative of their desire to reclaim and reassert their manhood? How are their choices, as responses to toxic masculinity, disastrous for the lives of these individuals? Finally, is there an equally negative effect on their subsequent treatment of women, and thereby the whole of modern society?

# The Best Is Yet to Come

Moderated by Richard Edinger, Thematic Option Honors Program,  
Department of English

Tuesday, April 12  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

**Devan Adhia**

## ***Blade Runner* and Death: Understanding the Dormant Killer within Every Human**

*The difference between technology and slavery is that slaves are fully aware that they are not free.*  
— Nassim Nicholas Taleb

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* portrays a futuristic world with android Replicants and explores the line that divides human and robot. While the film appears to applaud the human ability to understand and care for others, a mission to kill off six fugitive Nexus-6 Replicants reveals a different reading of the film. Using Achille Mbembe's "Necropolitics," this paper argues that at the core of the futuristic world of *Blade Runner* lies a reincarnation of the numerous instances of class subjugation that have scarred human history, serving as a painful reminder of an undesirable quality present within every human: cruelty. Yet all hope is not lost. *Blade Runner* also demonstrates how our cruelty can be overcome when a final stand between human and Replicant leads to a dramatic shift in the human perceptions of these advanced robots.

**Angelina Feronti**

## **Living in Echoes: Repetition in a Post-Colonial Identity in Anzaldúa's *Bordelands/La Frontera***

Where the edges of Mexican, American, and Indian cultures touch to create a culture in itself, author Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* leaves behind her clashing, crippling culture and creates a new one, in the pursuit of "tolerance of ambiguity." However, as Michelle Brittan Rosado suggests in *A Form between Places: The Pantoum across the Pacific*, something else deeply rooted in this new culture is a past that Anzaldúa cannot let go of entirely. Rosado's ideas of life crisscrossing through repetition and echoes of the past suggest that Anzaldúa's post-colonial identity does not zoom straight ahead but constantly looks over its shoulder as it intertwines with a clinging history. Rosado shows us that with each step Anzaldúa takes into that new territory, there are variations and different shuffles of the past, present and future, making zig-zags across time and space. The echo links the relationships between the remains and the fresh, between the roots of identity and the wind that carries that seed to a new, fertile land.

**Ashley Sacks**

## **Hitting Rock Bottom and Dealing with the Aftermath: Achieving Moral Clarity in *Angels***

*[I]t has to go down before it can go up.*  
— Bill Houston, *Angels*

We like to think that our experiences shape us, that we can build on those experiences and take an active role in developing our future. However, the characters in Denis Johnson's *Angels* challenge this idea. While the characters have the ability to physically move from place to place, their maturation and intellectual development are hindered by their psychological and socioeconomic statuses in what Alexandra Ganser, a professor and researcher, defines as "confined mobility." One character in *Angels* deviates from this generalization. Closer analysis of Bill Houston and his reflections on robbing a bank prove that the power of choice could have allowed him to escape the pressures

of his surroundings and choose a new life path; unfortunately, not utilizing this power of choice confined him to a life dictated by his crime. Ultimately, this confined mobility was not something he could have escaped on his own. Houston needed to hit rock bottom—rob a bank, kill an ex-cop, and be placed on death row—to realize the gravity of his actions and achieve a state of moral clarity. It was only upon being completely removed from the world of crime that Houston could begin to decipher at which points he could and should have done something to make a better life for himself and for the world around him. This begs us to evaluate our own lives—are we able to visualize and progress towards a brighter future, or are we also doomed to hit rock bottom first?

**Elizabeth Shi**

**Healthcare Equality:  
The Privilege of Living and Prejudices of Progress**

*Your zip code shouldn't determine how long you live, but it does.*  
— The California Endowment

As technology improves, healthcare disparities should decrease. Yet we continue to see escalating inequalities that are explicitly socioeconomically and racially charged. This problem is reflected in Neill Blomkamp's futuristic film, *Elysium*, in which the rich, predominantly white citizens, reside in a luxurious space station called "Elysium," while the rest of humanity struggles for survival on an overpopulated Earth. The biggest difference between the two worlds is the Medical Bay—an MRI-style machine capable of curing any disease or injury—that only functions for Elysian citizens. Although our technology has yet to advance to that degree, Medical Bays symbolize privilege, specifically through access to healthcare. While the film takes place in the year 2154, we can ask: how does *Elysium's* universe parallel sociopolitical issues in our world, and what social commentary is the movie trying to make, specifically with regards to healthcare? Blomkamp has stated in interviews that *Elysium* does not have a message; however, my paper will analyze how *Elysium* takes current problems with health, wealth, and boundaries to extremes in a way that can raise awareness and call for action against social injustice. In the process, I will highlight the dangers of healthcare inequality to argue that our system and culture needs to change and work towards equal access and treatment before our reality begins to parallel the apocalyptic state of *Elysium*.

**Angela Villamizar**

**Inheriting Our Future from the Past:  
Identity and Change in the Documentary *Inheritance***

If you can't change the past, maybe you can change the future. Family histories and backgrounds often compose a worldview through which we experience the present. Consequently, the past has an important role in dictating the rest of our lives. Yet, what if what we hold to be true about ourselves and our pasts is false, based on fiction, or—even worse—an unspeakable truth? In the documentary *Inheritance*, the adult child of Amon Goeth, the vicious Nazi, attempts to deal with her inherited shame and broken identity. In training her grandson to be widely inclusive and seeking a meeting with one of her father's victims, she attempts to atone for the past. To borrow a phrase from contemporary poet Tess Taylor, Monika tries to avoid "echoing [the] amnesia" that her mother handed down to her. Instead of omitting the ugly past, Monika decides to confront it. In this paper, I argue that trying to make up for the past is futile; instead, we must be willing to face the past to establish a better future. Though Monika cannot change the past, her journey to reconciliation and self-discovery marks "the beginning of another life, a life where [she] could live with the truth." Ultimately, it is only through remembering and facing the truth of her past that Monika can change her familial cycle of ignorance and violence.

# Damned If You Do...

Moderated by Professor Anthony Kemp, Department of English

Wednesday, April 13  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Vincent Caruso**

## **“How Could You Believe Me—When I Can’t Believe Myself?” Honesty and Happiness in *Long Day’s Journey into Night***

Are honesty and openness always as beneficial and constructive as they may seem? In Eugene O’Neill’s play *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, all four members of the dysfunctional Tyrone family struggle to accept the hidden demons that they each face, haunted by their alcoholism, drug addiction, sickness, and broken dreams. As the play progresses, however, the Tyrones begin to speak more freely and openly about their hidden demons, thereby acknowledging the issues they face as a family and as individuals. Nonetheless, the Tyrones prove unable to abandon their self-destructive behaviors by the end of the play. In this sense, they fail to attain what sociologist Avery Gordon calls “transformative recognition,” an outcome of being haunted that can lead to constructive change. In fact, the Tyrones’ honesty with one another actually does more harm than good at first glance. Despite the apparent ineffectiveness of the Tyrones’ newfound openness, I argue that the Tyrone family ultimately does benefit from acknowledging their own shortcomings, and that, while it may not seem obvious, honesty puts the Tyrones on the slow path to recovery.

