

# TROJAN HORSE

## Twenty-Sixth Annual Thematic Option Research Conference April 19 and 20, 2023

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

The Thematic Option conference provides an opportunity for undergraduate students to enrich their academic experience by publicly presenting their ideas and research. In response to a general call for papers, Thematic Option students developed topics under this year's theme, Trojan Horse, 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 subterfuge; subversion; concealment; a wolf in sheep's clothing; a cat's paw; sugarcoating the pill; smuggling; viruses and infection; malware; infiltration; the con and the trickster; the long game; gullibility and the mark; delusion; misunderstandings; miscommunication; illusion; disguises and costumes; passing; camouflage; stealth; war; us versus them; laying siege; lying in wait; sneak attacks; violence; death; revenge; heroism; underdogs; intelligence, ingenuity, and genius; hubris; winning at all costs; futility; overreaction; anything for love; construction; creativity; art; loyalty; teamwork; pride; legacy, myth, and legend; prophecy; storytelling; truth and lies; stalemate; inside/outside or within/without; surprise; plot twists; gotcha moments; layers; don't look a gift horse in the mouth; beware Greeks bearing gifts; or the student's own unique interpretation.

*keynote speaker*  
**Professor Vahé Peroomian**  
**Department of Physics and Astronomy**

Professor Peroomian has taught physics and astronomy for over 20 years, with a teaching philosophy centered on the success of not just a select few students, but each and every student enrolled in his classes. In that time he has repeatedly been recognized for excellence in teaching. With funding from NASA and the National Science Foundation, his research in the field of magnetospheric physics focuses on geomagnetic storms and their societal impacts, particularly the effects of solar flares on the Earth's radio signals and satellites. He has published numerous journal articles and serves as an author on the Serway and Jewett series of physics textbooks. Alongside his passion for astronomy, Professor Peroomian is an avid photographer, releasing two photo books, *A Photographic Journey of My Homeland, Armenia* and *Ode to the Eastern Sierra*. Additionally, he served three terms as an elected member of the Glendale Community College Board of Trustees. He is a beloved Thematic Option professor known for his popular CORE 103 course, "Human Exploration and Settlement of the Solar System," which employs cutting-edge science and iconic science fiction to conceptualize human life beyond our planet.

Professor Peroomian has taught physics and astronomy for over 20 years, with a teaching philosophy centered on the success of not just a select few students, but each and every student enrolled in his classes. In that time he has repeatedly

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*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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# The Kids Are Alright

Moderated by Professor Christopher Muniz  
The Writing Program

Wednesday, April 19  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Carnegie

**Vanessa Andrick**

**Love [in] the Void:  
Multiverse Theory, Existential Philosophy, and the In-Betweenness  
of the Chinese American Experience in *Everything Everywhere All at Once***

*We're all small and stupid.*  
—Evelyn, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Unfortunately, every universe's version of us *is*. The sensation of being everything, everywhere, all at once goes beyond the existential in the Daniels' 2022 science-fiction multiverse film of the same name; the liminality of the Asian American experience, of existing in the borderlands between identities and cultures, creates inner conflict. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* utilizes the premise of a multiverse to intensify awareness of our existence. I apply the physics and philosophy of multiverse theory to the film's representation of the multiverse to highlight how this perspective heightens existential dread compared to the single-universal scale. Chinese American identity is a central element to the experiences of the Wangs; I aim to explore the tension between the nihilism of Western existentialism and Asian existentialism as a representation of the challenges to developing meaning-of-life ideology for Asian American youth. The ways the members of the Wang family react to multiverse existentialism demonstrates that we need to love the void, the insignificance of our lives, and to choose to find meaning in others in defiance of this condition. This, ultimately, is our purpose: to "cherish these few specks of time."

**Elsie Bencke**

**Telling a Mother's Story:  
How the New Deal Helped Fill a Literary Void in "I Stand Here Ironing"**

The vast majority of the authors we focus on and deem "the greats" fit into a similar demographic profile: white men. Homer, Shakespeare, Voltaire, Dickens, T.S. Eliot, Orwell. The list goes on. Although surely these works are valuable to study, so are those of marginalized communities. Yet, diverse stories remain under-told within an oppressive system that disadvantages the poor, women, and people of color. Thus, it is imperative to go beyond baselessly declaring "listen to marginalized stories," and instead meaningfully address the root causes of why they remain under-told. During the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt acted on this with the Federal Writers' Project, reinvigorating the economy by employing diverse writers to tell their stories. One of these writers, Tillie Olsen, in "I Stand Here Ironing," sheds light on the lives of Great Depression-era working-class mothers, sharing the challenges of unreasonable societal expectations, financial hardship, and balancing individual needs with a mother's children. With federal support and by conveying these issues, Olsen helps fill a void in literary history.

**Yvette Castañeda**

**Like Mother, Like Daughter:  
Complex Mother-Daughter Relationships and Generational Cycles in *Pearl***

*Twenty years from now, would that be me?  
Would I be resigned to my fate, pushing my daughter toward the light so she could be free?  
Or pulling her down so I wouldn't be alone in the dark?*  
—Yamile Saied Méndez, *Furia*

The relationship between a mother and her daughter is the most fragile and complex relationship to exist. In the psychological melodrama and horror film, *Pearl*, Ti West and Mia Goth explore this connection through the tumultuous relationship between Pearl, and her immigrant, bitter mother, Ruth. *Pearl* is set during World War I and centers around the titular character who is isolated on her family's farm in Texas with her disabled father and overbearing mother. Afraid of facing her mother's fate, Pearl dreams of escaping the farm and becoming a dancer.

However, her mother stands in the way of her aspirations. On the surface, *Pearl* follows the traditional maternal melodrama, which bases its character of the “Bad Mother” in Freudian psychoanalytic theory to advocate for the rejection of the maternal. Utilizing the concepts of maternal envy and generational cycles, I argue that *Pearl* challenges the patriarchal authority by deviating from the traditional maternal melodrama. While the traditional maternal melodrama cites the “Bad Mother” as the culprit for her child’s moral downfall, Goth and West argue that Pearl’s inability to mend her relationship with her mother leads to her moral downfall and the continuation of generational cycles.

**Janette Fu**

### **Escaping the Home in Sarah Moss’s *Ghost Wall***

In Sarah Moss’s *Ghost Wall*, protagonist Silvie and her mother Alison are under the jurisdiction of Bill, Silvie’s father. He forces the family to participate in the reenactment of pre-modern hunter-gatherer traditions in the woods with Professor Slade and his students. There has been a protracted debate on trapping women in the home. Silvie acknowledges that “Without a house...it is much harder to restrict a person’s movement. Harder for a man to restrain a woman.” What happens when there is no physical home? As the novel progresses, Bill elucidates his family dynamic: upkeeping patriarchy through methods of domestic violence. Even though the family is in the wild, Bill manifests walls (psychological and physical) to construct a house to confine and alienate Sylvie and Alison. The home is supposed to be a place of comfort, which is why when Bill weaponizes the concept of making the home ubiquitous, it becomes an unsuspecting, yet powerful tool to oppress women. Bill does not need a physical house to restrict women, revealing the difficulty of escaping domestic abuse, and therefore, the home.

**Anya Jiménez**

### **This Is Not a Coffee Shop and I Cannot Be Your God**

This essay is an exploration of the visual and narrative language of Wim Wenders’ 1984 film *Paris, Texas*. It extends current secondary discourse surrounding themes of fatherhood, duality, and Americana by asserting that the film’s central character, Travis, is afflicted with an aimlessness symptomatic of fatherlessness, which is parallel to a broader, more existential Godlessness, as an extension directly related to the Christian concept of a paternal God. By analyzing the visual composition and subtextual content of the film, this essay connects Travis’s inability to reconcile his own humanity with an existential desire for paternity, guidance, and consequently, the capital “F” Father. It explores the relationship between the natural landscapes and the man-made landscapes of the American Southwest, the relationship between Hunter and Travis, and how those two relationships relate to one another. Can Travis’s repentance save him from damnation? With his simultaneous Godliness and Godlessness, can he face the world he made in his image? Was there ever a home for him in the first place? Or was it all just one great punchline?

# Marginalia

Moderated by Professor Brett Sheehan  
Van Hunnicks Department of History and  
Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures

Wednesday, April 19  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

## Izzy Del Gaudio

### Care for the Caregiver

Many of us are fortunate to go our whole lives only facing mild health issues, like seasonal allergies or the common cold. Hospitals are merely a place we go for annual checkups, until our bodies age and naturally begin to decline. With that freedom, there are endless possibilities to participate in society on our own terms. Yet, those that are disabled find that time is non-synchronous, challenging the normative societal view of progression. So how do those with disabilities experience time differently? In "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," disability scholar Ellen Samuels explains that disability has the power to extract individuals from time based on their diagnosis. However, this paper will expand the idea of crip time to the caregiver, who plays a vital role in supporting individuals who cannot care for themselves. But who cares for the caregiver? Are caregivers' lives bound to crip time as are those who are disabled? This paper argues that the caregiver is also drawn into this orbit of timelapse as they dedicate their lives to the comfort of another.

## Hector Espinoza

### "A Room of One's Own": Virginia Woolf and Economic Silencing of the Lower Class

Virginia Woolf's argument in "A Room of One's Own" is best illustrated through Woolf's imagined Judith Shakespeare who is equal in genius and potential to her great brother William Shakespeare. Yet, Judith cannot express her genius because society denies her the means to rise to such prominence. Specifically, in her time, she cannot earn a sufficient income on her own, thus contributing to her ultimate suicide. The tragedy of Judith Shakespeare underscores Woolf's argument that, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Although "A Room of One's Own" is perceived to be for a feminist audience, this paper extends Woolf's argument to those of low income because they are also ignored by society. In doing so, this paper emphasizes the necessity of striking a balance between work and leisure time. This balance is often unattainable for the lower class due to lower wages. As such, this paper puts forth affordable higher education as the solution that will help the lower class receive employment that supplies a living wage thus striking a balance between work and leisure time while realizing Woolf's argument.

## Tiya Jain

### Redefining the Narrative: A Rejection of Mainstream Colonialist Values in Silko's *Ceremony*

In *Ceremony*, Leslie Marmon Silko beautifully rejects mainstream white colonialist values, most strikingly in her narration of Tayo's perspective. As a Mexican Laguna Native American navigating America with World War II post-traumatic stress disorder, Tayo's reconnection with nature morphs his understanding of society and himself. Throughout *Ceremony*, Silko's Native American cultural values, which honor the land, conflict with mainstream capitalist values, forcing Tayo to grapple with both. In the context of *Ceremony*, this paper explores the following questions: how can minorities revitalize their cultures beyond unjust colonialist culture, and how can this reconnection with their unique cultures uplift people's self-fulfillment? Existing scholarship broadly discusses the challenges of acceptance in the face of white hegemony, as well as the concept of Native American nationalism. More specifically, this paper asks: how does Silko wield the power of narration to focus audiences on a marginalized perspective of society? By rooting our discussion in Tayo's reconnection with nature and delving into the emotional perspective Silko lends readers, we can unlock the potential for rejecting normalized values enforced by colonialist white society. Through the language of the novel itself, Silko enables the possibility of restructuring American society with a more balanced inclusivity of cultures and their values.

Mary Muir

**How to Kill God:  
An Examination of Latin American Resistance to Religious Colonization  
through *La casa del fin de los tiempos***

I know two things you don't. First, time isn't real. At least, not in the way you think it should be. Second, you've never heard of Alejandro Hidalgo's *La casa del fin de los tiempos*, known in English as *The House at the End of Time*. Now, this last thing I don't blame you for; after all, there are maybe three English-written academic sources about *La casa* and that's being generous. I aim to change this, drawing on Charles St-Georges's ideas of religious (a)temporality in his work "The Temporal Trope of the Ghost and the Rhetorical Figure of the Family in Hispanic Horror Films of the 2000s" as a lens through which to view this film. Examining the concepts of death, religion, and time, I intend to illuminate how *La casa* reflects the persistence of indigenous Latin American cultures underneath the onslaught of European religious colonization. Thank you for your time, it's not coming back.

Claire Qiu

**Where Do You Come From?:  
Redefining and Restoring the American Dream in *Yellow Face***

Just how American are you? Are you more American than me? At first glance, David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face* is a play about, well, yellow face, and the history of anti-Asian racism that it evokes. From consistent suspicion of their allegiance to exclusion acts, both historical and in race-based college admissions, Asian Americans have a long list of grievances against America, even as they continue to prove themselves the "model minority" with high rates of professional success. Upon closer examination, however, *Yellow Face* does more than victimize Asian Americans; instead, it expands beyond the question of race and discusses the concept of an American dream that has begun to modernize, whether we want it to or not. Increasingly, the American dream has become muddied by questions of race (do some races deserve opportunities more than others?) and glass ceilings (do people expect, unfairly—or perhaps fairly?—more from Asians, the "model minority"?). This paper argues that, with *Yellow Face*, Hwang calls for a restoration of the American dream as it was originally meant to be viewed, in its purest, most equal—one might even call it capitalistic—intent. *Yellow Face* exaggerates the questions of race, racism, and their respective deservedness to an extreme that forces the audience to question why we bother to define and reserve the American dream at all. The answer put forth by Hwang is that maybe we shouldn't—and that in not doing so, the American dream might actually serve us better.

# Now You See Me, Now You Don't

Moderated by Professor Anthony Kemp  
Department of English

Wednesday, April 19  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

**Minseo "Heidy" Cho**

## **That's So Not Fetch: The Depiction of Africa in *Mean Girls***

Where do you draw the line between comedy and racism? Does comedy excuse problematic portrayals of non-Western cultures? Is the context of production an excuse for racist depictions of Africa? October 3rd, in the pop culture world, is commonly known as *Mean Girls* day: a day to, in some ways, celebrate the iconic teen movie *Mean Girls* that furthered conversations about female relationships, harmful gossip, and so on. However, one area that is consistently overlooked is the depiction of Africa throughout the film. With the main character, Cady Heron, being from "Africa," there is a constant comparison between Africa and America, as well as stereotypical comments made about the former. Through this essay, I aim to explore the impact of this depiction, as well as the motivations behind this portrayal, using Edward Said's *Orientalism* to provide a more theoretical perspective on this topic. Additionally, the creator, Tina Fey, and her work and identity as a comedian will be considered to better understand her intentions for this film. Ultimately, regardless of Tina Fey's motivations, *Mean Girls*' portrayal of Africa is harmful, and while we should not completely boycott the film, we should acknowledge the racist rhetoric that is being perpetuated.

