

play

27th Annual Thematic Option Research Conference

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, Play, to be presented as part of a panel. Each panel is composed of up to five students, with a faculty member serving as the panel's chair and respondent. A question-and-answer session follows the presentation of papers in each panel. Topics are reflective of students' various disciplines and interests and focus on issues ranging from politics to popular culture. Possible themes include imagination, creativity, fantasy, and make believe; childhood and the child-like; sports, games, and toys; rules and boundaries; interaction, cooperation, and team work; competition; warfare; winning and losing; storytelling; satire and parody; drama, acting, and performance; costumes; rituals; the natural and the constructed; exaggeration and camp; distraction; deception; manipulation and exploitation; puppets and puppeteers; flexibility; nimble thinking; resistance; foolishness and mischief; free will; leisure and spontaneity; indulgence and frivolity; (ir)responsibility; gambling; risk and reward; desires, conscious and unconscious; dreams; good sense and nonsense; whimsy; fun; or the student's own unique interpretation.

keynote speaker

Professor Lydie Moudileno

Marion Frances Chevalier Professor of French
Departments of French and Italian, American
Studies and Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature

Professor Moudileno's research focuses on literary and cultural productions from the Francophone world, in particular the Caribbean and West and Central Africa, as well as postcolonial France. Her books have examined issues of authorship and metaliterary representations in Francophone Caribbean literature, post-Négritude Congolese fiction, and contemporary African fiction. She is the co-editor of several volumes and special issues on literary representations of Blackness in Francophone fiction, and on writers Maryse Condé and Marie NDiaye. Her more recent work examines race in contemporary French culture: *Mythologies postcoloniales: Décoloniser le quotidien*, a study of race in popular culture at the turn of the millennium, inspired by the work of Roland Barthes, and *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Signs and Symbols in Modern France*, a collected volume investigating traces of the colonial past in contemporary France.

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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.

SECOND FLOOR: SCRIPTORIUM



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All in the Family

Moderated by Rachel Newman
Department of English

Tuesday, April 16
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.
Carnegie

Sarah Brewer

Surviving Together: Houses of the Ballroom Community and Their Impact

Pose and *RuPaul's Drag Race* majorly brought ballroom culture into vogue for the mainstream audience in the 2000s and 2010s, but they weren't the first to do so. *Paris is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston, is a documentary that's primary focus is defining and immortalizing moments in time from the ballroom subculture in Harlem from the mid to late 1980s. Within this community, houses have formed. What's a house? According to one of the film's subjects, Dorian Corey, "They're families. You can say that. They're families for a lot of children who don't have families. But this is a new meaning of family." But what does that entail exactly? If you've ever been a fan of the "found family" trope in media, this is an instance of its manifestation in real life. These aren't fictional characters though; these are the circumstances of real people's lives and, more than that, this is how they have learned to survive. Through an exploration of the successes and shortcomings of ballroom houses, I argue in favor of their importance despite their imperfections. Ballroom houses are survival.

Christian "chrissy b." Brown

Toxic Child Meets Toxic Mother: Complex Child-Mother Relationships in *Coraline*

Have you ever felt like you're constantly babied? Well, in Henry Selick's *Coraline*, Coraline experiences this problem when she travels to an alternate dimension called the "Other" and meets her family's and housemates' doppelgängers. They initially appear to fill a void in her life, but turn out to be overbearing and borderline monstrous or toxic, especially her Other Mother. Coraline experiences the hardship of what it means to be a child and must learn how to grow into an individual person while navigating complex relationships with both her Real Mother and Other Mother. While many scholars of *Coraline* address the toxic motherhood in the film, I investigate how both Coraline and her mothers are "toxic" as well as the nuances of a toxic child-mother dynamic from a psychoanalytic perspective. Many people do not dare to perceive Coraline as toxic herself, but I believe this perspective is worth investigating. Ultimately, my goal is to open viewers' eyes to the complicated psychology of motherhood and childhood in *Coraline* and why no daughter or mother is innocent in the events that unfold in the story.

Owen Fong

The Monsters Next Door: *Happiness* and the Limits of Subversion

An eleven-year-old boy sits on a plush couch and tearily asks his father—a child predator—if he would ever molest him. His father replies, "No. I'd jerk off instead." The boy cries, and audiences are left unsure if the boy is crying because his father is a pedophile, or because his father wouldn't molest him. Like many pieces of media in the late 1990s, Todd Solondz's controversial black comedy *Happiness* irreverently skewers and subverts expectations, from relationships to activism to the concept of the American nuclear family. For instance, Bill Maplewood, played by Dylan Baker, appears to be a kindly suburban father, though underneath this facade lies a depraved pedophile. While the subversive content present in the film leads to great comedic moments, Solondz does not appear to provide any clear stances or moral judgments. For this presentation, I specifically examine the suburban Maplewood family, and how masculinity is approached in the film's subversions of traditional American values. Consequently, while many of the critiques of American society have aged relatively gracefully, a deeper examination of masculinity in *Happiness* produces troubling conclusions.