**Alexandra Plzak**

## **Damn, It Feels Good to Be a Gangsta: *Thelma and Louise* and the Thrill of Making Bad Choices**

Admit it, it’s fun to break the rules. There’s something exciting about rebellion and living life on the edge. Many would say that this desire to act out stems from nothing more than simple boredom with our own mundane existences. But I think that this romanticism of bad behavior signifies something much deeper: why else would we love to watch films like Ridley Scott’s 1991 iconic hit, *Thelma and Louise*, in which the characters are so obviously cruising for a bruising? Even more surprising, why do we prefer that they go down in flames rather than compromise their wild nature and turn themselves into the police, even at the expense of their own lives? Maybe delinquency is initially born out of frustration, boredom, and the feeling that something must be done about life’s tendency to stagnate, but it is ultimately a revolutionary response. It’s the expression of a life that exists somewhere beyond all the rules and regulations. And if we’re too afraid to break the odd rule here and there ourselves, then we can at least take refuge in the antics of legendary bad girls, *Thelma and Louise*.

**Marianna Shakhnazaryan**

## **Playing God: The Peril in Normalizing Death**

*Death undoes us less, sometimes, than the hope that it will never come.*

— Pico Iyer

Whose right is it ultimately to determine the mortality, or immortality, of another individual? Sigmund Freud’s definition of the uncanny—something altogether strange yet familiar to us—is acutely manifested within the concept of death. In looking at the series *Carnivale* through a Freudian critical lens, I will argue that the character Ben Hawkins’ endeavor to exert control over the uncontrollable nature of death represents his attempt to normalize something that is uncanny. Furthermore, I will argue that this manipulation of something so beyond our grasp proves perilous to those around, and ultimately raise questions about the societal repercussions of our own tampering with death.



**Bella Shary**

**One Doesn't Need to be the Loneliest Number:  
Toxic Relationships in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story***

*Who is to say a love relation is real or is really something else...in order to sustain a fantasy?*  
— Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love*

This paper explores the implications of society's stigma that being single is something to be feared by humans, and especially women. A recent study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* proposes that people often remain in unhealthy relationships motivated by the belief that to be with someone—anyone—is better than being alone. The paper will further develop this idea by engaging Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*. In this novel, the two central women, Mrs. Park and her daughter Eunice Park, are dependent on toxic relationships of convenience to provide the illusion each has a "happy" life. Fearful of the unknown, they endure instances of abuse or incompatibility, overlooking the freedom and subsequent happiness that could culminate from choosing to be single. Yet, this fear will persist, keeping people like Mrs. Park and Eunice from leaving the very thing making them so unhappy, until society stops conflating being alone with being lonely.

**Madrigal von Muchow**

**"Modern Nervousness":  
Suppression and Insanity in *Fight Club***

In a 1908 essay, Sigmund Freud contends that "our civilization is entirely based on the suppression of instincts," and that nervousness and neurosis in modern society stem from this suppression. The film *Fight Club* portrays a man suffering from insomnia and then insanity. He forms a fight club and creates and defeats an alter ego; we witness his self-destruction (as well as the destruction of several buildings) in the process. *Fight Club* shows us a nervousness of a new modern society on the latter end of the 20th century; I believe the same process of suppression that Freud defines is to blame. Freud argues that modern society causes people to act against sexual instincts and urges of aggression. In applying this theory to *Fight Club*, I will go beyond that contention, arguing that modern morality encourages the suppression of a deeper physical instinct, viscerality, which is a suite of instincts associated with the physical aspect of living. I will investigate the conflict between civilization and the human psyche as iterated in *Fight Club*, and highlight the inherent opposition between living in society and living in the body.

# No Pain, No Gain

Moderated by Professor Hector Reyes, Department of Art History

Wednesday, April 13  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Carnegie

**Elisa Aprà**

## **Maternal Might: Motherhood in James Cameron's *Aliens***

Contemporary conversations on motherhood often fixate on women's quest to "have it all" as they attempt to overcome the perceived barrier that motherhood presents to success. While James Cameron's science fiction film *Aliens* is at its core about two mothers—the tenacious Ellen Ripley and the Queen Alien leading the group of aliens seeking to destroy Ripley and her crew—it eschews the "having it all" conversation entirely. The film breaks from familiar depictions of motherhood, instead harkening back to the ancient images of the mother examined by Adrienne Rich in "The Primacy of the Mother," as well as demonstrating how patriarchal forces manipulate motherhood to achieve goals delineated by Rich in "Compulsory Heterosexuality." This paper examines how *Aliens* recasts motherhood as a potential wellspring of power that women may tap into if they choose to do so, rather than a prison of enfeebling femininity and duty.

**Iris Kim**

## **Love, Lust, and Artificial Intelligence: The Trap of the Companion Fallacy**

In the not-too-distant world of *Ex Machina*, we see a self-aware, intelligent, strong A.I. called Ava that can invoke passionate feelings of both love and lust in other characters, influencing decisions and even manipulating the protagonist of the film, Caleb, to meet his death. The film reveals what Joanna J. Bryson argues is a companion fallacy, or our tendency to mistake programmed reactions as genuine emotion. Mark Coeckelberg also examines the nature of authenticity and deception by A.I., claiming that instead of criticizing robots, we should re-evaluate our own unrealistic expectations of their emotional capacities. Grounded in both Bryson and Mark Coeckelberg's notions of the "deceptive" nature of robots, this paper reveals the ways in which Caleb and Ava's relationship is a cautionary tale of human craving for acceptance and love without judgment, a desire that may ultimately be our undoing in that it allows us to open ourselves up in an irrational way for exploitation, deception and betrayal by beings that can never truly return our love.

**Jasper McEvoy**

## **I Am Jack's Reality Check: Deconstructing Masculinity through Marla in *Fight Club***

During one scene of *Fight Club*, the main character, Jack, punches himself repeatedly in an empty parking lot. Why would he do this? People would say that he's crazy, but I propose a different theory: Jack suffers from the societal norms of masculinity. As I will demonstrate, Jack is confused about how to be a man. The only woman in the movie, Marla Singer, guides him toward a more viable identity by delegitimizing his experimental gender nonconformity in the testicular cancer support group and his hypermasculinity in *Fight Club*. I will use Judith Butler's theory on the "productive crisis" to examine Jack's identity crisis. By pointing out flaws in the way that we, as a society, tell men how to be men, Marla starts a process of reconsideration within Jack, and thus within the viewer. As Butler explains, the deconstruction of this gendered norm, and the resulting conversation about new norms, is defined as a "productive crisis." While the movie does not give Jack a definitive new identity, we learn that our definition of masculinity is broken, and that something must be done to fix it.

**Catherine Wang**

**Losing Love, Finding Self:  
Spike Jonze's *Her* from a Freudian Perspective**

Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her* imagines a melancholic romantic in a near-future world. Theodore Twombly, who ghost-writes love letters for a living, copes with a looming divorce by falling in love with his artificially intelligent operating system, Samantha. In Sigmund Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia," the psychoanalyst presents melancholia as a problematic, "pathological condition." However, *Her* complicates and redeems melancholia as a growing experience, as Theo learns to accept the loss of his wife, and later, the loss of Samantha, ultimately returning to a more optimistic reality. Even while he is trapped in Freud's melancholic state, Samantha helps Theo become more introspective and communicative, empowering him to face loss into the future. I will examine how the film uses technology as a vehicle to challenge our tragic perception of a grieving romantic, as it reveals melancholia's potential to enable human growth.