**Rachael Christensen**

## **The Ivy League Obsession: *Why We Need New Names***

The prevalent draw to the Ivy League brand contains an alarming message: who is really targeted to aspire to Brown's or Cornell's class of 2026? Noviolet Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names* shows that elite pre-made identities are pushed onto immigrants as a result of the bullying they endure upon arrival to America. While Jacob H. Parker has been able to define what the Ivy League brand has to offer, and Terrance Musanga has explored the significance of Bulawayo's novel in telling the immigrant story, this paper draws a connection between the two, focusing on the main character, Darling, who makes it possible to see the trajectory from migration to obsession. Darling endures bullying from her peers which stems from colonization. There are similarities between the way the colonizers came to America to simply establish a New England and the way the people surrounding Darling attempt to impose a new identity onto her. The novel explores why there is a push on immigrants to attend Ivy League institutions through the connection between the displacement of identity and obsession of elite signifiers in search of a new name.

**Isabella Flores**

## **The Ugly Truth about Beauty in Weike Wang's *Chemistry***

Do me a favor: think of a beautiful person. Imagine them as vividly as you can. Is this person male or female? Do you know them personally, or are they a celebrity? Are they the same race as you? Your answer to these questions may prompt you to reflect on how you define beauty. The unnamed narrator of Weike Wang's novel *Chemistry* defines beauty in two damaging, yet relatable ways. To her, beauty is a competition, and beauty is whiteness. For context, she is Asian American and has a beautiful mother who constantly criticizes her appearance. She idealizes women like Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly, and, well, who wouldn't? So, think back to that individual you imagined earlier. First of all, are they white? If they are and you are not, why do you think this happened? And second of all, does thinking about them for too long make you feel worse about your own appearance? This paper considers all of these questions and more through an analysis of *Chemistry* and contends that the narrator has a lot to teach us about the way we gravitate toward comparison and how minorities may subscribe to white standards of beauty.



Sun Jin

**The Flight Risk:  
“Helicopter Story” and the Definition of Dysphoria**

*Our aircraft is wounded in its body and in its crew.  
We are propelled by disaster. We are moving swiftly.*  
—Isabel Fall, “Helicopter Story”

Isabel Fall’s controversial short story “Helicopter Story” subverts the transphobic meme “I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter.” It is a military science fiction centered around a former woman named Barb who has physically transitioned into an attack helicopter pilot. The DSM-5 defines dysphoria as “a marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and natal gender,” essentially mental dissatisfaction with one’s assigned sex. However, Fall’s narrative makes gender dysphoria physically tangible. She calls it a malfunction to be reported out of fear that it will cause problems and argues that the effects of gender dysphoria are life or death. Thus, the definition of dysphoria within “Helicopter Story” is consequence. In Fall’s world, there is nothing strictly psychological about dysphoria—it is present, worrying, and a primary risk. Establishing an intersection between this evolving definition and the exacerbation of dysphoria in the military, I will argue that “Helicopter Story” invites us to consider dysphoria as something far more consequential and all-affecting than we may think. Fall’s assignment of higher metaphorical consequence to dysphoria poses a question: is the flight risk an isolated factor, or a greater multifaceted issue hidden within metal casing and human skin?

Floyd Stott

**The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire:  
Woman as a Burning Effigy in the Struggle for Workplace Reform**

As long as revolution has been commonplace in society, women have been at the forefront. Innumerable civil rights movements, labor reforms, and social justice organizations have been spearheaded by prominent female figures. Why is it, then, that so often they are overlooked in our history books and even more shockingly, our legislature. This paper seeks to examine the pervasive overlooking of women in society, specifically American labor culture. The Triangle Shirtwaist fire was a landmark calamity in the fight for workers rights and labor reform, and through the lens of this period of suffering in the lives of the American workers, one can more adequately examine the circumstances that brought activist women into the spotlight, then shoved them out. Using Rose Schneiderman’s groundbreaking speech in the wake of this tragedy, this paper ponders and perhaps peers deeper into the underlying culture of revolutions that contributes to the erasure of female figures.

Dean Warren

**Code Switching, Become Your Own Oppressor:  
Racial Capitalism and Identity Erasure in Boots Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You***

After initially struggling to make sales in his new telemarketing job, Cassius is offered advice from a coworker: “use your white voice.” This small yet profound moment jump-starts a complex depiction of capitalism and the racially marginalized working class. The film explores Cassius’s experience attempting to climb the professional ladder, reaching a climax as Cassius faces an ultimatum of success or morality. His ultimatum and experiences throughout the story are intended to depict what Boots Riley labels the “good fight.” The good fight signifies a larger concept of marginalized people participating in a radical change to unjust systems. Riley accomplishes his intention through several recurring symbols and tools, the most prominent being a dubbed White Voice. The voice’s nature starts as harmless and comedic and then transforms into a more sinister representation of whiteness as a symbol of power. This paper argues that the White Voice reinforces ideas of Racial Capitalism and suggests that identity erasure is necessary for the racially marginalized working class to succeed in a capitalist system. It also explores the implications of the White Voice in everyday code-switching and how “harmlessly” imitating whiteness contributes to a system aimed at destroying racially marginalized people.

# Question Everything

Moderated by Professor Emily Anderson  
Department of English and College Dean of Undergraduate Education

Wednesday, April 19  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Gutenberg

**Aidan Fingeret**

## **Clones Are People Two: The Ethics of Creation in *Never Let Me Go***

Is it morally acceptable to create human clones in order to harvest their organs? While it may seem simple, this question constantly confronts readers of Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*. Although the novel provides a clear answer to that question through the terrible lives the clones lead, it also raises questions about the ethics of other forms of creation. Savior siblings, children that are conceived in order to save the life of a living child with a fatal illness, are the real-world concept most similar to the clones from the novel. The novel, through parallels between savior siblings and the clones, takes a stance against savior siblings. This stance raises questions about what it is that makes certain reasons to have a child ethical and others not. Why is it that having a child in order to save another child's life is unethical, but having a child because it's time to start a family is ethical? This reading of *Never Let Me Go* raises this question and demonstrates the need for greater discussion surrounding the ethics of all creation.

**Ginger Hunter**

## **Critical Race Theory and Its Post-Racial Utopias: Du Boisian Philosophy in "The Comet"**

A W.E.B. Du Boisian future, as presented in "The Comet," depicts an anti-racist "could be" future in which race functions at the center of a "utopian" society. "The Comet" unfurls a complex dilemma between ignorance of the social complexities of race and pushing for anti-racist ideology by confronting racial prejudice in systems upheld in daily life. Du Bois's philosophy allows the reader to reflect on their biases while paralleling the anti-racist foundations of critical race theory (CRT) as we know it today. CRT grounds itself in being confrontational toward an inherently racist past through the means of destroying racist systems. Similarly, Du Bois's writing ultimately ends in a "failed utopia," where his white characters are on the cusp of ascension into an understanding of race, and then immediately fall flat. But why? Can we confront the problems of systemic racism without first being anti-racist and creating a distinction between white and Black? No. This paper argues that the white characters' reluctance to morph their current racism into a futuristic idea of race's importance bars them from escaping the systems of segregation and white supremacy, keeping them tethered to a life of comfort rather than one of anti-racism.

**Jerry Li**

## **Reconciling Humanism and Alterity in Italo Calvino's *Mr. Palomar***

*Yes, we do owe animals an explanation, if not a reparation ...*  
—Italo Calvino, *Saggi*

What responsibilities do we have to animals? Italo Calvino's *Mr. Palomar* answers this question through 27 everyday interactions the titular character has with the world, where he seeks to find the universal truth in each one. Humorous and light-hearted, the novel shows Mr. Palomar's frustration and failure to generate one universal formula of rationality. Specifically, in each of the seven instances where Mr. Palomar encounters an animal, he finds it difficult to rationalize those animals through a humanist, or human-centered, lens. Although the alterity, or otherness, of these nonhuman animals initially leads Mr. Palomar away from humanism, he continues to revert back to it. This paper argues that "The loves of the tortoises," where Mr. Palomar witnesses the mating of two tortoises, is summative of all his interactions with animals. Mr. Palomar's lack of a humanist universal truth is the universal truth Calvino tries to present. By showing readers our need to coexist with animals, Calvino restores animals' agency and subjectivity reduced by Anthropocene institutions and beliefs, and, consequently, problematizes the potential limitations of our agency as humans. So, not only do we "owe animals an explanation," as the epigraph suggests, but we also owe ourselves one.

**Samantha Pollard**

**Love is a Battlefield:  
Scopophilia, Death, and Proclamations of Love in *The Virgin Suicides***

Sofia Coppola's 1999 film *The Virgin Suicides* is an exploration of adolescence and longing. Set in 1970s Detroit, the film is narrated by a group of adult men who, as teenagers, develop an obsession with their neighbors' five daughters: the suicidal Lisbon sisters. The boys spend the rest of their lives indulging in an insatiable obsession with the Lisbon sisters as they question the girls' motives for group suicide and whether or not it could have been possible to stop them. Witnessing the girls commit suicide halts the boys' development; a part of them will always be fantasizing about the elusive Lisbon sisters. During the tragic events of the film, multiple discomfiting proclamations of love are made by the male characters. These proclamations are troubling, as they are associated with death and non-consensual voyeurism and often appear to be directly contradictory to the unloving actions of the boys. Through analyzing the narrative and cinematic elements of these proclamations, as well as Laura Mulvey's concept of scopophilia—the act of receiving pleasure through observation—this paper aims to examine how romantic love is thematically portrayed in the film to gain an understanding of what it indicates about those who claim to have felt it.

**Lucia Zhang**

**Love to Hate Her:  
Romanticizing Mental Illness in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation***

How can you interpret a book with an insufferable main character? Is it satire, or is it relatable? Few main characters are as easy to hate as the unnamed narrator of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh. The novel revolves around the narrator's goal to spend a "year of rest and relaxation" by taking dozens of medications. Self-described as "tall and thin and blond and pretty and young," she is a casually racist, apathetic, Ivy League graduate living off of her inheritance in Manhattan. Despite her negative qualities, many reviewers hailed her as relatable and realistic. She is the embodiment of the "sad girl," an aesthetic that glamorizes female mental illness. The aesthetic is so appealing because it reinforces established societal values of attractiveness, whiteness, and privilege. However, despite Moshfegh clarifying that she intended for the novel to be satire and "not real," the overwhelming allure of the "sad girl" aesthetic unintentionally perpetuates the exact thing Moshfegh attempted to critique. In doing so, the novel raises a key question: what responsibility do artists have for the impact of their work?

# Super/Natural

Moderated by Professor William Handley  
Department of English

Wednesday, April 19  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Aiko Milagros Abo Dominguez**

## **Magical Realism: Keeping It Real with Colonialism in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony***

Magical realism, obliterating Western linear standards of time and space in literature, acts as an ideal medium for colonized voices to viscerally express their historically silenced narratives. The genre is rooted in real experiences and perspectives of non-Western peoples, like Leslie Marmon Silko, a Laguna Pueblo-Mexican-white author raised with Laguna beliefs. Where a Western lens depicts the universe as individualistic and linear, non-Western cultures, like the Laguna Pueblo, appreciate the universe as one continuous community. This perspective is reflected in the non-linearity of magical realism. For Silko, her novel, *Ceremony*, is not fantasy or magic; it's a radical expression of her cultural beliefs in the face of Western standards, told through the experiences of protagonist Tayo. Previous literature connects Silko's use of magical realism to her community's interconnected world view, in turn creating a text transgressing definitions of femininity, race, and even distinction between nature and humanity. However, this paper argues this is possible only when she introduces "witchery" through magical realism, which is the force proliferating false ideals steeped in consumption and individualism: the antithesis to Laguna values. It is detrimental to all, including those who live its lies. Silko vividly illustrates the violence it perpetuates in Tayo's life. Building on the works of Saleh, O'Brien, and other scholars relevant to *Ceremony*, this paper highlights Silko's juxtaposition of her community's values with the harmful values of witchery through magical realism, thus granting us a prolific presentation of the pitfalls of colonialist Western practices.

**Cecily Chung**

## **Immaterial Immortality: Iconoclastic Theory in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle***

What happens when we die? Do we go to Heaven? Hell? Somewhere in between, somewhere else entirely? With her 1962 novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Shirley Jackson throws a new answer into the ring: we don't. The Blackwood Mansion is full of *things*. Gold things, silver things, sparkly things, and chief among these things are three in particular: the Blackwood family china, Lucy Blackwood's portrait, and the Blackwood food preserves. These three possessions respectively correlate with a different phase of the Mansion itself—the Home, the House, and the Moon—before a fire and mob seemingly destroy them. Yet, they are only destroyed on a material level. This paper analyzes these objects on an *immaterial* level, utilizing the theories of art historian David Freedberg, who argues that idols are indestructible. As religious items, idols contain divine presence but, more generally, are objects with any supernatural presence. This paper aims to prove that each of the three objects above can (and should) be classified as idols imbued with the supernatural presence of the late Blackwoods. The application of Freedberg's theory then leads to the conclusion that, not only are the Blackwoods' possessions indestructible, but the Blackwoods themselves are as well.

**Logan Dorothy Falkel**

## **What Would Five Dead Girls Tell Us about Our American Dream?**

They died, and the neighborhood watched. They never said a word, so people could only wonder: why did they do it? By any account, Jeffery Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* is a haunted tale of five sisters' deaths, but what if we looked at it through the lens of a ghost story? If we let the dead girls speak, this paper contends they'd have something to tell us not only about their world, but about ours, too. Their death was a statement. *The Virgin Suicides* is often considered to be a commentary on the collapse of the 1970s Detroit auto industry, and with it modern American manufacturing. This setting provides a microcosm of what happens when the critical "American lifestyle" collapses. Taking into consideration the haunted nature of what remains, the girls' suicides can be applied to the implications of Detroit's collapse, and with it, the figurative collapse of the American Dream.