**Jordan Wong**

**On Sports, Violence, and Heterosexual Masculinity**

What does it mean to "be a man"? Is there any direct correlation between contact sports and an off-field desire for violence? This paper explores the ideas our society has about masculinity and how our perceptions of manliness relate to contact sports and athlete violence. In Don DeLillo's novel *End Zone*, characters Gary Harkness and Taft Robinson find in themselves unexplainable inclinations for nuclear war and concentration camps, respectively. Each character is confused and perturbed by his own obsession with these violent aspects of life, and seeks to understand why he desires to know more about them. In this paper, I address the idea that perhaps these inclinations are in fact explainable, and are related to the fact that both men are football players. I do this by looking deeper into Gary and Taft's lives, as well as by exploring research done by Derek Kreager on school sports and adolescent male violence, and how those two topics correspond. I also discuss the idea that sports promote violence as a means of proving heterosexuality and masculinity, and how we can work to lessen that promotion and thus help decrease violence in athletes. Finally, I attempt to answer two questions. If contact sports and violence are in fact related, and are used to promote masculinity and heterosexuality, how do we begin to address that? And, if there is something to be done, how do we address our perception of sports, violence, or masculinity?

# Rock the Boat

Moderated by Betsy Sullivan, Department of English

Wednesday, April 13  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Gutenberg

**Noha Ayoub**

## **Viva la Revolución: The Makings of a Revolution as Seen in *Blade Runner***

*Revolution is not an apple that falls when it is ripe. You have to make it fall.*  
— Che Guevara

Ridley Scott's cult film *Blade Runner* chronicles the struggles of a renegade gang of humanoid robots called Replicants as they take up arms to resist enslavement by their human creators. At first glance, the film seems to create a projection of a brave new world filled with wondrous technology beyond our capacity. However, in truth the film's greater purpose lies in its commentary on present society as the Replicants counter postmodernist theorist Fredrick Jameson's conception of cultural progress as one that will inevitably happen with time. Rather than waiting for the day that humans suddenly support their rights, the Replicants in *Blade Runner* fight against their human masters, demand liberty, and ultimately seize their revolution in a way that I argue real-world activists can replicate. I argue that so too should we fight against oppressive systems through empowerment because only then can oppressed people lift the veil of their oppression, identifying the sociopolitical structures that have kept them oppressed and unifying them under the shared experience of their subjugation. If something must be done, then at the very least we should understand how to begin. This isn't just a call to action. This is a call for revolution.

**Samantha Nishimura**

## **"We've given you better lives than you would have had otherwise": Moral Complacency as a Channel for Oppression in *Never Let Me Go***

"We've given you better lives than you would have had otherwise," a guardian in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* patronizingly claims. Although the guardians seem to disrupt society's norms by giving clones a humane childhood, my paper examines the idea that by sheltering the clones from the truth of their future organ donations, the guardians perpetuate the very system of oppression that they supposedly fight against. They took issue with the way that clones were raised and realized that something must be done, but is that something—a sheltered childhood—enough? When doing something comes in the form of anesthesia to society's ills rather than a cure, does it even benefit the oppressed at all? Although they believe themselves to be morally superior to and aware of society's inhumane norms, I argue that by hiding the frank truth of the students' fates, the guardians ultimately remain subject to the ruling class's ideology, discussed by philosopher Louis Althusser in his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." This ideology, the subtle dissemination of beliefs, proves so pervasive that the guardians unwittingly maintain oppression precisely because they feel complacent in their skewed standards of morality.

**Jerry Tsui**

## **Silent at Sea: Reconciling Absence and Loss in *Lose Your Mother***

*Silence is its own language that one can read, interpret, and even speak.*  
— M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*

In her emotionally difficult book *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman discovers through her journey tracing the Transatlantic Slave Trade that the most painful manifestation of loss is the absence of stories detailing the experiences of the enslaved peoples themselves. She is disappointed and alarmed when she finds no physical evidence

of the pain and suffering that her ancestors endured centuries ago at the ruthless hands of slavers. However, by using M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* as a theoretical text to explore the power of silence, it becomes evident that Hartman accepts the absence of a slave narrative as a powerful manifestation of sorrow. In this paper, I explore how Hartman actually uses this silence to shed light on the stories of African slaves that were previously erased from history.

**Alex Wada**

**There Is Always a Never Again:  
The Pressures of Existential Dread in *Synecdoche, New York***

Charlie Kaufman's directorial debut *Synecdoche, New York* portrays death's inevitability as an overwhelming force and warns against the "something must be done" response so many have to its crushing weight. In the film, renowned theater director Caden Cotard obsessively pursues connections with others and his own lost self-identity through an increasingly detailed theater piece about his own life. As art begins to imitate life imitating art, Caden flounders in the futility of trying to find a final, unchanging "true self" and never realizes how his dedication to his work alienates him from those who love him most. Ultimately, as the name of the movie predicts, Kaufman uses Caden and his tragedy as a microcosm, representative of the perennial anxiety and bottomless void found in existential dread. Many have turned to the pursuit of worldly accomplishment to fill that hole, but *Synecdoche, New York* warns that this objectivist approach only hurts the self and society. We must accept that we will die to truly begin to live.

**Samuel Wands**

**What Would Marx Make of *When Will There Be Good News?***

Karl Marx asks why the promise of salvation through faith—"the opium of the people"—replaces action in the present. In this paper, I investigate how Marx's signature critique of faith in *On Religion* is manifested in the quiet, post-religious hero Reggie Chase in Kate Atkinson's *When Will There Be Good News?* Reggie, a sixteen-year-old amateur detective and domestic aid, lives in precarious circumstances with a dead mother, an absent father, a drug-dealing brother, and not much time for school. Reggie, though she is in a position where she may use religion prescribed to her by her old, bitter teacher Ms. MacDonald as a means to find comfort in this life in hope of Lazarus-like salvation in a later one, remains skeptical. She sees people indulging in religion in the very way that Marx critiques it in *On Religion*: as something promoting a societal complacency of which she does not want to play a part. Reggie, therefore, becomes an embodiment of the mentality and action called for by Marx as necessary in promoting an equalizing revolution that allows us to live our lives to the best of our abilities.

# What's Plan B?

Moderated by Professor Rebecca Lemon, Department of English

Wednesday, April 13  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

**Rachel Chiu**

## **Surviving with Grace: Choosing Clarity and Contentment in Kate Atkinson's *When Will There Be Good News?***

My research paper reveals the often undesirable effects of walking the straight and narrow in Kate Atkinson's novel, *When Will There Be Good News?* Atkinson's character, Louise Monroe, is devoted to the idea of implementing a template in her life through which she hopes to attain a level of contentment as well as a degree of success. This mindset is called into question, however, as Louise begins to observe the manner in which other characters in the story embrace an unrestricted way of living following various traumatic events in their lives. In challenging her preconceived notions regarding the value of the template, Louise opens the door to less common—yet more befitting—avenues to her goals, finally providing herself with a chance at true happiness. In the same way, it becomes necessary to reevaluate the presence of such a template in not only the lives of fictional characters, but also our own. What is often considered to be a mechanism geared towards success may, in truth, simply be the agent which hinders it.