**Abriana Stewart**

**A “Landing Place” in the “Valley of the Shadow of Death”:  
Psalm 23 and *The Stone Gods***

Have you ever felt adrift at sea with no destination, with no one to discover your message in a bottle? This state of being is the common reality in Janette Winterson's dystopian societies of *The Stone Gods*, individuals *existing* as if floating in a dream but never truly *living*. The protagonist, Billie, lacks a “landing place,” defined as a purpose which one may rest in and return to, embedded in love with something to guide the way. This paper examines the convergence of religion and science as a means to provide such a “landing place” of constant safety, livability, directionality, and soul-sustaining purpose to restore the dying planet and the essence of humanity. This paper explores this intersection through the lens of Psalm 23 and the adjacent symbolism of stars within soul-sucking dystopias mimicking hope-filled utopias, hauntingly not dissimilar from our modern societies. This paper also defines the soul as the essential component of the human form, justifying its need to be fulfilled. However, Winterson complicates the roles of science and religion with simultaneous references to satanism and faulty scientific theory, challenging her readers to forge meaning beyond these frameworks. Therefore, this paper concludes by examining artistic expression and authentic love as alternatives to establishing a site of purposeful landing.

**Martin Yoon**

**Savior of Humanity or Victim of Human Rationality?:  
Idealization of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind***

On the edge of extinction, a wise, courageous, and empathetic teenage princess saves the world through self-sacrifice and resurrection! Isn't this the best way to end a movie? Hayao Miyazaki's science fiction features a post-apocalyptic world where the remaining humans struggle against an expanding toxic jungle, Fukai, with the lost technology of the distant past. While Miyazaki's environmentalism manifests itself throughout the aesthetics of the landscapes, I will focus on the characteristics of the protagonist, Nausicaä, and subsequently how she deviates from a typical heroine model. Professor Daisuke Akimoto argues in his essay that her self-sacrifice and empathy for all living creatures mark her as a peaceful mediator between environment and humans. However, this paper will demonstrate how the idealization of Nausicaä, in fact, testifies to the victimhood of the younger generation because of the hubris of human rationality. It also enters the discussion on human rationality in which feudalism and dependence on technology play a critical role in contrasting it with the harmonic nature of the environment.

**Fenris Zimmer**

**The Divine Call of Silence:  
A Theology of the Event in *Blood Meridian***

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is a ruthlessly violent novel, and its bleak veneer has led many critics to interpret the work as atheist nihilism. The historical novel follows “the kid,” a teenager who has run away from home and traverses a brutal and bleak American West on the heels of the Mexican-American war. These nihilist interpretations, however, gloss over the subtle spirituality which peeks through in the sedate interludes of the novel. This paper argues that *Blood Meridian* in fact lies on the other side of the range of critical interpretations, and the kid's move away from ruthlessness toward compassion highlights divinity in an age which can often seem cruel and godless. Through immanent critique, this paper uncovers the novel's particular intellectual position and investigates the many ways critics have interpreted it. The postsecular philosophy of John D. Caputo perfectly captures the sort of theology envisaged by *Blood Meridian*. McCarthy's place in history is a unique spiritualism—an expression of the divine which lives in each moment and action.

# Dazed and Confused

Moderated by Professor Roberto Diaz  
Departments of Latin American and Iberian Cultures and Comparative Literature

Wednesday, April 19  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

**Sophia Berry**

## **False Narratives: Finding the Truth within *Fun Home***

Alison Bechdel's memoir *Fun Home*, is a tragicomic that meditates on the period of her life when she simultaneously came out to her family and her father died. She depicts her childhood, young adulthood, and relationship with her father as she comes into her nascent sexuality, and throughout the memoir depicts her struggle to come to terms with both his death and his own queerness. Bechdel uses extensive archival material, recreating letters, diaries, and family photographs to authentically depict her life. By reading *Fun Home* we can examine the impossibilities of memoir. This paper examines the expectation that memoir must achieve some impossible level of realism. Instead, we must focus on the author's true goals. In this case, Bechdel uses her memoir to connect her own life to the larger narrative of the queer world as an attempt to find her own place within queer history. Through this connection she essentially novelizes her life, turning the truth into fiction, while constantly attempting to appear as authentic as possible as a way to gain credence to her narrative. This fictionalization of real life is representative of memoirists' desire to find meaning within their lives.

**Lyana Calyanis**

## **A Not-So-Subtle Auditory Suggestion: Burnett's Magic with Music in *Killer of Sheep***

What does slaughtering sheep to classical music have to do with the political climate of 1970s Watts, Los Angeles? Charles Burnett forges this connection and does so impactfully in his 1978 film *Killer of Sheep*. Burnett depicts the life of a slaughterhouse worker named Stan, and gives viewers glimpses into his family life and his community. Among themes of children, poverty, and murder, Burnett uses the soundtrack of the film as an artistic tool to guide the audience to a more specific matter: the Watts Riots of 1965. These riots had a disastrous and lasting effect on the community of Watts, and Burnett incorporates the implications of this event into *Killer of Sheep* with music. By constructing scenes in which the music obviously contrasts the visuals, Burnett calls the viewer's attention to the deeper meanings within the scene. When Stan slaughters the sheep, he's being forced into a violent profession due to his socioeconomic status, in the same way that the community of Watts was forced into violence as a reaction to police brutality. This paper explores how Burnett uses music to highlight the way in which Stan's life is emblematic of the struggles of the Watts community.

**Sophia Cho**

## **An Interrogation of Insanity in *The Crazies***

What would happen if the world was struck with a virus that makes people go crazy? George A. Romero provides an answer to this question in his 1973 film, *The Crazies*. Set in the small town of Evans City, Pennsylvania, *The Crazies* outlines the aftermath of the Trixie virus outbreak, which causes the infected to become homicidal and hysterical. Defined by intense militarization, paranoia, and death, the film is often viewed as a political commentary on the secrecy of the government and as a social commentary on the breakdown of society in the face of turmoil. Other scholars highlight the significance of the virus itself: how the virus functions and the nature of its effects. This paper aims to further these inquiries and explore the essence of insanity itself. This paper centralizes the plot of *The Crazies* and focuses on the dysfunctional family structures in conversation with the concept of insanity, which serves as the boundary between familiarity and unfamiliarity. Thus, this paper will answer a different question: what is "crazy" and how does George A. Romero elucidate the concept in *The Crazies*?

**Kiyana Hayes**

**The Cost of Color Blindness:  
An Examination of Transracialism and Post-Racialism in *Little Fires Everywhere***

Who do you imagine yourself as when you are reading fiction? The main character, the villain, the side character who doesn't get enough attention? When there is no physical description for a character, readers are free to make a character look like whomever they want and inherently, they always project a person they are able to sympathize with onto a character they have not and will never be able to see. This essay discusses how this seemingly insignificant projection onto "raceless" characters like Mia and Pearl in *Little Fires Everywhere* leads society to a place where we ask: is race even important anymore if it is interchangeable in literature? Neglecting the importance of race ignores the significant implications that it has in our world. Art usually imitates life, so why would authors ever write a novel where there are not enough physically defining features that make race obvious?

**Bianca Ravestoot**

**The Endless Maze of Cinematic Ambiguity:  
Wait, Where Are We Now?**

Psychopaths lurking at the edge of a dark scene. Anonymous callers with an unsettling level of knowledge about one's whereabouts. The tropes of cinematic horror can cause quite the tense scare, yet none can be attributed to a film's persistent relevance in academic discussion. Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of *The Shining* has been a major focus of literature for over forty years; fans and critics alike take a shot at interpreting the movie's events, or explain a specific metaphorical subtext only accessible from their viewing of the film. While Jack Nicholson's performance is certainly noteworthy, it's not inherently clear why so many people continue to pour over this cult-classic. Couldn't scholars investigate another work with or without an axe-wielding killer? Not necessarily. So then, what's so special about *The Shining*? This paper explores the relationship between the film's ambiguity, viewer experience, and the power of seemingly indefinite interpretations.

**Jeb Wu**

**Waiting for the End of Fascism:  
A Historical Analysis of *Godot* through Samuel Beckett's Eyes**

How does one counter fascist narratives using art? This is a question Samuel Beckett sought to answer as he lived through the reign of Nazi Germany, and he came to his conclusion in the play *Waiting for Godot*. The play follows two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who engage in a variety of philosophical, existential, and religious discussions and miscellaneous encounters as they wait for the titular Godot, who never arrives. Though it has many interpretations, *Waiting for Godot* holds special relevance to its specific historical era and its ideology: Nazi fascism. However, the play surpasses its original historical context and remains relevant even to the modern day. This paper analyzes Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as an allegory and satirization of a fascist society, specifically Nazi Germany. Using Beckett's own diaries from the period, this paper defends the play's postmodernist interpretation as Beckett's response to fascism and analyzes the rhetorical devices Beckett uses to counter fascist narratives.

# Express Yourself

Moderated by Professor Nancy Lutkehaus  
Departments of Anthropology and Political Science and International Relations

Wednesday, April 19  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

**Abi Bridgeman**

## **Behind Pearly Smiles Lie Backstabbing Bitches: How Society's Obsession with "Nice" Is Destroying Female Youth**

*What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and everything nice.*  
—19th century nursery rhyme

Historically, female identity has been centered around correct feminine behavior where women are encouraged to constantly express only positive emotions— in essence, "Be Nice." However, when girls experience the other side of the emotional spectrum, they are condemned for the expression of perfectly normal and healthy negative emotions such as anger, envy, or disgust. As a result, these emotions are suppressed. On the outside, it may seem as though this emotional suppression is effective and brings harmony to Girl World, but is that really the case? While the sociological concept of "nice" is meant to create kinder, more empathetic women, is it actually working? Not at all. In fact, it's getting worse.

**Matthew Busenlener**

## **The Inexpressible Nature of Experience: Investigating Communication Barriers in *The Left Hand of Darkness***

Can our mental states be accurately represented by others? Can sufficiently steep communication barriers be resolved? Ursula K. Le Guin approaches these questions in her science fiction novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Le Guin explores the nature of misunderstanding through earthborn envoy Genly's challenges in connecting with the biologically androgynous inhabitants of the planet Gethen. The absence of gender as a social construct amongst the Gethenians generates an immense cultural barrier for Genly that disrupts all attempts at mutual understanding. While other scholars argue that Genly does eventually manage to see beyond his strictly gendered worldview, this paper contends that he fails to accurately represent the subjective character of the Gethenian experience. Highlighting Thomas Nagel's theories on the inaccessibility of consciousness, I argue that their unique psychological frameworks constrain Genly and the Gethenians from understanding what it is like to be the other through any form other than projection. While this dynamic is heightened by the intensity of psychological distinction between the two to begin with, the subjective nature of consciousness challenges the extent to which our mental states can be represented by others at all.

**Mina Jung**

## **Uncanny Mechanical Animals: Reevaluating Art's Role in Empathy in *Never Let Me Go***

Art reveals humanity: would you agree with this assumption? It's an assumption that seems to be debunked in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*, where art created by human clones, who are destined to donate organs until death, fails to change "normal" non-clone humans' perception that they are soulless entities. As such, multiple literary scholars posit that art fails to elicit empathy within the novel. However, these scholars gloss over the one example of when art does elicit empathy—when the narrator Kathy feels warm concern for illustrations of mechanical animals drawn by her lover Tommy. Given that Kathy and Tommy are clones themselves—perceived as less-than-human by "normals" within the novel and by readers—this scene questions whether empathy must depend on the perception of one's "human-ness." This paper argues that readers form a new concept of empathy as they relate to Kathy's response to Tommy's drawings, subverting the feeling of the uncanny that the clones originally evoke. If empathy, often associated by literature with the essence of being "human" or having a soul, can be elicited by art either created by or representative of non-human entities, then *Never Let Me Go* challenges the traditional definition of empathy. Tommy's drawings and our relatability to Kathy's response to them suggest that instead of art revealing the humanity within us, art can reveal our less-than-human nature—the product of living in a modern, technologically-advancing world.



**Samantha Ng**

**“The more you deny, the stronger I get.”:  
Monstrous Materiality in *The Babadook***

Jennifer Kent’s *The Babadook* doesn’t sugarcoat the brutal realities of motherhood and grief. Beginning six years after its protagonist, Amelia, loses her husband while driving to give birth to her son Samuel, *The Babadook* unflinchingly chronicles the horror, hurt, and heartbreak that occurs when the monster that Samuel speaks of becomes terrifyingly real. Since the film’s release, countless scholars have investigated the Babadook’s significance, generally agreeing that the monster symbolizes the shame and sadness that Amelia suppresses as she struggles to cope with her grief. However, all this extensive research around the monster’s allegorical nature tempts audiences to overlook the Babadook’s most obvious, important feature: his tangible existence. Building on the works of scholars, psychoanalysts, and social theorists, this paper explores how the Babadook’s symbolic significance ties to his materiality, investigating why it is so essential that he is made physically real rather than existing solely as an invisible tormentor or imaginary spirit. Through this exploration of the Babadook’s terrifying tangibility, this paper reveals how the film’s depiction of its titular monster allows its audience to better understand and sympathize with Amelia, creating an honest, humanizing, and ultimately hopeful portrayal of a grieving mother’s adjustment to living and loving after loss.

**Imani-Unheri Whyte**

**Embodying Anger:  
How Black Women Resist Exploitation in *Set It Off***

Is there power in anger? F. Gary Gray’s 1996 film *Set It Off* answers this question with a resounding “yes.” The four main characters, Frankie, Cleo, Stony, and Tisean, are impoverished Black women from the projects of Los Angeles who are overworked and underpaid janitors. They are defined by limiting caricatures of Black women including the mule, the Jezebel, and the mammy, which facilitate and justify their labor exploitation. Because of these archetypes, their value and personhood are reduced to their labor. Indignant at their oppression and desperate to improve their material conditions, they decide to rob banks. The main characters use the only tool available to them to combat oppressive power structures: anger. In this way, robbery becomes the outward expression of their rage. Embodying their anger, instead of suppressing it as white society expects, allows the women to separate their identities from labor and assert their humanity; anger is their revolutionary weapon.

# Gender Reveal

Moderated by Professor Peter Westwick  
Thematic Option Honors Program and Van Hunnicks Department of History

Wednesday, April 19  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Gutenberg

**Isaiah Alwin**

## **Examining Class Solidarity through Butch/Cis Male Relationships in *Stone Butch Blues***

Research and discourse surrounding *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg has largely focused on themes of gender and sexuality, and the ways in which the protagonist Jess is different from those around her. Though this is important to acknowledge, this paper argues that the novel also provides a powerful portrayal of class solidarity which is widely ignored by scholars, and will explore this through Jess's relationship to masculinity as a butch, and to the men around her. Analysis of instances of communion will redefine and complicate our understanding of the novel and of Feinberg's message as a communist. At the same time, Jess's class identity also works to "other" her. By looking at this aspect of the novel which is often considered taboo, we may come to see that our commonalities are just as impactful as our differences, and focusing on the former allows us to be stronger together.

**Lucia Musacchi**

## **The Sparks of War: Exploring the Origins of Mass Conflict in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness***

The fighting that fills television screens seems entrenched in reality. War appeared as early as 2500 BCE and has stayed since. How did humans get to this point? What fuels and convinces individuals to jump on board with mass violence remains an open-ended question, but one that the science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* seeks to address. Ursula Le Guin skillfully places readers on a fictional ambisexual planet that has avoided war up until the beginning of the novel, where competition threatens to erupt a peaceful past into a violent future. While most scholars have latched onto the planet's androgyny to propose that Le Guin sees war as gender-driven or, alternatively, as a political tool, this paper aims to complicate these perspectives. Analyzing the ways that the gender, psychological, state, and experiential elements of war collaborate to grow hostility, it argues that the novel illuminates how war comes to life and what conditions subvert its arrival. *The Left Hand of Darkness* highlights that only through breaking down its components can humans understand the patterns of collective violence.

**eMJay Ross**

## **Black Kin, White Masks: Performance and Ambiguity in Nella Larsen's *Passing***

*I had only to break it and I was free of it forever.*  
—Nella Larsen, *Passing*

The title of Nella Larsen's *Passing* doesn't just refer to the act of racial passing that its plot hinges on; but also to the mysterious death that disrupts the end of the novel. The ambiguous narration of Clare Kendry's fatal fall from a window after she is no longer able to "pass" as white has served as a source of speculation for many readers and scholars. Using sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, this paper theorizes that the ambiguous narration throughout the novel positions the reader as main character Irene Redfield's "white consciousness," narrating her subjective experience as she monitors herself through the frame of whiteness. Especially in the context of the 1920s when *Passing* was published, moving through the world safely not only required conformity with whiteness, but cisgendered heterosexuality as well. Further, the performance of whiteness both requires and enforces hegemonic concepts of gender and sexuality. With an exploration of fundamental concepts discussed by Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, bell hooks, and other scholars, this paper reveals how the narrative points to an ultimate rejection of those who try to inhabit a space "in between" normative roles by the institution of whiteness as a whole.

**Colin Stillman**

**Going Nuclear in *The Babadook*:  
An Examination of How Nuclear Families Have Destroyed Single Parenthood**

The nuclear family does not result in bombings or meltdowns, but it still proves immensely destructive to single parents that diverge from the more typical two-parent, child-raising family. Western culture has constructed itself around supporting the nuclear family and ensuring it flourishes—through both financial and psychological methods—inadvertently ignoring and oppressing the single parents that work to support a more disjointed family. Through the lens of the horror film *The Babadook*, this paper evaluates how a titular monster and side characters represent financial and social oppression towards Amelia, a single parent, along with the emotional trauma she feels as a result. This will exemplify the impossibility of rejoining a nuclear family or fully overcoming the difficulties of single parenthood. But despite this dour claim, this paper also evaluates how single parents can deal with this harrowing situation, ultimately answering the question: for single parents, is there any hope in a world that actively works against them?

**Jay Wenner**

**Some Like It Straight...Or Do They?:  
Deconstructing Heterosexuality in *Some Like it Hot***

Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* inverts the Gen Z phrase, "fellas, is it gay to..." by both covertly and overtly deconstructing heterosexuality in a way that prompts the debate, "fellas, is it straight to...?" The film depicts two musicians, Joe and Jerry, who adopt alternate female identities and join an all-female jazz group. Unlike Jerry, Joe adopts another identity, one of the male millionaire "Junior," to seduce Sugar outside of his female disguise of "Josephine." At first glance, the film appears to conform to the standards of a traditional romantic comedy, establishing a glorified image of heterosexuality. However, the mere existence of heterosexuality does not fortify the concept. To support this argument, this paper builds on Schilt and Westbrook's theory that "heterosexuality requires a binary sex system" by connecting the concept of a binary sex system to how sex is expressed through certain gendered behaviors. By conducting close readings of two key points in Joe and Sugar's relationship—"Junior" and Sugar's breakup call as well as Sugar's kiss with "Josephine"—this paper explores how Wilder ultimately deconstructs heterosexuality. In subverting expectations of gendered behaviors aligning with sex, Wilder destroys the binary sex system on which heterosexuality relies.

# Not Your Normal

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

Wednesday, April 19  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Carnegie

**Devansh Bansal**

## **Why Is Being Earnest so Important?: A Psychological Reading of Seriousness in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest***

*Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life.*  
—Algernon Moncrieff, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

What does it mean to be “serious about something”? For characters in Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the word “serious” really has no meaning. Throughout the story, issues that we normally find serious, like family relationships and death, are trivialized, while things as small as having the name Ernest matter the most. Scholars over time have commonly analyzed this exaggerated nonseriousness as a critique of the upper-class, frivolous Victorian society Wilde grew up around. However, this analysis may distance the contemporary reader who still relates to the idea of being “serious,” but in the modern sense of finding purpose. I offer a more psychological reading of seriousness that explains Wilde’s subversion of the trivial and serious as a way of demonstrating humans’ need to always “do,” even if they have to force it. Especially today, in a society driven by technology and speed, we are always “doing” and trying to keep up with life’s rapid pace. Reframing *The Importance of Being Earnest* can help us see the play as more than just a product of its time, and even rethink if the things we deem serious—purpose, achievement, “doing”—are as trivial as having the name Ernest.

**Mia Burke**

## **A Slip in the Home’s Domestic Veil: Hitchcock’s Uncanny Rendition of *Rebecca***

The aim of this paper is to analyze Alfred Hitchcock’s 1940 film adaptation of Daphne du Maurier’s Gothic novel, *Rebecca*. In both the novel and the film, the unnamed narrator is haunted by her husband’s deceased ex-wife, Rebecca, whose memory continues to creep around Manderley, a place where she was deemed the ideal woman. Though many scholars frequently use Freud’s Oedipus complex to analyze both the novel and film, linking Maxim as a father figure and Rebecca as the Oedipal mother, this paper posits that Freud’s theory of the uncanny is what creates such an unnerving story. Through his direction of space and classic camera work, Hitchcock reveals the anxiety and feminine desire brought about by the expectations women were forced to subscribe to, not just in this house but in society. In this way, Hitchcock, perhaps unknowingly, posits that society is incredibly reliant upon gender norms, particularly upon the two-dimensional woman. When femininity is not presented as warm, docile, and understanding, it becomes “unwomanly” and inconvenient. Here, Freud’s uncanny demonstrates that the conceptions of female anxiety, stress, and perfectionism, are a sight into the dark decay in striving to be the “ideal” woman. In the end, the destruction of Manderley is the dissolution of our faith in gender roles as the manor is set aflame.

**Kelly Kim**

## **Shattering Stereotypes: Resisting the Model Minority Myth**

The moment you venture beyond the boundaries of stereotypes, you are no longer considered “normal.” In *When the Emperor Was Divine*, Julie Otsuka portrays a Japanese American family struggling to be the polite, submissive model minority that society expects them to be during World War II. Artfully blending her grandparents’ stories of internment with historical research, Otsuka creates a world in which her characters face an identity crisis and experience racial prejudice as a result of stereotypes emerging from the model minority myth. While some critics argue that the characters internalize these oppressive stereotypes and that the emotional nuances of the novel are disrupted by harsher and angry overtones, this paper provides an alternative perspective, examining the detrimental effects of stereotypes towards Asian Americans, while also arguing that the characters resist the restrictions these

stereotypes impose. The first step towards becoming “not your normal” is by dismantling what others have defined as “normal.” The Asian American struggle for social justice and visibility beyond the model minority myth is exactly what Otsuka aims to draw attention to in *When the Emperor Was Divine*.

**Alex Wang**

**Promoting, Rejecting, and Shedding the “Model Minority” Myth in *Yellow Face***

How does David Henry Hwang, a prominent advocate for Asian American eminence on the literal and societal stage, interact with the idea of a “model minority,” a stereotype that dramatically and tangibly harms the very groups he fights for? What does it take to dispel this stereotype that society so deeply ingrains in Asian Americans? These are the questions this paper examines through Hwang’s play *Yellow Face*. The “model minority” myth is the idea that Asian Americans are the most assimilated, highest-achieving, and least rebellious minority group in America. This paper scrutinizes how each of the three major characters in *Yellow Face* exemplify discrete modes of interaction with this myth. It also explores how these characters model the notion that only the most foundational, impactful experiences can help individuals shift between these modes. Ultimately, Hwang delegates to his audience the obligation of finding their own ways—their own experiences—to reckon with the “model minority” myth and fight for Asian American communities.

**Emily Wu**

**Competitive Chefs and Microwaveable Spring Rolls:  
Food and Asian American Identity in Weike Wang’s *Chemistry***

Asian Americans have long been associated with food—think ramen, rice, or tikka masala. Or, wait. Let’s describe it like the quintessential Asian American novelist: perhaps you’re imagining a bowl of golden ramen, the crisp green onions floating in its fragrant broth; or takeout boxes of steaming, snow-white rice; or tikka masala, tender pieces of spiced chicken simmering in a velvety, tomato-ey sauce. Vivid, almost exotic descriptions of ethnic food often line the pages of any Asian American novel you pick up—and it makes sense. Food is, and has always been, a mostly safe way for Asians to communicate their culture. So why deviate from the norm? Enter Weike Wang, author of *Chemistry*, a witty coming-of-age story about an unnamed Chinese American chemistry PhD student who learns to reshape her life when she’s forced to quit her research program. Wang’s use of food is worth analyzing because she uses it to shape the narrator’s Asian American identity without playing into Asian food stereotypes or exotifying Asian food in the way mainstream media often does. Thus, this paper aims to explore how Wang uses food to expand upon current models of authentic Asian American representation.

# The Wider Conversation

Moderated by Professor Paul Lerner  
Van Hunnicks Department of History

Wednesday, April 19  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Quincy Bowie, Jr.**

## **Imagining a New Nation and Diverging *Ceremony* from the Master Narrative**

The slowly diminishing numerical majority of the dominant culture will have unforeseen effects on the world of literature and media. With shifting numbers comes a shift in desires, and then a shift in representation. How then does anti-colonial literature serve these communities who will face a different, unimagined reality than the one in which these novels were written? This paper examines the ways scholars have defined *Ceremony* by Leslie M. Silko's relationship to anti-colonial and radical discourse, questioning how a radical novel maintains its function in a society where the dominant culture it was written under is no longer "dominant"? In conversation with other scholars, this paper explores features like nonlinear time, spiritualism, and hybridization within the novel. However, this paper extends beyond the current scholarship by the likes of Joseph Bauerkemper and Jin Man Jeong, seeking to diverge this text from the master narrative. This text's true poignancy lies outside of linear time and the limits of the hegemonic Western canon and framework.

**Lora Dohler**

## **Anti-Psychiatry in the 1960s: An Analysis of Niki in "The Breakthrough"**

Does having a disability affect someone's intrinsic value? Problematically, the portrayal of disabled characters in literature and film often suggests that it does. Within the "supercrip" trope, disabled characters often have an extraordinary ability, giving them unique value and allowing writers to sugarcoat their disability—something our systematically ableist society deems undesirable. Typically benefiting a neurotypical, able-bodied lead character, this fantastic trait counteracts the undesirability, making the inclusion of disabled characters acceptable in media. This paper analyzes the trope within Daphne du Maurier's 1966 short story, "The Breakthrough." The story follows a research team exploring parapsychology and life after death through their test subject, Niki—a young, intellectually disabled girl, who, under hypnosis, channels miraculous psychic energy to access supernatural abilities. This paper argues that du Maurier connects Niki's disability to her savant power, portraying her as a supercrip, and contextualizes this portrayal within the antipsychiatry movement of the 1960s and 70s, which opposed institutionalizing and experimenting on mentally ill and disabled people. While du Maurier initially challenges the ideas of the antipsychiatry movement by linking Niki's abilities to the experiments, this paper contends that the author upholds the movement's central principles by exemplifying the tendency of psychiatric experimentation to harm patients.

**Adheesh Kale**

## **Hand in Hand We Transcend: Ineffability in *The Passion According to G.H.***

Despite being regarded as a "Sorceress of Words" by the Latin American literary community, Clarice Lispector often notes that her readers do not understand her writing. This is likely due to the limitations of their humanized understanding of language itself, as seen in her novel *The Passion According to G.H.*, wherein she expresses her frustration with the limitations of language. The novel features a woman named only as G.H. gradually transcending human cognition, experiencing a form of sensory apotheosis in the process, making her unable to perceive the world in a "humanized" manner that can be described with words. In her journey she is accompanied by a disembodied human hand she pretends to hold in hers. This paper explores G.H.'s symbiotic relationship with the disembodied hand, its role in the story as G.H.'s companion as she wades into a functionally unknown world, and its role as a literary device, acting as a kaleidoscope for the reader that enables them to see the world as G.H. does, effectively overcoming the limitations of language.