**Simran Singh**

## **Amoral Morality: A Study of Cult Leadership within a Machiavellian Framework**

Cult leaders often present sets of morals that underlie each other, with the stated moral guide for members aligning with what the leader finds most beneficial for himself. Indeed, the continuous acquisition of power for the cult leadership is often the primary underlying moral imperative within the organization. Thus, morality within an isolated community becomes a tool for gaining power and promoting influence; morality becomes, in essence, amoral. In *Big Machine* by Victor LaValle, the Washburn Library initially appears to be a bastion of morality: its idealistic mission and belief in forces beyond what is readily apparent set its Scholars above the masses. However, just as *Big Machine* as a whole illuminates the disconnect between idealistic expectations and disappointing realities with regard to the Library, the leadership strategies the Library employs to keep its Scholars engaged are materialistic and pragmatic in an amoral, Machiavellian sense. The Library's reliance on grandeur, image, and explicit generosity ultimately draws attention to the universality of amoral techniques for power and influence, questioning the extent to which those leadership strategies outline systems of control within modern society.

**Madeline White**

## **Nothing Should Be Done: Inaction as a Means of Productivity in Denis Johnson's *Angels***

Action is often our first line of response to any crisis. Whether faced with an emotional or physical dilemma, we so often take action because the thought of doing something in the face of that catastrophe feels better than doing nothing at all. However, it is important to recognize the many times when we try to help but only make the situation worse. Denis Johnson's debut novel *Angels* serves as a revolutionary outline for this type of impulsive action with negative consequences. Time and again we watch as the protagonist, Jamie, attempts to forge new futures for herself and her children, yet with each step forward she strays farther from her intended path. By reading *Angels* through Alexandra Ganser's theory of "confined mobility" we can explain the repercussions and results of Jamie's choice of action. However, while Ganser's perception of confined mobility claims that moments of action and travel fail to change social circumstances, it is necessary to bring the inverse of this analysis to Johnson's novel. Through close analysis of *Angels*, we find that the scenes of greatest revelation and impact for the characters are moments of rest

and inaction. In my essay, I explore Jamie's relationship to her children and uncover why it is that she is only capable of caring for them in moments when she experiences extreme physical limitation and emotional duress. By tracing these scenes in particular, I argue that Jamie, and perhaps society as a whole, changes and grows the most in the moments when action is not, and should not, be an option.

**Benjamin Wu**

**Binary Code Breaking:  
The Impossibility of Simple Classification in *Ex Machina***

What's the difference between a program and a programmer? A computer and a code monkey? Man and machine? Caleb Smith puts these questions to the test when he tries to determine if Ava, an A.I. created by his boss Nathan, can simulate humanity. As Caleb continues testing, he becomes more convinced in the goodness of A.I., pitting it against the inherent depravity of man, and decides to help Ava escape—with disastrous results. In this paper, I will demonstrate that while Caleb tries to find the dividing line between man and machine, he is never able to grasp this hard distinction because none exists. Drawing upon the scholarly writings of C. S. King, I will argue that the director deliberately distorts Ava and Caleb's "fixed" identities because he wants us to recognize that robots and humans alike are abject bodies that are only defined by their ambiguity. Through its ingenious camerawork and special effects, *Ex Machina* cleverly sets up clear-cut ideals of man and machine, and just as cleverly tears them apart by exploring their similarities. By showing us how impossible our classic binaries are, Garland peels away our conceits on other "clear-cut" distinctions we use to separate other groups of race, class and gender. *Ex Machina* is a call for us to change our black-and-white assumptions of our world, and to embrace the ambiguous, revel in the abject, and accept our complexity.

**Kelsi Yu**

**Flesh and Blood:  
An Analysis of Parenting in *Geek Love***

In *Geek Love*, Katherine Dunn reveals the consequences of the monetization and isolation of children from social norms. This paper analyzes the progressively dysfunctional nature of the Binewski family in relation to Amy Mullin's model for childcare, which emphasizes the social and moral development of a child. Mullin does not consider love as a relationship, but an attitude towards another. Al and Lil embrace their children's deformities, fostering a sense of superiority over society while failing to recognize and care for their needs. With a hierarchical family structure and lack of external influence, the Binewski siblings are unable to socialize without competing, manipulating, or expressing intimacy with one another—resembling and transcending the boundaries of a family. In the end, love alone is not enough to care for a child; action is necessary to instill the value of relationships.

# WTF, Man?!

Moderated by Professor Steve Ross, Department of History

Wednesday, April 13  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

**Madeleine Dile**

## **Your Foreskin is Not the Problem: The Toxic Woman Trope in *The People of Paper***

Popular culture revels in the idea of *femmes fatales*, women who use their sexuality to cause male destruction. Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* contains a web of parallel relationships where the same critical issues repeat themselves in multiple pairs of lovers, but the female characters are consistently blamed for causing the failure of the relationship even though the male characters are also responsible. In one such relationship trope, the women are perceived to leave their lovers because of something their male partner cannot control, such as their bed-wetting habits or lack of circumcision, leaving the men eternally devastated and unable to function. In another, the women are viewed as too damaged to nurse their broken-hearted partners back to health. However, both of these depictions of relationships ignore the man's role in maintaining his own relationships, insinuating that men should not have to solve or are not capable of solving their own problems. This paper will argue that the demonization of female sexuality and agency and infantilization of men perpetuates an imbalance of power between genders that is detrimental to the success of a functional society.

**Serena Jarwala**

## **The Invisible Woman: Erasure of the Female Voice in *Super Sad True Love Story***

*I kept thinking about how much I've lost and how much I'm still going to lose.*  
— Eunice Park, *Super Sad True Love Story*

Gary Shteyngart creates a futuristic world in *Super Sad True Love Story* where your personal information is preserved in innumerable ways and instantly available for anyone who happens to look at you. Yet, if you are a woman, you can still be invisible. Eunice Park, a young, temperamental woman, is absent from the novel and the reader's mind through the machinations of her lovers, Lenny Abramov and Joshie Goldman. By applying Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of erotic love triangles and gender imbalance, I will argue that Lenny only desires Eunice because his youth-obsessed society tells him she is a prize to be won. To him, she has no purpose beyond an inanimate object. This creates a toxic relationship where Eunice's complexities as an individual are ignored; Lenny does not see her humanity. Eunice is further marginalized by the rivalry that forms between Lenny and Joshie as their competition for alpha-male dominance and their fear of how their own relationship has changed becomes their primary focus. Ultimately, the paper argues that after being treated as invisible for so long, Eunice suffers devastating psychological damage and accepts her "assigned" place. *Super Sad True Love Story* shows our society's super sad, and dangerous, future as the female voice continues to be erased.