**Luke Legrand**

***The Watermelon Woman and the Importance of Subjective Authority:  
Forward Thinking Towards an Intersectional and Decolonial Approach to Democratizing Epistemology***

*Sometimes you have to create your own history. The Watermelon Woman is fiction.*  
—Cheryl Dunye, *The Watermelon Woman*

Parts of the history-writing process, especially those surrounding archival sorting, are beginning to be automated with the use of A.I. and machine learning. Deployment of these decision-making algorithms has been approached from the biased standpoint that history and data are holistically “objective.” By showcasing an instance of failed A.I. decision-making in a high-stakes healthcare admission process, Sharik Mohamed outlines a decolonial approach to A.I. implementation within epistemological (history-writing) practices that gives a framework to practice an inclusive system that can adapt to what people want through their interaction with it. *The Watermelon Woman* is an adamant example of allocating authority to one's own subjective historical narrative, elevating its value no matter what is conventionally deemed “objective” history. Drawing on perspectives from Giovanna Colavizza, Moonsun Choi, and Sharik Mohamed, this paper takes an intersectional and decolonial approach to offer an inclusive groundwork for the future of historiography. In these first steps towards unimaginable change, it is more important than ever to critically approach our decisions lest they—not considerate of human diversity, complexity, love and life—become dominant principles and rules within automated systems that legitimize and perpetuate colonial systems of degradation.

**Kate Okerstrom**

***Mythological Matrices:  
The Evolution of Personal and Narrative Agency in The Einstein Intersection***

What does it mean to have agency in a world determined by preexisting stories? In Samuel R. Delany's 1967 novel *The Einstein Intersection*, an alien civilization has built their society from the fragments of an abandoned Earth's mythos and pop culture. The novel's protagonist, Lobey, is a member of this society whose journey to find his deceased partner is time and time again compared to the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Unlike Orpheus, however, Lobey abandons his quest in the novel's final pages, choosing to leave his partner unrescued and the myth unfinished. This paper analyzes how *The Einstein Intersection's* ending is crucial to understanding its discussion of choice and nonconformity within preexisting structures. By choosing to step away, Lobey gains a sense of personal agency—something he lacked throughout the majority of the novel. By achieving this agency, Lobey shifts his perspective on myth from a controlling force to something fluid and adaptable to his own goals. It is ultimately this shift that underlies the novel's core discussion of how people considered to be outsiders can ultimately write their own stories.

# Certain Tendencies

Moderated by Professor David Albertson  
School of Religion

Thursday, April 20  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

**Will Baharian**

## **The Death of Utopia: Daphne du Maurier's "The Breakthrough" and the False Hope of Techno-Utopianism**

Technology excites us, entices us, and lures us to forget all our worries. Following the Second World War, rapid technological advancement allowed humanity to envision a future in which new technologies cure all the world's ills. In literature, this prompted the rise of a subgenre of science fiction known as "techno-utopianism"—the idea that rising technology would solve all of mankind's problems. Daphne du Maurier challenges the optimism of the techno-utopian movement by using a rather unconventional utopian impetus in her 1960s short story "The Breakthrough": immortality. While utopian authors seldom broach the topic of death and human finitude in their writing, du Maurier attacks death directly. Her narrative clings strongly to death, subverting the utopian expectations of achieving immortality and foreshadowing the dystopian results of a world where technology breaks the limits of human life. Therefore, "The Breakthrough" constitutes a strong critique of the techno-utopianism that became prominent in the science fiction of du Maurier's era. Du Maurier provides a peek into the Pandora's Box of technical advancements, proving that although technology may be capable of solving humanity's problems—even death—it may be more apt to consider the new issues it may cause.

**Carson Chivers**

## **Mischief Makers and Boundary Crossers: Ferris Bueller's Role as a Folklore Trickster**

*Incredible. One of the worst performances of my career and they never doubted it for a second.*  
—Ferris Bueller, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*

So, you think you know the main character? Well, in John Hughes's *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, the true answer may surprise you. If you remember anything from this movie, it's Ferris Bueller. He's playful, funny, charming, and smart—someone every teenager wants to be. Who is hiding behind his bold nature, however? None other than his best friend, Cameron Fry. A depressed, stressed, completely ordinary teenager, and... the protagonist? This paper explores the relationship between Cameron and Ferris using the lens of a folklore trickster archetype. Drawing on the work of Anthropology scholars Michael Moffatt and Elizabeth Traube, along with Dr. Helena Bassil-Morozow's analysis of the trickster in film, this paper explains the significance of Ferris Bueller as a trickster and how this compliments Cameron's role as the true focus of the film. While *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is already a fun summer flick, the impact explodes when given proper analysis.

**Shamoli Ghosh**

## **Murder's for the Sick and Twisted: An Examination of Psychological Contagion and Emotional Response in *Cure***

X marks the spot—or rather the scene of the crime—in *Cure*. Kiyoshi Kurosawa's 1997 film follows Detective Takabe as he investigates a string of murders all hypnotically linked to Mamiya, a former psychology student capable of inducing homicide through mesmerism. *Cure* combines the best of an outbreak thriller and detective story into a work devoid of emotion. While most of the critical conversation about the film focuses on how it defined the genre of J-horror, a more important discussion is how *Cure*'s "dissolution of the emotion of horror" forces viewers to reckon with their own ideas of real-world horrors: sickness, homicide, and manipulation. This paper will examine how the psychological contagion behind the characters' homicidal tendencies and lack of emotion in *Cure* create horror without a monster. Without emotional cues from the characters, does the sickness of murder ever cross our minds?



**Cristina Mussiett**

**Watching *The Babadook* Really Get Under Your Skin:  
A Sympathetic Approach from the Audience**

Cinematic devices are commonly known to aid in the invoking of emotions within audiences, as they can carry background emotions in order to add a layer of complexity to emotions the plot already induces. Within Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*, the plot involves single, widowed mother Amelia and her troubled child Samuel as they face the emergence of a monster from a children's book, the Babadook. The context of this includes the traumatic experience of Amelia losing her husband on the way to have Samuel, making her life harder as she attempts to balance work, motherhood, and her loss. The aid of cinematic devices induces a sympathetic feeling within the audience, as it's further revealed that the only way Amelia can "get rid" of the Babadook is by facing her trauma. This implies that the Babadook's purpose is to represent Amelia's unwillingness to accept the trauma in her life. This paper analyzes the effects of trauma and sympathy within *The Babadook* and argues that visual cinematic devices reveal the pitiful aspects of Amelia's experience with the Babadook, creating a new sympathetic lens for psychological horror movies to be seen through.

**Michael Reo**

**"We will laugh where we would scream."  
Shirley Jackson's Gothic Comedy**

Most readers and scholars recognize Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as a Gothic text. The book's story of a young, murderous woman and her surviving family members living in semi-isolation from society until the arrival of a strange cousin reflects the tragedy indicative of the Gothic genre. However, Jackson's novel can also be analyzed as a Gothic comedy, due to its use of many conventions of the subgenre. In reading the story through this lens, readers can more accurately see the story through the eyes of its narrator, the young and monstrous Merricat. Because of Merricat's apathy towards the well-being of others, the traditional horror tension of the Gothic text becomes comic tension. In reading the story as a Gothic text, readers are inclined to expect great catastrophe to fall on the family. In reading it as a Gothic comedy, readers expect these catastrophes to be amusing and trivial. Both interpretations are, in one way or another, true. Merricat believes her life to be a comedy, whereas more sane characters might paint it as a tragedy. In the end, it is up to the reader to decide.

# How to Be

Moderated by Professor Lucas Herchenroeder  
Department of Classics

Thursday, April 20  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Carnegie

**Logan Burgess**

## **A Model of Femininity: An Analysis of Gender in *Princess Jellyfish***

*Every girl is born a princess, some just forget is all.*  
—Kuranosuke Koibuchi, *Princess Jellyfish*

The depiction of women in anime often falls into predictable tropes, however the genre of *josei* seeks to solve that issue. *Josei*, a genre intended for a mature female audience, dissects the ideas of femininity. No anime explores the concept more than *Princess Jellyfish*. The most feminine character in the cast is Kuranosuke, who adds this layer of complexity to these questions because they are assigned male at birth. This paper explains how Kuranosuke serves as a role model for the other women in the show, since they are an example of how intentional femininity can promote positive growth. In addition, it discusses how Kuranosuke combines traits from the *otokonoko* genre, focusing on the feminine non-cisgender female protagonist, to enhance their presentation of femininity. The femininity presented by Kuranosuke grants women the opportunity to create their own unique kind of femininity, taking the aspects they like and synthesizing it with their own personality.

**Alexandra Coyle McDonald**

## **Framing Immortality: Portraiture and Identity in *The Two Mrs. Carrolls***

To put it bluntly: when *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* was released, everyone hated it. Who wouldn't be troubled by Humphrey Bogart—a beloved actor glorified for roles that epitomize the classic, all-American hero—playing an adulterous, psychotic villain? Nevertheless, in the psychological drama *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, director Peter Godfrey selected Bogart to star as Geoffrey Carroll, a deranged artist with the horrifying tendency to paint his wives as "Angels of Death" and then murder them once they no longer inspire his work. Focusing on the unusual dynamic between female portraits and the construction and destruction of masculine identity in this film noir, this paper argues that Geoffrey's paintings of his wives become, in effect, self-portraits intended to solidify his identity and confirm his competence as an artist and a man. Then, when Geoffrey's artistic abilities fail, this threatens his identity, and he turns to murder because to be recognized—and, moreover, immortalized—as a killer would validate him as a masculine man with power and appeal. Ultimately, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* provides insight into postwar societal anxieties about shifting gender roles and the fragility of patriarchal authority in contemporary America.

**Nye Davis**

## **Prescription of Interracial and International Peace in "The Comet"**

Human sterilization, of course, is a cynical reply to the overwhelming demands of a world tortured by the man-made system of racial division; yet, to renowned social visionary, W.E.B. Du Bois, the oblivion of the human species might be the perfect solution. In his story, "The Comet," he creates a social order unconcerned with human intervention and relieved of the pesky tendrils of systemic oppression. Yet, when racism is resuscitated from its oblivion at the story's conclusion, one is nervous to unearth what his fable means for our future. Bewildering an anxious reader further, the story is both riddled with hopeful cosmopolitanist and religious allusions, and contradicted by what appears to be Du Bois's grim forecast of social progress: a dead infant. By investigating the foundations of his ambiguous pessimism, this paper contends that he creates what Nicole Waligora-Davis references as the "fourth dimension," a realm erected to not only emphasize a prescription of peace for oppressed communities, but a call to action for oppressors, too. Only when his recommendations are ignored do we risk reaching the point of no return, trapping ourselves within a society where history is doomed to repeat itself.

**Dane Sprague**

**Radical Psychology in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony***

Leslie Marmon Silko provides an escape from colonialist capitalism that tries to assert itself as objective and universal through her novel *Ceremony*. Colonial capitalism sees nature as an “other” that lies outside of society, an opposing force meant to be conquered and beaten. Laguna culture, conversely, views human society as existing within the natural world rather than in opposition to it. Laguna culture asserts nature as the true universal of the world, which radically shifts how Laguna individuals treat the world. The psychological implications of the expanded universal create a conscience that takes the natural world into account. *Ceremony* is a revolt against faux-objectivity not by asserting itself as correct or true but by exposing the subjective nature of the colonialist worldview. Other scholars recognize *Ceremony*'s embrace of subjectivity but fail to see how Silko creates a quiet revolution against capitalism that happens psychologically within the individual before it can ever happen externally.

**Avery Soong Thunder**

***Breakfast at Tiffany's* and the Fascination with Damaged Women**

In Truman Capote's novella, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the societal perception of female careers is explored, with a focus on the illegitimacy and whoring attributed to certain professions; women only becoming justified in these careers if they have enough damage in their past to explain their supposed desperation. Holly Golightly's career is a prime example of this perception, which ignores the freedom such careers provided women during the 1940s and attempts to suppress unconventional female paths. The novella also prompts an inquiry into the societal standards of career legitimacy, particularly why the narrator's career is deemed genuine, while Holly's is deemed illicit or unscrupulous, despite both trading their emotions and souls in distinct ways.

**Aidan Williams**

**Hyperrealism and the Homemaker:  
An Examination of Gender Roles in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles***

*No one has a corner on depression, but housewives are working on it.*  
—Gabrielle Burton

Director Chantal Akerman's film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* was recently ranked number one on *Sight and Sound's* "100 Greatest Films of All Time," beating out traditional winners like *Citizen Kane* and *Vertigo*. The film looks at the life of Jeanne Dielman, a middle-aged, widowed mother living in post-war Belgium. Besides possessing a compelling story, Akerman's film earns its top spot through its focus on the negative impact the “housewife” lifestyle enacts on women forced into this role under traditional gender roles. This paper elaborates upon Akerman's implementation of hyperrealism, which is the depiction of reality through film, thereby accomplishing three tasks: breaking down the spectator barrier between viewer and subject, highlighting the mistakes Dielman makes in her daily routine, and defining Dielman's housework as reproductive labor. By achieving this, hyperrealism allows viewers to truly examine the negative impact the “housewife” lifestyle has, leading viewers to critique the traditional gender roles that force women into this damaging lifestyle. This scathing critique is what makes Akerman's feminist film worthy of being number one, as many films have great stories, but only the best films possess an excellent narrative with an equally excellent and easily perceptible message.

# Queer and Now

Moderated by Professor William Deverell  
Van Hunnick Department of History, Spatial Sciences Institute,  
and Environmental Studies Program

Thursday, April 20  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

**Delaney Carroll**

**An Audience on Display:  
Camp Queer Aesthetics as Resistance at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show***

*Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style.  
It is a love of the exaggerated, the “off,” of things-being-what-they-are-not.*  
—Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp"

Almost every weekend for nearly fifty years, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has attracted guests to midnight screenings, many of whom mimic the styles of the actors on screen. Beyond emulating the characters' dress, the attendees imitate the film's normalization of fluid gender and sexuality, regardless of their personal identities. The queer community rejects society's notions of how men should appear versus women, so defying clothing norms aids in resisting heteronormativity and acts to unify the community. This is what *Rocky Horror* builds upon by employing camp aestheticism. Camp is always more than what meets the eye, and this film is no different. There is no question whether *Rocky Horror* uses camp for subversion; the question is whether the audience's imitation is subversive. This paper explores whether mockery of dissent produces dissent itself. If so, is the audience conscious of its contributions? And how does resistance differ when it is intentional versus a byproduct?

**Rustle Frost**

**Realness and Reality:  
Empowerment and the Emulation of Archetypes in *Paris Is Burning***

We often define “empowerment” in oppositional terms—with one group given superiority in a zero-sum enterprise at the expense of a subjugated “other.” Yet these distinctions are not always so rigid when the separation between communities is blurred and the agency of marginalized identities is acknowledged. A potent expression of this cerebral dialogue exists in a perhaps surprising place: the ballroom drag culture of 1980s New York City as depicted in director Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning*. In the ballroom, such deconstructionist thought is not grappled with as tenuous, academic theory, but in physical, communal gathering and expression. The ballroom may initially be viewed as an isolated community separated from broader society. However, synthesizing the perspectives of gender studies and critical race theory, this paper argues it is more productive to consider the construction of identity in this space in a critical interaction with the dominant culture that it imitates, namely, as an emulation of power from a place of dispossession. “Realness” performance is revealed as radical in the way it stakes claim to power that has been denied to these individuals, flipping the dominant discourse of how power manifests through appearance to assert value as marginalized bodies within a normative system.

**Mehr Kotval**

**Lesbians and Labor Unions:  
A Story of Survival, Solidarity, and Social Change**

Delve into a powerful narrative of groundbreaking activism, fierce solidarity, and unlikely allies. In the mid 20th century, lesbians in the workplace faced a mix of violent discrimination, sexism, homophobia, and challenges related to societal expectations around femininity and heteronormativity. Unlike gay men who could choose to conceal their sexual orientation at work, butch lesbians faced distinct struggles navigating both their gender and sexual orientation in workplaces unwelcoming to both women and queer individuals. *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg vividly portrays the complex plight of lesbian workers and their unwavering fight for equality and acceptance. Unions offered solidarity, power, and respect to queer workers, while the participation of queer workers strengthened and empowered unions. The reciprocal relationship between unions and queer workers had a significant impact on advancing the rights of lesbian workers and influencing the broader LGBTQ+ rights movement. Unions

facilitated socialization among diverse employees, fostering empathy and understanding of each other's struggles and similarities. This helped combat the stigma against queer individuals both within and outside of the workplace. The story of lesbians and labor unions is a testament to resilience, camaraderie, and the power of collective action, where unlikely allies came together to create unstoppable progress.

**Paul V. Lazzari**

**“Wish he'd stay away always.”:  
Sapphic Subtext as a Means to Representing Queered Sexuality in *Passing***

The term "queer" has recently received a rebranding. What was initially synonymous with strange, was adopted as a slur against gay, trans, and gender-nonconforming people, then reclaimed by those oppressed by it, and lastly incorporated into official scholarship to the point that the word now features in the title of an undergraduate student conference panel. "Queer," the word, has been queered; it contains at once a multitude of identities that each deviate from expectation. Modern understandings of identity (racial, class-based, gender, and especially sexual) very much rely on fluid, queered ideas. Nowhere is a fluid understanding of sexual identity expressed more perfectly than in *Passing*, written and directed by Rebecca Hall. The film presents the story of two black, queer women—different from each other in many ways, yet experiencing life in parallel. This paper proposes that *Passing* achieves such a successful depiction of queered sexual identity through the use of something many in our age of canon gay representation might consider outdated: gay subtext.

**Audrey Serrano**

**Love Languages:  
The Metaphorical Linguistics of Queerness in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves***

Forget words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, receiving gifts, and even physical touch. Metaphors are the most powerful way to communicate love. Regarded as Virginia Woolf's most experimental work, her 1931 novel *The Waves* explores the intersecting coming of age stories of six narrators on the shoreline of the English coast. Rather than assigning *The Waves* a sole protagonist, Woolf relies on the soliloquies of the six friends to progress the narrative forward. Though critics have frequently noted the literal implications of these soliloquies in order to achieve a better understanding of Woolf's signature stream of consciousness style of writing, the underlying metaphors provide a voice of protest against 20th century heteronormative standards. Published for a culture that promoted heterosexuality as the romantic norm, Woolf's examination of queerness through Neville and Rhoda, *The Waves*' two queer protagonists, makes use of metaphors to counter false assumptions surrounding sexuality. The unofficial sixth love language, metaphor, works to combat expectations of heteronormativity through representations of queerness in *The Waves*.

# Taking Advantage

Moderated by Dr. Richard Edinger  
Thematic Option Honors Program

Thursday, April 20  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Gutenberg

**Scott Altsuler**

## **Memory Shaping Identity and Insanity in George Cukor's *Gaslight***

Who are you? Most people would answer this question with their passions or past experiences: secure ideas that they remember about themselves. But “gaslighting” uses specific methods to tear apart this security. In George Cukor’s 1944 film *Gaslight*, he explores how his main character, Paula, changes drastically in how she views and portrays herself as her husband continuously manipulates her into believing false realities. Rather than discuss how identity changes when someone loses their memory, Cukor portrays Paula as losing herself by gaining false memories called confabulations. As Paula’s coherence and grasp on her memory strengthens and weakens throughout the film, she becomes more and less stable. Looking at various psychological studies linking autobiographical memory and identity, we understand how Cukor depicts a direct correlation between Paula’s consistency in memory and her coherent sense of self. Inconsistency and believed lies based on subjectivity serve as a detriment to her sense of self, and consistency strengthens it. With this exploration, Cukor demands that we analyze how memories make us create and just as easily lose ourselves.

**Daniel Gottschalk**

## **The Perils of Retail Therapy: Commodity Fetishization in Don DeLillo's *White Noise***

For a society so characterized by consumerism, it is remarkable how little we know about what we consume. This issue takes center stage in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* through its narrator, Jack Gladney. Whether it’s his designer sunglasses, academic gown, or television, Jack experiences life invariably through some form of consumption. Literary scholars Adam Seztela and Sanja Matković see Jack’s connection to his possessions as a means to fabricate his professional, filial, and personal identity. However, this paper argues that Jack actually possesses a disconnection from the everyday products he consumes. Utilizing Marx’s theory of the commodity fetish, this paper explores how Jack’s ignorance regarding a commodity’s production allows him to imbue his purchases with characteristics. These qualities enable Jack’s possessions to transcend their material state and become symbols for his personal validation. Yet, this fundamental divide between Jack and his means of self-actualization results in Jack perpetuating his identity crisis. By reading Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* in conjunction with Marx’s *Capital*, this paper reveals the perils of idolizing commodities and overconsumption, ultimately prompting the reader to reflect on their own consumerist tendencies.

**Nia Lwanga**

## **Sorry to Bother You: Racial Capitalism and Its Irreversible Impacts on Minority Identities**

Sorry to bother you, but you’re at risk of becoming capital. This is the reality director Boots Riley dumps on his audience. Despite efforts to gain autonomy through corporate success, protagonist Cassius “Cash” Green cannot achieve fair success in his unfair world—our unfair world. Ultimately, Cassius loses his human identity and becomes half-human, half-horse: an “equisapien.” CEO Steve Lift’s belief that marginalized workers are live capital irreversibly changes Cash’s identity. Together, the “white voice” and horse imagery are motifs that outline Cash’s narrative arc—a narrative arc that shocks audiences as it dramatically and realistically shows how minority workers are exploited and dehumanized in capitalist and racially prejudiced societies. To explore how Riley’s use of motifs showcases the process under which Black identities are effaced in racially capitalist societies, this paper turns to social critic Cedric Robinson and film scholar Ed Bakony’s work on semiotics. Of course, no one desires to be dehumanized and become capital. So the uncomfortable question this film presents is: can minorities evade becoming capital in racially capitalist societies? Is it even possible for marginalized workers to succeed and resist exploitation in corporate America?

**Thomas Reese**

**Revolutionary Eroticism in *Jeanne Dielman***

*Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* by Chantal Akerman is widely considered the greatest film of all time despite its overtly boring plot. For many commentators, *Jeanne Dielman*'s position of high critical regard is justified by reading the film as focused on rebellion against patriarchal oppression. This essay argues that such a reading fatally misrecognizes Akerman's radical critique of the constitution of the human subject. Far from transcending capitalist patriarchal domination as humanist readings suggest, concepts of restrictive economy, excess, murder as wasteful expenditure, and macro/micropolitics (George Bataille, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari) propose Jeanne's act of murder as an extension of the mundane animality denied in her obsessively routine home life, and thus murder is able to disavow the human from society all together. Attending to otherwise yawning moments such as stale cameras focused on empty rooms, repetitive meals, and failed coffee brewing reveals that beneath Jeanne's productivization of downtime (excess) is an unstable process of subjective construction. Read through this frame, the murder at the film's conclusion is a revolutionary eroticism refusing the production of a "human" subject that divorces excess from the general economy.

**Xavier Wisniewski**

**What's Her Problem?  
Capitalism and Malevolence in Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy***

In *The Living Is Easy*, Dorothy West provides us with Cleo Judson, the narrator of the piece whom many readers cannot help but loathe due to her constant prejudice against those around her. While her hatred ranges from racism against members of her own race to classism directed at those less wealthy than her, this paper argues that the origin of all of these problematic views is her engagement with capitalism. Cleo prioritizes upward mobility above all else, and it is her wholehearted engagement with the capitalist system that leads her to devalue the humanity of her fellow Bostonians, even her own husband. In her quest to break into the upper class, Cleo focuses so intently on her own prosperity that no one else seems to matter to her. In fact, she seems almost completely alienated from her fellow man, viewing all with a hateful eye.

# Who's the Victim Here?

Moderated by Professor Arjun Nair  
School of Religion

Thursday, April 20  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Peyton Dacy**

## **Transgender Killers and the Killing of Transgender People: *Psycho* and Transgender Genocide in America**

*For the good of society ... transgenderism must be eradicated from public life entirely —  
the whole preposterous ideology, at every level.*

—Michael Knowles

A man in women's clothing kills people in an isolated hotel. He is no longer himself but fully consumed by his mother. The man is Norman Bates, introduced in the film *Psycho*, and is a controversial and influential figure in the horror and slasher genres. Drawing from the framework of Gregory H. Stanton's ten stages of genocide, this paper dissects how Norman's invocation of transgender imagery on screen feeds into the idea that transgender people are looking to harm defenseless women and how these harmful and dehumanizing ideas are used to justify the genocide of transgender people in America. Through examining Norman's portrayal on screen, this paper illuminates the ways in which *Psycho* reflects how transgender people are being actively demonized in the media today to encourage the further marginalization of transgender people in America. Don't lose hope, as there is still time to stop the genocide of transgender people in America.

**Chaundra Furin-Campbell**

## **The Murderer as the Victim: Gender Roles as the True Villain in Ti West's *Pearl***

Identifying the villain in films featuring serial killers is often a simple task. However, Ti West's *Pearl* presents a complex monster: Pearl, a young World War I era Texan wife, living on her family farm with an upbeat demeanor and a predilection to commit unspeakable acts of violence. Pearl is a character born from societal structures. Although West's film showcases her committing a series of gruesome murders, positioning Pearl in the historical context of the film can make it a reflection of how harmful gender roles truly are. Using writing by actual women who lived through WWI—women not too different from Pearl (except for, of course, the murders)—this paper will examine how societal expectations and hardships may have impacted Pearl's behavior. Notably, although Pearl fails to behave in accordance with society's ideals, when she interacts with the corpses of her victims she falls into these ideals with ease. As a result, we can see how Pearl's monster origin story is the result of the era's strict gender roles. Let's hope history doesn't repeat itself.

**Reid Hartman-Teske**

## **"The mean reds": Dichotomy and Ambiguity in Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's***

Why do we indulge in the takedown of cultural idols, particularly women? Why do we obsess with categorizing female icons in archetypes and flattening their complexity? How does this manifest in our media? These questions simmer at the heart of Truman Capote's 1958 novella *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Its hit film adaptation wholly eclipsed the novella in popularity, but the novella's Holly Golightly merits investigation. As the narrator befriends the peculiar young runaway starlet, call girl, and socialite, he finds that the way the other characters discuss her is an incessant attempt to unravel the "truth": is she authentic or a "real phony"? Is she endearing or a degenerate? Does she deserve concern or contempt? As subtly shown in the narrator's own inability to interpret her, this paper contends that there is no answer. Capote's intentional ambiguity in his portrayal of Holly is a subtle comment on the American cultural treatment of female icons and the way we taxonomize them based on the unraveling of glamorous and respectable public images, especially in the context of substance abuse and vicious rumors. Ultimately, Capote underlines Holly's ambiguity and impossible-to-define nature to suggest that our obsession with the "truth" about female idols is innately oppositional to the multifaceted nature of being human.



**Amisha Kumar**

**Revolutionary or Race Traitor?:  
Confronting the Contradictions in Phillis Wheatley's Perspective on Slavery**

*'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land...*  
—Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America"

What are we to make of a slave thanking God for her capture? We're confronted by this question when considering the life and legacy of Phillis Wheatley, the first published African American poet. Most scholars view her as a "race traitor" for never discussing her own experiences as a slave in her poems and instead celebrating her forced conversion to Christianity. The remaining scholars label her a "revolutionary" who passionately fought against slavery in her poems. However, both camps ignore how Wheatley herself describes her relationship with slavery. Instead, they try to make her fit the mold of other African American slaves who fought for their freedom, taking away her personal identity. To rectify this, this paper will use Wheatley's own words to show her as she is: an enslaved African poet who is fiercely grateful for finding her religion—to the point that she ignores and even celebrates the effects of her capture—and yet is deeply critical of the way that slavery has hurt both her fellow slaves and the kinsmen they lost in being brought from Africa to America.