**Sabrina Odigie**

## **Waxing Nostalgic in *The Big Sleep***

In a culture that so heavily romanticizes days gone by, this essay aims to show that although times have changed, misogynistic ideologies have not. Philip Marlowe, the detective protagonist of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, is heralded as an exemplary, knight-like masculine figure. By default, the attitudes that he has towards women are perpetuated through the novel and passed on to the reader. This argument shows that where autonomous womanhood is demonized, the virginal purity of femininity is intensely desired, and that the latter type of femininity is truly just a means of keeping women useful to men. This piece ultimately analyzes the idea that social attitudes towards women, as exemplified through Marlowe, have progressed with the passage of time. Time, in reality, has moved on without us.



**Preeyam Roy**

**The Surveyed and the Surveyor:  
Destabilizing Traditional Depictions of Women in Western Art with *Ex Machina***

The use of art to explore the human condition is undeniable in Alex Garland's film *Ex Machina*. In addition to art with which the characters directly interact, the film features art that does not affect the plot, such as the *Portrait of Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein*. Although this 1905 Gustav Klimt portrait is only featured in a scene's backdrop, this presentation shows it is extremely significant due to what it reveals about Ava, the film's main protagonist and a potentially human A.I., by examining the juxtaposition between Ava and Wittgenstein through the lens of art theories by John Berger. According to Berger, Western art traditionally depicted women as objects of sight for the viewing pleasure of men. Therefore, women depicted in Western art have two distinct elements within their identities: the male surveyor and the female surveyed. By comparing Ava and Wittgenstein, this paper proposes Ava lacks this duality and therefore defies the traditional depictions of objectified women in art. By contrasting them, it shows how Ava subverts objectification by her male creator. Ultimately, this presentation discusses how Ava's depiction functions as a call-to-action, provoking people to question how they partake in surveillance and perform in social media.

**Michael Thurber**

**The Gileadean Allegory:  
*The Handmaid's Tale* and Compulsory Heterosexuality**

This paper introduces a new reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Rather than interpreting the story of the dictatorship of Gilead as a cautionary tale of the possibility of gender-based subjugation, it argues that Atwood is in fact purposefully comparing Gilead to global society as it is now. Using Adrienne Rich's theoretical framework of compulsory heterosexuality, it will show that the oppression faced by women under Gileadean rule manifests through the same channels as that which they endure in the contemporary world. Atwood is not asking us to beware the future, but rather to turn a critical eye on the power structures of the present. To not recognize the elements of Gilead in our own time is to be dangerously blinded by the feel-good promises of liberal democracy.

# A Single Spark

Moderated by Kendra Atkins, Department of Comparative Literature

Wednesday, April 13  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Ivana Giang**

## **Black Lives Matter: Claudia Rankine Gives America an Ultimatum in *Citizen***

*Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word.*  
— Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Toni Morrison warned us more than twenty years ago that the breaking point of deaths caused by language is being reached because, “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence.” Through *Citizen: An American Lyric*, a multi-genre book lauded for its images, poetry, and prose, Claudia Rankine unapologetically sheds a harsh light on the community most ravaged by oppressive language: black America. The Black Lives Matter movement is the urgent question. *Citizen* is the answer that it desperately needs. Morrison articulates the real threat as one against the free and true exchange of knowledge between all members of the human race. When the divide between subgroups—such as those of black and white America—is woven in between the promises of protection made by representative government and authority, however, there is little room for the oppressed to breathe, let alone move. The breaking point is here. The black community has grieved over too many Michael Browns, Tamir Rices, and Freddie Grays. If America cannot do anything to curb those deaths and strive for the permission of new knowledge into its body, oppressive language will soon cause the death of knowledge.

**Darcy Gleeson**

## **Conscious Role Reversal Sparks a Movement**

Established roles of gender, race, and class distinctions can be broken down by conscious reversal. In other words, once people succeed in living in contrast to a defined role in society, they reveal the arbitrary and prejudiced nature of the traditional conventions that define their social role. In short, conscious role reversal highlights flaws in social systems; the first step in beginning a movement to change oppressive societal structures. This essay discusses conscious role reversal with respect to Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper*, in which the flower-picking citizens of El Monte strike back against the surveillance of their omniscient narrator Saturn. As characters, the people of El Monte take control of the narrative by hiding from Saturn, leading to the breakdown of an established system of surveillance. Without the protection of his conventional narrative distance, Saturn’s failures as a narrator, and as lover, are brought to the forefront, causing the reader to question the distinction between artist and subject. More than simply a statement about love lost, or oppressive surveillance, *The People of Paper* forces its readers, with uniquely explicit self-exposure and jarring formatting, to look inward to start their own personal movement towards empathy.

**Cyrus Khandalavala**

## **The Power of Love: Empowering Social Imaginations to Create New Futures in Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story***

Is love no more than a frivolous poetic ideal? One with little actual contribution to society compared with the tangible results of economics or technology? Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt, two contemporary theorists, shatter this limitation, and reconceive of love as a serious transformative power. In “On the Risk of New Relationality” they articulate love as the spark that ignites the imaginations of entire societies, and as that which enables people to overcome oppressive political forces. These ideas create a unique approach to critically reading Gary Shteyngart’s postmodern novel *Super Sad True Love Story*. Set in a dystopian future of an America eerily familiar to our present

state, the complex love in this story fuels the development of compassion and altruism in the young Eunice Park. Viewed through the lens of Berlant and Hardt's theory, examples of Eunice's development through *Super Sad True Love Story* uncover the power of love to shape collective imaginations and empower social change.

**Olivia Landau**

### **Grief as a Revitalizing Mechanism in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close***

All too often in the process of grieving, the mourner loses a crucial aspect of his or her identity. In Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Ruth Black, defeated by her husband's death, is stripped of her agency and therefore remains stagnant, spending the rest of her life atop the Empire State Building. Similarly, William Black loses the drive to hear the vivid sounds of the world, consequently turning off his hearing aids for twenty-four years. Foer's characters demonstrate that our attachment to other people is fierce, so powerful that, in the wake of tragedy, we lose ourselves in others' absence. Helplessly dependent on other people, we are unable to cope when they falter. Something must be done. As the link stringing these mourners together, however, Oskar Schell demonstrates that grief does not necessarily guarantee identity-shattering results; rather, grief can precede positive growth and nuanced perspective. Oskar's quest through New York's five boroughs, searching for the rationale behind his father's tragic death in 9/11, brings him to life. When Oskar meets Ruth and William Black, he recognizes his pain in their pain. Forging a community of mourners not only provides him with introspection and comfort, but also with a reason to continue living despite his tragedy. Through coping with grief, Oskar revives William and strengthens his relationship with his mother. Contrarily, just as attachment to another person can lead to personal destruction, it is through Oskar's newfound attachment to other mourners that his pain is relieved. Through this essay, I will explore how Oskar illustrates that losing a loved one does not destroy the griever, but instead reshapes and enhances his identity.

**Brittany Richart**

### **Mob Mentality: Cathartic or Chaotic?**

Why do apparently rational people, when placed in a group setting, suddenly seem to lose all sense of rationality, and instead rely on instinct? This phenomenon, widely known as "mob mentality," especially occurs within the context of sports. In a sport such as boxing, do the crowds act so irrationally violent (e.g. chanting "kill him!") because there is a suspension of morality regarding violence in boxing that carries over for the spectators? Or, is mob mentality a special case of Aristotle's idea of catharsis—a way of cleansing oneself of violence in a relatively safe setting? Joyce Carol Oates in *On Boxing* claims, "Spectators at public games derive much of their pleasure from reliving the communal emotions of childhood, but spectators at boxing matches relive the murderous infancy of the race." The types of mobs that accompany boxing matches are far different from the mobs that accompany any other sport. The collective "threshold of violence" appears to be far lower than that of the typical crowd. It appears as though something must be done to control this mob mentality. What if, however, it is healthy and even necessary to have the mindset of boxing spectators—allowing the release of one's "murderous impulses" to serve as the tragedies did in Aristotle's time? Can boxing matches be the perfect venue for catharsis to occur?

# Damage Control

Moderated by Sanders Bernstein, Department of English

Wednesday, April 13  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Carnegie

**Soraya Simi**

## **What A Six-Year-Old Can Teach Us About Saving the World**

“Sometimes you can break something so bad, you can’t put it back together,” remarks six-year-old Hushpuppy in Benh Zeitlin’s film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. She reaches this chilling realization once she understands how profoundly we humans have devastated our environment, and that there is no turning back. Hushpuppy’s home, the Bathtub, a small town perched on the other side of the New Orleans levee, is set to be ravaged by an oncoming hurricane triggered by climate change. This essay discusses how a child’s sensitivity to her environment, and continued reliance on nature’s affordances, fosters in her a sense of responsibility to take care of the same place which for so long has taken care of her. Hushpuppy has lived in these wetlands all six years of her life, and is deeply connected to nature’s subtleties through all her observations. She knows before everyone else that truly terrible is about to happen, and that the only way to survive is to adapt.

**Nina Singh**

## **Inside-Out: The Peculiar Nature of Interactions Between Trauma Survivors and the “Outside World”**

What happens when you spend your whole life believing that your community is perfect...until the outside world discovers the ugly “truth?” In Chuck Palahniuk’s *Survivor*, Tender Branson’s worldview is continuously reshaped and redefined as the outside world takes an increasing interest in his experience in the Creedish suicide cult. He is forced to reconcile a loss of ideological legitimacy with his sense of self, while simultaneously learning to interact with an entirely different breed of people. Judith Herman, in her psychology text *Trauma and Recovery*, argues that the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others, so recovery can take place only in the context of relationships. However, many attempts to create these relationships fail because they focus on control rather than empowerment, leading to an uncomfortable power dynamic called “traumatic transference,” in which authority figures take responsibility for a trauma survivor’s recovery. The relationships that focus on guiding Tender’s confrontation of his past lead to the buildup of excessive amounts of traumatic transference, completely inhibiting recovery. Thus, Palahniuk’s *Survivor* suggests that instead of trying to diagnose and treat trauma victims, we must focus on helping them regain control of their lives.

**Matt Solowan**

## **“Cut Down Where She Stood”: The Aftermath of Violence Against Women in Kate Atkinson’s *When Will There Be Good News?***

The purpose of this research is to understand how being a victim of gender-based violence affects the character Joanna Mason in Kate Atkinson’s novel *When Will There Be Good News?* After the massacre of her mother and siblings, Joanna develops a split personality: on one hand, she becomes a caring mother and doctor, and on the other, she becomes a violent killer herself. In a sense, she triumphs over the men who victimize her, yet she is scarred forever by the violence that changed her life, and eventually internalizes it and succumbs to it. Although this research only analyzes one case of this type of violence, it is important in understanding how violence against women is used as a social mechanism to force women into a subordinate status, and how women forever marked as “victims of violence against women” cope and deal with life after loss.

**Suveena Thanawala**

**From Person to Story:  
The Golem Effect in *Angels***

How much do our preconceptions affect those around us? Can people's oversight cause the downfall of others? In Denis Johnson's *Angels*, Burris Houston attempts to escape expectations of what he, as a drug addict and the son of a convicted felon, is capable of accomplishing in life. According to the psychological phenomenon described by the "golem effect," people are doomed to achieve only what others give them credit for because their faults and limitations are constantly being made known to them. I argue that Burris is a key example of a victim that falls prey to this effect; one whose trauma led him to disaster. Via close readings of *Angels* before, during, and after Burris's failure to execute a critical part in a robbery, and by invoking the theory of the golem effect, I will discuss how Burris' attitude changes from wanting to do something to change his family's and his acquaintances' perceptions of him to convincing himself that there is nothing he can do. It seems inevitable that Burris would fail to rise above the judgments, which evokes in us a sense of sympathy for his situation. Something must be done about the way we see these "secondary" characters, because, in reality, we have to shoulder the burden for creating the criminals we condemn.

**Kiyo Vigliotti**

**Family Time:  
Remembering and Repeating Trauma in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close***

War has always been a prevalent part of society, so much so that history has been defined by periods of war and periods of peace. In this essay, I illuminate the long-lasting impacts that war creates within the smaller microcosm of a family. The characters in Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* demonstrate the terrorizing truth of memory and how war reshapes the perception of time in society and, more specifically, in a family. Oskar can only refer to 9/11 as "the worst day," a pre- and post- to the family he once knew; because of this trauma, his mind is constantly drawn to the past, during the present. Even his future plans are dictated by these memories, as his father's voicemails serve as the catalyst for his two-year scavenger hunt. Oskar invites other characters and readers to tackle the traumas with him as he scours New York City for the message he believes his father has left for him. The Schell family's urge to repeat exemplifies Freud's argument that traumatic memories have the power to forcibly impose themselves on victims. According to Freud, these memories appear unbidden, and, paradoxically, force one to repeat the traumatic moment over and over until it is mastered. In this essay, I argue that Oskar and his grandparents are thrust into the cycle of remembering and repeating that Freud describes. Importantly, the most striking impact of this cycle is that it allows the past to break into the present, breaking the linear flow of time and space. I contend that Foer's novel depicts, in the microcosm of the family, the power of trauma to reshape time. Moreover, Foer's novel employs experimental narrative forms that invite readers to participate in this same experience of traumatic time. This reshaping of time serves as a daily reminder for these characters and our society that we are nothing more than a traumatic memory away from our deepest fears and toughest battles.

# Missed Connections

Moderated by Rebecca Ehrhardt, Department of English

Wednesday, April 13  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Gutenberg

**Sydney Page Coleman**

## **Connective Technology: Reconstructing Our Collective Culture and Outgrowing Postmodernism**

William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* explores a world transformed by advancing technology and an ever-evolving artificial intelligence, a world that is marked by tension between individual and shared consciousness. Using Frederic Jameson's theories about postmodernism, this paper examines the ways in which Gibson's futuristic cyberpunk novel creates tension between our current cultural framework and the world that will be created by technology as it becomes more communal and connects us more intimately. When Case literally "flips" into Molly's headspace, Gibson directly attacks the bounds of postmodernism and our collective culture around technology, raising questions regarding the ways that culture and interpersonal relations will change as a result of being able to share consciousness with friends and enemies alike. As our culture seems to deliberately move toward a technologically-mediated world of shared experiences, I argue that *Neuromancer* calls us to question our increased reliance on technology to connect us with our fellow humans as well as our own emotions.