**Jeanne Michelle Revilla**

**Just Girly Things:  
The Validation and Rewards of Teenage Rage in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle***

Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood poisons four of her family members, diminishing the Blackwood family into a ghost of what it once was, left to live on the outskirts of town with her older sister and debilitated uncle. Yet, as shocking as it is, readers can't dislike her. In fact, we are meant to love her for it. Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is a perfect encapsulation of the inherent rage present in all teenage girls. This anger is spurred in three different ways, all of which are present in both the protagonist's life and that of the modern female adolescent: societal standards, familial expectations, and the promises of unconditional love. Because the novel is told from Merricat's point of view, readers begin to sympathize with her struggles against the townspeople and Blackwood family patriarchs until, eventually, quadruple familicide seems like a reasonable solution. The happy ending Merricat is allowed at the conclusion of the story serves to validate her even more, acting as a reward for her behavior. Though many critics have discussed how each of these three components affects Merricat and how her point of view sways us, this paper takes their work one step further by relating each influence to the real-life teenage girl. Thus, *Castle* is Jackson's effort to justify Merricat's girlhood rage, expose the problems of the environment women grow up in, and argue how apt it is that the female adolescent should rage against whatever seeks to constrain her.

# Body Politic

Moderated by Professor Hector Reyes  
Department of Art History

Thursday, April 20  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Alexandria/Jefferson

**Grace Gordon**

## **On Counter-Cinema and the Gravity of Sex in *Jeanne Dielman***

Following progressively distressed single mother and prostitute Jeanne Dielman across three days of her life, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Bruxelles*, directed by Chantal Akerman, offers a myriad of concepts, questions, and problems to explore. The dominant critical conversation around *Jeanne Dielman* is the question of how a film can be truly "feminist" if it mostly occurs in the domestic sphere, primarily centering on Jeanne's domestic tasks and chores. This paper asserts that critics and scholars often overlook Jeanne's sexuality—or lack thereof—in favor of its study in slow cinema and more general feminist topics such as the role of the woman at home. Using Peter Wollen's concept of counter-cinema, film scholar and philosopher Patricia MacCormack's concepts of cine-sexuality and cine-masochism—which relate to audience interaction and feelings of pleasure or "tension and release" that come with viewing a film—and Laura Mulvey's article titled "A Neon Sign, A Soup Tureen: The *Jeanne Dielman* Universe," this paper argues that the devolvement of Jeanne's routine is a result of her first innately "pleasurable" sexual experiences, not the mundanity of housework.

**Karen Li**

## **Closet of Bodies: The Purpose of Gendered and Racialized Humanoid A.I.s in *Ex Machina***

If one were to incarnate an A.I. by constructing its physical humanoid body, what would assigning race and feminine attributes to the A.I. add to its functionality? This is a question that viewers of Alex Garland's film *Ex Machina* are forced to unravel when protagonist Caleb discovers his boss Nathan's closet which immaculately displays the bodies of Nathan's humanoid A.I.s. While some of the A.I. "women" are completely naked, others are missing limbs. Yet, there is a striking similarity between these humanoid bodies: all the A.I. "women" appear to belong to a discernible race and are of slim build. This paper argues that in assigning gender, race, and feminine physical features to the otherwise formless A.I.s, Nathan attempts to find meaning in his own existence through their programmed acceptance of him as their authority, and obtains sexual pleasure from his ability to gaze at the A.I.s' bodies without needing consent. Thus, the film warns of the emotional detachment individuals will face in a technologically advanced society where self-pleasure is easily obtainable, subsequently critiquing the use of technology as a replacement for pleasure from social interaction. As a result, the gendered and racialized humanoid A.I.s from Nathan's past projects warn of the dangers of utilizing technology to make otherwise unattainable personal fantasies attainable.

**Jennifer Nehrer**

## **When Your Dream Isn't Kosher: The Symbolism of a Pig in *Pearl***

Ignoring a gift is already a bad idea, but how could it get worse? In Ti West's movie *Pearl*, set in 1918, Pearl is a young woman infected by dreams of fame while suffering under the control of her mother, Ruth. At the same time, Pearl and her family are trying to avoid the Spanish flu currently plaguing their Texas town. What Ruth doesn't anticipate from trying to keep the outside world away from the family farm is another sickness, one that Pearl gradually lets into their home. Viewers may see *Pearl* as a villain origin story, but this paper examines a slight detail—a suckling pig that Pearl's family has been gifted—as the symbolic root of Pearl's villainy. Drawing upon interviews with *Pearl*'s personnel and scholarship on horror and melodrama cinema (both of which *Pearl* takes from), *Pearl* reclaims old, misogynistic movie tropes that frame women as the ultimate victims of cinema. This paper argues that the pig symbolizes Pearl's dream of stardom, and as the dream metaphorically rots and infects the household, so physically does the pig—making it an unkosher symbol of an evidently unkosher aspiration.

**Katie Simons**

**She Has Her Mother's Eyes (And Her Classist Body Politics):  
The Forced Expectation of Thin and Wealthy Daughters in *Roma***

What makes a girl's body "valuable" within a patriarchal society? Is it her ability to work and thus provide for her family? Or does the value come from being conventionally pretty so she can attract a wealthy husband? In Alfonso Cuarón's film, *Roma*, the answer to the question depends on the girl's socioeconomic status. To the wealthy Mrs. Sofía, her daughter's body is most valuable when she is thin, as this helps distinguish her from the "polluted bodies" of working class women, as described by sociology professor Erynn Masi de Casanova. Through Cuarón's use of camera position and long-scene shots, it becomes clear that the family in *Roma* is willing to ignore their daughter's unhealthy eating behaviors because of their desire to be seen as physically different from their domestic workers. The actions that result from this mindset form what theorist Pierre Bourdieu calls a "gendered class habitus," which forces young girls to take on disordered eating habits because they are never exposed to a healthier way of understanding class. Through this lens, this paper examines the ways the bodies of daughters in high socioeconomic status groups are hegemonized to reaffirm the status of the elite class and ultimately, how daughters are used as pawns in an unwinnable class battle.

**Deborah J. Sohn**

**A Prison for Your Mind:  
The Thin and Unknowable Border Between Reality and *The Matrix***

Red pill or blue pill; consciousness or unconsciousness; was it ever your choice? Renowned science fiction film *The Matrix* portrays the philosophical struggle to trace the edge of human consciousness. Long intrigued by the thin border between consciousness and oblivion, humans have been stumbling for answers regarding metaphysics, reality, and existence after death. Many philosophers have failed to reason out of the possibility that our perception of time and space may be artificial or, even worse, controlled, much like the simulated reality humanity has been subjected to in the film. French philosopher René Descartes may have the most insightful view into this inescapable bind. His Cartesian dualism theory and method of doubt illuminate the possibilities and dangers for Neo and the other protagonists of *The Matrix* who tread too close to the edge of consciousness. The genesis, evolution, and applications of Cartesian thought create a cross-cultural timeline that outlines the unique quality of a film like *The Matrix*. Come see just how deep the rabbit hole goes.

# The Feminine Ideal

Moderated by Professor Stephanie Payne  
The Writing Program

Thursday, April 20  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Carnegie

**Yasmeen ElFarra**

## ***Ex Machina* and the Muslim Female Trope: A Thought Experiment**

When you hear the phrase “Muslim woman,” what image comes to mind? A veiled woman, perhaps? Do words like “oppressed” or “trapped” enter your mind? As a Muslim woman myself looking to see representation on-screen, I find the Muslim female experience portrayed there unrepresentative of reality. So, when watching the film *Ex Machina*, I could not help but notice the parallels between the trope of my demographic and the way Ava, the female lead, is portrayed. Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* follows three main characters in an isolated location: Ava, a female android who is trapped by Nathan, her “creator,” and Caleb, a computer programmer who arrives at Nathan’s estate to test Ava’s consciousness. Through Ava and Caleb’s interactions, we learn that Nathan has kept her trapped, though ultimately she uses Caleb to help her escape. I posit that Ava, despite lacking any obvious Muslim female characteristics, portrays a role Muslim women often fill—a damsel in distress, in need of saving. Thus, I will explore how the Western-depicted, Muslim female experience is represented through Ava—a visibly white, female robot—and the profound implications of this representation. This counterintuitive pairing sheds light on the gaps within Muslim women’s narratives in Western media.

**Samantha Fedewa**

## **Is Water Thicker than Blood?: The Bounds of Maternal Relations in *Roma***

She cooks their meals. She sings them to sleep. She comforts them in times of need. While these many tasks are often undertaken by a mother, she is not theirs. In Alfonso Cuarón’s film, *Roma*, housekeeper Cleo straddles the line between maternal figure and hired help in the household. While scholars such as film writer Gabrielle O’Brien argue that Cleo and the family’s relationship is merely “transactional,” the physicality of Cleo and the children’s relationship seemingly illustrates that their connection is much deeper. Their relationship seems to transcend the confines of “solidarity”—which scholar Isabel Norwood defines as fleeting, ingenuine intimacy—and instead appears to constitute maternal love. The children’s biological mother, Sofia, similarly shares moments of intimacy with her children that seem to involve a relationship greater than the bounds of simply “solidarity.” Feminist scholar Emma Goldman argues that in order for true women’s emancipation to occur, maternal relations and love must no longer be viewed as constraining. This paper examines the validity of Goldman’s theory by exploring what degree of truth it holds in relation to how maternal love constrains or frees Cleo and Sofia.

**Halle Hunt**

## ***Nausicaä’s* Lush World of Toxicity: Using Ecofeminism to Redefine Scopophilic Narratives**

Can a story centered around toxic botany and larger-than-life, beetle-like creatures become a narrative that challenges cinema’s consistent objectification of women and nature? Hayao Miyazaki says, “yes.” In his film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, Miyazaki promotes an ecofeminist narrative by refocusing audiences’ typical “love of looking” (scopophilia) from women to the natural world. By substituting the visually-striking animation of nature, particularly through depictions of giant insects, the beautiful yet toxic jungle, and the lush protective valley, for the subject that audiences desire to see (which is typically women), Miyazaki connects our preconceived notions of womanhood and nature to manipulate expectations of a film through the male gaze. This intentionality behind Miyazaki’s development of women characters largely shines in his nuanced animation style. While Miyazaki partakes in no inherent act of sexualizing or thrusting a romantic plot line onto the protagonist, Nausicaä, he also does not deny her a traditionally feminine figure which signals that the female anatomy is not a contradiction to strong leadership nor something to be ashamed of in fear of sexualization. Ultimately, this paper argues that Hayao Miyazaki integrates concepts of ecofeminism in the film to challenge viewers to reflect upon their systemically patriarchal bias of the space women and nature have in storytelling and to further recognize their role in narratives beyond advancing the male gaze.

**Kira Murata O'Gorman**

**The Beauty of Being Heard:  
Role of the Immigrant Mother in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous***

*Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war.*  
—Little Dog, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

What happens to a child when their mother has been irreparably traumatized by war? In Ocean Vuong's epistolary novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the narrator, Little Dog, grapples with his tumultuous relationship with his illiterate, immigrant mother, Rose. Instead of being a source of stability through which he can explore the world, Rose struggles in her role as a mother due to trauma from the Vietnam War. In turn, this distorts Little Dog's perception of love and the way he forms relationships. This essay explores the idea that Little Dog's letter is a form of narrative therapy, a way to both elevate Rose's voice and provide intimate insight into the experience of Asian immigrant mothers in America. Yet, Little Dog's unique responsibility to amplify Rose's voice is only possible because of the further degree of generational separation between them and the traumatic events that their family endured. In addition, Vuong's attention to Little Dog's maternal bonds emphasizes an inheritance that is rooted in traumatic wartime memory of the motherland. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a reminder that while our pasts incline us, they do not bind us.

**Ashwin Yogaratnam**

**An Entirely Different Sex?:  
The Deconstruction of Idealized Femininity in *Some Like It Hot***

*Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.*  
—Judith Butler

What would you imagine to be the paradigm of femininity? In the 1950s you might imagine that to be a blonde bombshell like Lana Turner or Marilyn Monroe. On a face level, *Some Like It Hot* entertains that idea, playing the ditzy and sensual Sugar Kane, performed by Monroe, opposite the characters of Josephine and Daphne, played in drag by male actors Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon. Kane's naïve eroticism may create a seeming feminine paradigm that, as Daphne puts it, is "an entirely different sex," but this paper argues that Kane's femininity is more transgressive than it seems. Kane is not being subjected to the male gaze but instead intentionally crafting an identity that caters to the people she encounters as a means to ensure herself a better life. Kane's performance in turn shows how her "natural" feminine charm is merely as artificial as the performances that Josephine and Daphne put on.

# Hall of Mirrors

Moderated by Professor Devin Griffiths  
Departments of English and Comparative Literature

Thursday, April 20  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Laurentian/Sumerian

**Liz Allen**

## **Reflections of Self: Exploring Identity and Visibility Outside the Mirror**

*Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg is a novel ahead of its time, exploring gender fluidity and self-identity in a way that resonates with readers today. This paper delves into Feinberg's use of mirror scenes to convey the complexities of protagonist Jess Goldberg's struggle with self-perception. In addition, it takes note of where else Jess recognizes her reflection and feels seen in a way that mirrors could never provide. Through Jess's constant search for herself, the reader is invited on a journey of self-discovery that challenges societal expectations and traditional gender norms. By examining Jess's relationship with identity and her search for representation, this paper offers a fresh perspective on *Stone Butch Blues* and how self-identity is a tool for readers to connect with Jess's experiences, despite the novel's controversial portrayal of queer communities.

**Aayush Manapat**

## **The Emperor in Exile: How Julie Otsuka Presents the Nuanced Impact of Internment on Japanese American Children**

Julie Otsuka's historical novel, *When the Emperor was Divine*, highlights how Japanese American children grapple with a deep-seated sense of confusion about their identity after their family is interned in the Utah Desert. This paper explores the motifs of sleep and inter-community interaction to highlight inter- and intrapersonal dynamics that exhibit internment's effects on key determiners of identity in children and adolescents. Self-esteem, sociability, and logic are altered by the experience of internment, changing how the two children in the novel rationalize their identities. Analysis of Otsuka's novel is supported by evidence from an archive of letters written by interned adolescents. This paper concludes that Otsuka focuses on internment's inherent connection with the isolation Japanese American children feel. She then underlines how isolation persists internally and externally, spatially and temporally and how this isolation fundamentally changes the way in which Japanese American children reckon with notions of identity through periled familial relations, self-esteem, and sociability.

**Teja Moe**

## **I'm Feeling Homesick: Home's Effect on Health in *Safe***

What if your home, your place of comfort and stability, was making you sick? Todd Hayne's film *Safe* explores the interconnected relationship between mental health and the home when suburban housewife Carol falls ill. Though the origins of her illness remain ambiguous throughout the film, the most explicitly stated cause is toxins from Carol's urban environment. However, this paper draws upon the ideas of scholars such as Susan Kollin, Linda Belau, and Ed Cameron to discuss the possibility that the real cause of Carol's failing health is troubles in her home. From scenes of uncomfortable interaction with her husband and stepson to the visual manipulation of her house through angles and camerawork, Haynes leaves a purposeful hint at Carol's home life being an ominous environment. Furthermore, with this analysis of Carol and her home, this paper examines a broader topic in *Safe*: the causal relationship between a person and their home life, in particular, how an unsettled emotional environment results in challenges to mental health. So, what would you do if it was your family, the people you love the most, causing your illness?

**Rui Zhang**

**Objects with Eyes:  
*Ex Machina's* Kyoko and the Power of Looking (Back)**

“She doesn’t speak English. Just give her the napkin.” *Ex Machina's* Kyoko, an Asian female A.I. designed to clean, cook, and warm one’s bed, seems poised to epitomize a problematic tradition of depicting Asian women in film as docile, exploitable, and robotic. Apparently speechless and domesticated, she hovers silently around the periphery of scenes, readily ignored. Yet one might notice the intent in her presence—listening in on conversation as she cuts fish, watching over her creator’s shoulder as she lies naked in his bed. As described in Steve Mann’s theory of sousveillance, there is power to be asserted in “looking back” at one’s oppressors. Kyoko, a servant and a sexual object, is uniquely able to utilize her apparent harmlessness to access and disseminate the information that sets the film’s major conflict in motion. Scholarly conversation about Kyoko has often veered towards the naively optimistic or the excessively fatalistic. In a reading that acknowledges the power found in looking, this paper posits that even as we see Kyoko killed by the film’s end, we might look at her immobile body and notice that her eyes are still open.

**Keira Marie Zoleta**

**Transparent Fabrics and People:  
Fashion's Role in Female Self-Objectification in *House of Mirth***

Wake up. Clothe yourself. Clean the house. Marry a rich man...No? Then, there is no other choice than death. This is the life of Lily Bart, a woman living in New York during the late 1800s in the film adaptation of Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth*. Through Lily Bart’s facial expressions and depressive verbal tone, Lily’s written existence becomes visualized. But, the bell-shaped dresses, feathered hats, and layers of frills displayed on her body provide more than visualization; they serve as indicators of her transformation from a woman to an object. Her failure to adhere to society’s demand for marriage and wealth allows her family and friends to discover a tear in her humanity. Consequently, Lily decides to completely rip her humanity apart by committing suicide. Through her unfortunate ending, we can discover fashion’s role in female objectification and how it acts as a two-way mirror, in which patriarchal society is observing through the transparent side. She is a victim of fashion’s expectations that are often ignored. Or should I say “it” is a victim?

# Inside Voices

Moderated by Sarah Frontiera  
Department of English

Thursday, April 20  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Gutenberg

Sooki R. F. Beeley

## **The Intersection of Militancy, Gender, and Sex in "Helicopter Story"**

In 2020, an anonymous author published the short science fiction story, "I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter" in *Clarkesworld Magazine*. While the story was initially celebrated for queer subversion, some readers suspected that the author was a cisgender man weaponizing the viral anti-transgender "attack helicopter" meme. Online attacks caused the author to rename their work "Helicopter Story" and disclose their identity as Isabel Fall, a transgender woman, before removing her story from the publication. Fall's experience is ironic, given her story's relevance to her own situation. This paper argues that Fall's story disrupts established queer theory by blurring the delineation between gender and sex and depicting gender as a self-determined choice. These disruptions allow Fall to capture the dangerous implications of her imagined futuristic society, where the military can "gender reassign" individuals, breeding violence just as assigning gender to people is viewed by some queer individuals as a form of violence.

Aanika Gupta

## **Silent Control and Sunken Consciousness: Exploring Intergenerational Trauma in *Get Out***

Comedic, thrilling, horrific, twisted, and politically accurate. These are all words critics have used to describe the ingenious Academy Award-winning film, *Get Out*. The film's protagonist, Chris, travels to meet his white girlfriend Rose's family. While there, he discovers the horrific truth behind Rose's intentions towards him, exposing the family's scheme to harvest his body. Scholars have explored a multitude of political issues and psychodynamic theories about the film such as W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness (feeling as if you have multiple identities) and Landsberg's "horror vérité" (a truthful horror). However, these theories don't tell the whole story; the silent backbone of Chris's split consciousness, and theories about the film itself, is intergenerational trauma. This paper will explore Chris's behaviors and thoughts while in the "Sunken Place" and his interactions with other characters to provide context for both his intergenerational trauma and double consciousness. By highlighting Chris's individual experiences, this paper brings attention to the individual story while still recognizing the importance of broader issues such as intergenerational trauma and double consciousness.

Cameryn Kwong

## **What It Costs to Wear the Crown: Internalized Misogyny as a Vessel of Freedom and Entrapment in Tina Fey's *Mean Girls***

Ruthless revenge. Backstabbing bitches. Gossip. In Tina Fey's film *Mean Girls*, these motifs are anything but shallow, as they push a narrative of power play in women. *Mean Girls* revolves around "Queen Bee" Regina George and the influence she has over everyone she encounters. Rarely do people realize the subtle yet loud forms of internalized misogyny this queen bee inflicts upon her subjects. She can pull anyone—consenting or not—into her orbit, her rules, and her tyranny. Her influence dictates what people wear, how they act, and whom they "choose" to associate themselves with. Yet, Regina herself is able to dress however she pleases, act however she wants, and talk to whomever she wishes. She derives her power from an ironic twist on internalized misogyny: in order to break free from internalized misogyny, it's necessary for Regina to impose it in the form of rules onto all of her female peers. What drives this behavior? What subconsciously motivates Regina's actions? And why are we as viewers so entranced by this ironic power play?



Erika Li

**In Defense of Illness:  
Sickness as a Seed for Empowerment in *Safe***

Sickness is often seen as a draining force, yet rarely is it considered something that can be empowering. Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe* has been touted as a novel piece of counter-cinema, a film that subverts the traditional norms of the time, for its depictions of distorted suburbia and the relatively new concept of environmental illness. *Safe* chronicles the daily life of Carol, a suburban southern Californian housewife who falls ill without explanation. Eventually, Carol attributes the cause of her sickness to ubiquitous chemicals such as pesticides and disinfectants. While critics often interpret Carol's illness as a manifestation of her identity repression in her rigid suburban life, they seldom acknowledge the agency and autonomy that Carol gains from sickness. Haynes interweaves Carol's symptoms and the freedom she gains from them, highlighting illness as an empowering vehicle for Carol to gain more control over her expression of identity. This paper argues that *Safe* is not revolutionary simply for its depiction of the causes of illness, but for how it portrays the impacts of illness on the individual identity.

Maya Lin-Stevens

**"Torn asunder":  
Shattering Binaries in Nella Larsen's *Passing***

How would it feel to be a stranger, even to yourself? Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* tackles this question in unexpected ways through the eyes of two white-passing Black women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Unable to fit into a specific racial category, Irene and Clare are each free to live as they choose; Irene decides to remain "true" to her Black identity, and Clare uses her privilege to pass as white to gain more power in society. Given their struggles with denial and disorientation, it might appear at first glance that Irene and Clare experience "double consciousness," a theory introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* in which Black individuals feel torn between the pressures of white society and their desires for hope and social change. However, by challenging societal assumptions around external perception, appearances, and oppressive systems, the act of passing fragments their identities to a point beyond intelligibility. This paper will utilize Du Bois's theory to examine the ways "passing" fractures one's psyche, subverts traditional ideas about racial binaries, and leads us to question the purpose of definitive categories as a whole.

# Machine Learning

Moderated by Zak Breckenridge  
Department of English

Thursday, April 20  
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Scriptorium

**Sophia Chen**

## **Androgyny, Non-Action, and Taoism: How *The Left Hand of Darkness* Connects Gender to Progress**

A lot of 1950s and 1960s American science fiction comments on the rapid technological innovation of the time. While some authors built optimistic techno-utopias, others highlighted technology's postatomic destructive potential. The frigid and harsh planet of Gethen in Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* contrasts this era's fiery obsession with progress; interplanetary ambassador Genly Ai remarks that Gethenians would question the prospect of making their 25 mile-per-hour vehicles faster, the same way Earth would question their sluggishness. However, many scholars fixate on *Left Hand's* commentary on gender, as Gethenians do not have a binary sex or gender except for "kemmer," a monthly occurrence for intercourse. While Gethenian androgyny plays a major role in its culture, Le Guin herself believes that her novel encompasses other cultural phenomena beyond just gender. By reframing Gethen's culture with the concept of *wu wei*, or non-action, and using Le Guin's proposed definitions of yin versus yang speculative utopias, this paper argues that Le Guin uses Taoist principles to create an androgynous planet that doesn't emphasize advancement to analyze how binary gender impacts societal ideals surrounding progress.

**Kyle Ching**

## **Stimulating Human Attention with A.I.: Navigating ChatGPT through Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing***

How does artificial intelligence affect the human mind? In *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, author and artist Jenny Odell laments how interacting with "algorithmic versions of each other" has diminished our capacity for attentive reflection. Odell is referring specifically to social media algorithms, but she might as well be talking about ChatGPT. Released by the company OpenAI, the new artificial intelligence software can produce highly advanced responses to user prompts. Given ChatGPT's ability to generate instantaneous content, this paper explores how Odell's fears about social media are manifested in the new technology. For instance, this paper looks at the ways ChatGPT overwhelms users with information and prevents them from taking contemplative pauses. Rather than suggesting a total rejection of ChatGPT, however, this paper contends that the software can further the type of meditative reflection that Odell advocates for. This paper proceeds to offer different ways we might use ChatGPT to enhance our attention rather than diminish it. Thus, by applying Odell's recommendations for the attentive use of technology to ChatGPT, artificial intelligence can become an invaluable tool to our thought process.

**Harshitha Dasari**

## **Weaponizing Gender: Militarized Masculinities in "Helicopter Story"**

*Can you tell me honestly that killing is a genderless act?  
The method? The motive? The victim? When you imagine the innocent dead, who do you see?*  
—Isabel Fall, "Helicopter Story"

The archetypal military man is a paradox. He is the strong, heroic warrior who valiantly fights atrocity on the ground; he is the cool, sleek drone with the power to level entire cities; he is the protector of women, the sworn defender of the motherland; he is the rapist assaulting women, the war criminal massacring civilian villages; he is the rational general and the sympathetic killer and the warrior king. One cannot understand warfare without considering how masculinity intersects with militarism. Isabel Fall's controversial "Helicopter Story" envisions a sci-fi world that has learned to program and reprogram the neural networks of gender. Using the "technology of gender," this post-apocalyptic world wires soldiers into weapons of war. By explicitly connecting gender and war, Fall exposes how masculinity fuels violence. Furthermore, Fall demilitarizes masculinity by depicting the monolithic military man as

a melting pot of contradictions: rational and risk-taking, aggressive and emotionless, violent and protective. In doing so, "Helicopter Story" opens up space for indeterminate and undefinable gender identities.

**Kailin Liu**

**Art, Ad, or A.I.?:  
Jackson Pollock and *Ex Machina's* Warnings for Artificial Intelligence**

Mud-painter or artistic revolutionary? Fraud or worth \$140 million? Jack the Dripper or Jackson Pollock? From splattering paint to extinguishing cigarette butts to pressing handprints, Jackson Pollock, regarded as one of the 20th century's greatest and most controversial artists for his "drip technique," transformed human-sized canvases into messy, subject-less masterpieces. Instead of establishing a clear subject in his work, Pollock invited his audience to decide for themselves, claiming that he was painting from a mental space that was neither deliberate nor random. Fast forward nearly 100 years. The 2014 film *Ex Machina* takes Pollock's *No. 5, 1948* and places it dead center of a discussion surrounding artificial intelligence, its believability, and its dangers. Specifically, *Ex Machina's* antagonist Nathan, a scientific genius and unhinged drunk rolled into one, likens Pollock's artistic approach to A.I. development: that a truly believable A.I. also operates from a place that is neither deliberate nor random. Inadvertently, Nathan's choice to spotlight *No. 5, 1948* allows *Ex Machina* to present a more holistic and critical lens of A.I. Through Pollock's art and ideology, *Ex Machina* not only explores the challenges facing A.I. development, but also highlights the issues within the industries that motivate and market A.I.

**Simone Wesley**

**Dispatch the Ideal Body:  
An Exploration of du Maurier's Rejection of Bodily Perfection in "The Breakthrough"**

Our ideals trap us more than our bodies ever could, but how can this be? The idiosyncratic and unattainable nature of the "ideal body" has wreaked havoc on our societies before we even knew of its existence; it has evolved alongside us. In "The Breakthrough," Daphne du Maurier explores the moral implications of experimentation on disabled individuals—those not adherent to the ideal body's standards—to further our collective scientific and technological achievement. This paper contends that we should discard the ideal body from our society. It argues that the implementation of newfound technologies should not be considered by society as necessary to "fix" disability since their creation stems from an ableist viewpoint and perspective. This paper examines "The Breakthrough" as a critique of the ideal body in its perceived deviations from the physical and mental and its assertion that society's desire for bodily perfection is the real disability.