**Lyndsey Franklin**

## **Criminally Detached: Lost Connection and Crime Prevention in *Lush Life***

As the detective in fiction has evolved from the observational genius of Sherlock Holmes to the cynicism of the hard-boiled detective, a concerning pattern of the detective psyche is revealed: the startling ease with which detectives distance themselves from human connection. In his novel *Lush Life*, Richard Price dramatizes the struggle of New York City Detective Matty Clark to see beyond his cases and understand the people they involve from victims to the criminals themselves. As he navigates through the murder of a young man while simultaneously juggling his two delinquent sons, Clark remains aloof and disjointed from a debased society. This paper will explore how the detective profession inherently separates detectives from interpersonal relationships. And through the incorporation of theory about crime and violence from Lewis D. Moore, this paper will also examine how such a lack of connection precludes any proactivity in crime prevention.

**Aditi Jackson**

## **Between Gogol and Ganguli: Bridging Cultural Gaps in *The Namesake***

An almost magical relationship between names and reality saturates Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*. Recent Bengali immigrants, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli face a dilemma: the naming of their newborn son. Unable to leave the hospital until complying with American law, they must choose a name to put on their son's birth certificate. But what name do they choose? The name they select will affect their child's character, and how the world perceives him. Moreover, it will influence how he perceives the world. In this light, I explore the consequences of "naming." Through protagonist Gogol Ganguli's experience as a multicultural kid growing up with an atypical name, I trace the effects of one's name on one's cultural identification. Examining Gogol's odd juxtaposition of titles—Gogol, a Russian author's last name, and Ganguli, an Indian surname—I analyze the impact of straddling two conflicting cultures on an individual's identity. Ultimately, using Gogol as a lens, I consider the steps required to reconcile one's identity with one's name, asking: What are the implications of defining oneself within cultural terms? I conclude that the reconciliation of name with culture can only transpire when one learns to define oneself outside of such cultural boundaries. And that's when the magic happens.

Austen Le

**Man and the Monster:  
Deconstructing the “Damsel in Distress” Trope in *Ex Machina***

The “Damsel in Distress” plotline is a literary archetype that has existed from the Middle Ages until modern times, and the movie *Ex Machina* appears to be yet another iteration of the age-old tale. Caleb, the main character, becomes infatuated with Ava, a hyperrealistic robot who is kept confined within a glass cell by her genius programmer Nathan. Already, we see striking parallels between the movie and the “damsel in distress” trope, with a knight in shining armor wanting to save the helpless damsel that is trapped by an evil dragon. However, instead of the typical happy ending for knight and damsel, we find that Ava kills Nathan and abandons Caleb to die, leaving much of the audience shocked and asking how Ava is able to betray Caleb after everything that he has done for her. This paper answers the question by showing that Ava is not a helpless “damsel” but instead a cunning con artist who has manipulated Caleb all along. Through this argument, Caleb’s unconscious desire to live out the “knight in shining armor” fantasy is revealed, and we see the deeply ingrained patriarchal gender expectations that lead to his delusions. From this revelation, we realize that our own assumptions are not too far off from Caleb’s, and we ask how and why these expectations have become part of our society.

Maia Chloe Lopes-Gilbert

**Let’s Talk Politics:  
An Analysis of Love, Language, and Political Turmoil in *Super Sad True Love Story***

In this paper, I analyze how the dissolution of communication and language between human beings leads to political turmoil, denial, and detachment from reality. I explore both Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* and George Orwell’s *Politics in the English Language*. In Shteyngart’s novel, the United States is falling to pieces around the two main characters—Eunice Park and Lenny Abramov—while their inability to communicate, with others or each other, leads them to live in a delusional bubble of love. The complex arguments, relationships, political battles and social norms that form both Lenny and Eunice’s romance and world take on whole new meaning when examined through the lens of Orwell’s *Politics in the English Language*. As George Orwell writes, the decline of a language “must ultimately have political and economic causes,” but an effect can in turn become a cause, setting off a viciously perpetual cycle. This domino effect of the dissolution of language, which can be observed in *Super Sad True Love Story*’s future dystopia, provides new insight into the political turmoil, technological weirdness, and persistent denial that surrounds the entire romance. In other words, in Lenny and Eunice’s world, language is dying. Technology and politics are killing it, and our country implodes as a result. Delusional, ignorant “love” becomes the only escape from the chaos. The scariest part is their dystopian society doesn’t seem like such a far reach from the direction our reality is going. Something must be done.

# Self-Help Section

Moderated by Megan Herrold, Department of English

Wednesday, April 13  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

**Justin Camden**

## **How to Stop the Robot Apocalypse: Ethics 101 for the Automation Generation**

In Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* collection of short stories he introduces the Three Laws of Robotics to provide an adequate framework that allows for us to focus on the ways that humans are in danger of becoming adversely dependent upon their technologically-enhanced creations. Because robots and technology in general are so forcefully bound to benefiting humanity in Asimov's world, they eventually surpass their masters in their ability to operate society. As productivity increases, humans continue to leave more and more up to the machines, happily indulging in the convenience gained at the cost of their agency with the eventual result being the servants becoming masters and the masters suddenly finding themselves outcast from their own world as slaves. Grounded in Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic this paper will reveal the ways in which Asimov's fictional warning is one that we should continue to heed, before proposing ethical coding as the salvation for what I refer to as the "automation generation."

**Conor Drakeley**

## **The Invisible Action: Uncovering the Power of Introspection in Denis Johnson's *Angels***

The road novel has traditionally been seen as one in which the physical journey of the protagonist is synonymous with their own internal journey or transformation. This universal understanding seems to be upheld time and again, as a protagonist leaves the safety of their home and enters unknown environments, while this action allows them to discover something new about themselves. However, theorist Alexandra Ganser has argued against this widely accepted view of road novels with her theory of confined mobility, which holds that although a character may be in constant physical motion, the biases and societal constructs associated with their home life keep them from experiencing growth. By not only upholding Ganser's theory, but complicating it, Denis Johnson's novel *Angels* makes an important distinction between productive and unproductive action. Jamie, the protagonist, undergoes consistent motion while on the run serving to present the illusion of action: we are encouraged to unconsciously think that she must be accomplishing something due to her motion. However, through further investigation, it is revealed that the "action" of motion Jamie undergoes while running is merely an illusion of doing. The reader is not the only one fooled by this illusion, as Jamie herself uses it as a coping mechanism of avoidance. Through close reading of the scene where Jamie is confined and forced to look inward, her first truly productive actions are revealed. Ultimately, introspection, a less profound or tangible action that is often overlooked, may be just what we should have been focusing on all along.

**Maria Ferreri**

## **A Library of Trouble: The Journey Through "Gender Trouble on Mother's Day"**

Gaining knowledge is not really about fancy diplomas, bigger paychecks, or shiny medals. Gaining knowledge is about bettering yourself, becoming more aware of the world, and figuring out some of the more puzzling aspects of life. We like to approach literature to attempt a greater level of comprehension, but more often than not our encounters leave us with more questions than answers. In fact, in a world of only books—Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel"—there exists a limitless amount of knowledge coupled with a limitless amount of questions. The only way some of these questions can ever be answered is through experience, determination, and desire, all of which cannot be obtained from words alone. Therefore, theory is not necessarily the source of knowledge; rather, it is only



the catalyst for a journey of self-discovery. My presentation uses Jord/ana Rosenberg's essay, "Gender Trouble on Mother's Day," to examine this claim in the context of Jord/ana's real-world example. In the end, it is determined that it truly is the person, not the book, that makes learning occur.

**Rafael Maarek**

**When Extraordinary is Ordinary:  
The Prevalence of Ordinary Inferiority in *The Rider***

Friedrich Nietzsche, sensing a new age of man that transcended the past, once wrote, "Behold, I teach you the Overman!" But what is man, then, if to Nietzsche we are all Overmen? When Tim Krabbé takes us through his fictionalized account of the Tour de Mont Aigoual, he isn't the ordinary man but a top-tier cyclist; he is our Overman. However, dreams of grandeur shift his conception of greatness until he too feels insignificant, unable to match his rival Reilhan. He laments his peer's abilities while ignoring his own, leaving us as readers to question the "inferiority complex" distorting his perception. How can he be so blind to view second place as an utter failure, considering so many fail worse than he? Do we act the same way, and, if so, why? In drawing from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and famed psychologist Alfred Adler's *Understanding Human Nature*, this paper explores how the pretense of inferiority influences the mindset of the athlete: how it aggravates a thirst for success, how it shapes a perception of competitors, how it holds the potential to compromise a career. Ultimately, it strives to reveal the role our sense of inadequacy plays in achieving our adequacy, yet it additionally warns of the associated dangers. If one attacks the Overman then one attacks oneself, thus condemning one to true, rather than simply perceived, inferiority.

**Taylor Whittemore**

**Hope Shlottman's Agency Against Coercion in Marvel's *Jessica Jones***

*Despite [Jessica's] several problems, she still hopes that, at her core, she might just be a hero.  
But only if she can save [Hope]. The ultimate innocent victim.*  
— Kilgrave, *Jessica Jones*

Marvel's *Jessica Jones* is a television show born of hybridization of genres between the superhero genre and the noir detective genre, and it features Jessica Jones being forced to confront Kilgrave, a dangerous man who has the ability to force others to do whatever he says with a simple verbal command. In this conflict, she strives to save the victim Kilgrave is currently forcing to concede to his will, a young woman named Hope Shlottman. Although Hope occupies the detective fiction's archetypical role of the victim, she still discovers agency against coercion and defies the conception that individuals that have been victimized are powerless. Additionally, Hope's agency resides within the realm of unconventional extremes, and these actions reveal that she fiercely refuses to submit to the coercion to which she is subjected. Despite the dark premise of her actions, there is an empowering message to be discovered: victims, particularly females, have the capacity to transcend the damsel-in-distress stereotype assigned to them and to instead claim agency and discover heroism.

# Through the Looking Glass

Moderated by Stephen Pasqualina, Department of English

Wednesday, April 13  
7:15 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

**Samuel Josephs**

## **“Successfully Survive a Horror Movie”: *Ex Machina*, Monsters, and the Other**

A common trope in slasher horror movies is the girl who gets away and lives is the virgin, and those who are shown having sex die. Although not so obviously a horror movie, *Ex Machina*, with minimal blood, guts, or gore, manages to be a terrifying movie. As a horror movie, *Ex Machina* aligns with this trope: Kyoko, one of Nathan’s previous robots, has sex with Nathan and dies, while Ava remains untouched and escapes her prison. If following this horror trope shows that Ava is the virgin girl who survives, what does that make of Nathan and Caleb? In Claire Davis’ *Embracing Alterity: Rethinking Female Otherness in Contemporary Cinema* she argues that Ava is an Other not only because she is a robot, but because she is a woman as well. The Other is traditionally seen as a monster, but Davis suggests that *Ex Machina* shows that the real monsters are Nathan and Caleb, standing in for the patriarchy. However, it is hard to watch Ava and not consider her monstrous. To escape the cruelty of the patriarchy, must Ava become a monster herself? And when she does defeat Nathan and Caleb, has she even truly escaped?

**Zoie Petrakis**

## **Housekeeping: *Xenia in Fingerbone***

What must be done about women’s perceptions of themselves as aliens and foreigners in their own societies? Perhaps more importantly, what must be done about our society’s struggle to accept and empathize with women who feel like outsiders? In her novel, *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson explores femininity and its association with being an outsider. Here, I examine the role that alienation from a society plays on the female individual. In Robinson’s novel, Sylvie Fisher, an itinerant wanderer, is called upon to care for her small-town nieces. Using Sylvie as a case study, I read the small town of Fingerbone as a microcosm for any homogenous society constrained by familiarity. I argue that the perception of an individual (particularly a woman) as a foreigner, a “xenos” figure, ultimately leads to her demise.

**Margaret Spencer**

## **Must Something Be Done? Reconciling Self with Surgical Change in Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love***

This essay will investigate the relationship between beauty normativity and identity in face of surgical modification by focusing on the controversially motivated Miss Lick of Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love*. While Lick seems to challenge the role of beauty in professionalism, her subversive practice actually reinforces female dependency on appearance. This investigation reveals that battling beauty standards by way of physical modification in fact plays directly into the devices that define it, and ultimately challenges cosmetic surgery as a psychological harm.

**Modupe Thompson**

## **A Precious Form of Beauty: A Black Woman’s Struggle with the American Standard of Beauty**

Susan Bordo, a prominent feminist theorist, writes that “we are surrounded by homogenizing and normalizing images—images whose content is... suffused with the dominance of gendered, racial, class, and other cultural

iconography.” This paper will use the stories of individuals struggling to define beauty for themselves in Susan Bordo’s essay “Material Girl” to analyze Lee Daniels’ film *Precious*. In *Precious*, Claireece Precious Jones, a dark-skinned, overweight, 16-year-old girl in junior high, fights to discover beauty and strength in order to improve life for herself and her two kids. This essay will also go beyond the film *Precious* to examine how women from differing backgrounds strive to achieve ideal forms of themselves through beauty enhancements. It will explore the detrimental effects that unachievable standards have on women’s self-worth, and consequently their ability to succeed in society.

**Cooper Yerby**

**Taping Together the Composition of Fear through Interrogating Introspection in *Eat The Document***

Imagine going to a carnival. Within this “carnival of your mind” there is a set of curved mirrors. The mirrors—mismatched, undulating with ripples, and composed of differing materials—represent the variety of ways one can view the composition of life and the self. Rather than investigating the components of our true selves, we prefer to observe others or ourselves tainted through the faulty lenses of reality-curved glass impeding the truth. If we seek actuality and authenticity, then why do we shy away from truth in popular culture? Why do we analyze the actions of others instead of our personal actions? Finally, is the abandonment of introspection impeding our progress? Through analyzing the character Mary, who possesses a fear of herself, in Dana Spiotta’s *Eat the Document*, I propose that our obsession with others is deeply rooted within the fear of ourselves. Rather than seeing our true selves in the mirror, we would rather break the mirror and only analyze our positive parts. Though finding the parts of ourselves, including the negative shards, and carefully piecing all fragments together, we may do something to combat the stagnation that comes with uncertainty regarding who we really are.

# USC Dornsife

Dana and David Dornsife  
College of Letters, Arts and Sciences