Akul Jindal

**Memory as a Lens:
Exploring Post-Generational Memory in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous***

*How we perceive the world and how we act in it are products of how and what we remember.
We're all just a bundle of habits shaped by our memories.*
—Joshua Foer, *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*

The topic of memory is deeply ingrained in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. More specifically, the story centers the way through which the protagonist, Little Dog, recalls his post-generationally-influenced memories and the traumatic memories from his childhood and considers how these impact his personality. This novel, written in the form of a letter to his illiterate mother in her second language, begets many vital questions, and to understand it better we must first find answers to them. Why did Little Dog write a letter to his illiterate mother? What purpose does it serve? Who is it actually meant for? And most importantly, what does it mean in the face of the trauma he has had to face? After all, as Mitch Albom writes, "It is not your memories which haunt you. It is not what you have written down. It is [...] what you must forget. What you must go on forgetting all your life."

Luisa Luo

**The Clash of the Century:
Metacognitive Awakenings in *Everything Everywhere All at Once***

Imagine a world where your daughter secretly orchestrates the annihilation of humanity—a narrative captured in the multiverse film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (*EEAAO*). This creatively defiant work dismantles the viewers' initial expectations about the genre and refreshes representations of Asian American characters. Among various metacognitive awakenings, absurdist nihilism and Daoist *wu wei* stand out as two geographically distant concepts that resemble each other in spirit. The two philosophical threads are embodied by the ultra-villain daughter Jobu Tupaki and the quiet yet patient father Waymond respectively. When the two contrasting attitudes come into contact, they undergo a drastic, seemingly irreconcilable clash only to reveal a shared universal truth: compassion and kindness dissolve the menace and danger of self-destruction. Navigating the tumultuous ebb and flow between cosmic insignificance and redemption, *EEAAO* masterfully integrates our deepest anxieties toward the meaninglessness of life. If Jobu's "Everything Bagel" is the epitome of chaos, then Waymond's playful "Googly Eyes" provide the firm hands that relieve the pain. Drawing on contemporary interpretations of effortless action to counter the "nothing matters" type of pessimism, this paper seeks to reimagine a collision of two ideologies that leads to an ultimate acceptance of existential struggles.

Past, Present, Future

Moderated by Professor Corinna Schroeder
The Writing Program

Tuesday, April 16
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.
Gutenberg

Elleana Bone

Nostalgia in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*: Healing or Harmful?

Things which don't shift and grow are dead things.
—Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

According to Silko, it is important to balance time and adapt ceremonies to current experiences, a contrast to engaging with rigid tradition. *Ceremony* emphasizes the need to fit tradition into modern contexts in order to heal PTSD and alcoholism. I argue nostalgia is the force that both causes these illnesses and heals them in the Native American characters. Silko's *Ceremony* has been analyzed in the context of healing through ceremony, but there is a lack of conversation regarding nostalgia as the balance between healing and witchery. Nostalgia, which I define as the feeling of attachment to a past time, ensures the healing ceremonies of the past stay in the present mind. However, excessive nostalgia can lead to being stuck in the past, as is the case with PTSD. Nostalgia motivates the characters to reconnect with traditional ceremonies and nature, which enables their healing, but balance is key to their survival. Reconnecting to traditions and adapting them to current circumstances has proven to be a powerful healing mechanism for many cultures—traditions such as hair braiding, tribal dance, and traditional celebrations. Perhaps by exploring this concept in *Ceremony* we can better understand how to heal oppressed cultures through balancing nostalgia.

Silas Epstein

Think of the Children: Generational Divides in Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru*

How can a country without autonomy maintain its cultural heritage? That is the question Akira Kurosawa's 1952 film *Ikiru* poses. The film follows Kanji Watanabe, a zombie-like bureaucrat whose cancer diagnosis inspires him to become an active political force. His newfound political interest comes at a fraught time though. After World War II, the Allied forces occupied Japan and replaced its government. Culturally, the occupation created a sharp divide between the younger generations who grew up surrounded by Western media and the older generations, many of whom had fought for Imperial Japan against the West. *Ikiru*, released during the last year of Allied Occupation, demonstrates this divide through its older and younger characters. There is one exception though. Toyo, a young secondary character who leaves City Hall to join an assembly line, does not fit neatly into either age group's stereotypes. The reason why Kurosawa made her so nuanced not only changes how we view *Ikiru*, it gives us a blueprint for navigating the social media age.

Emma Massey

Why I Can't Wait to Be 80: An Exploration of Aging in *Strangers in Good Company*

Many of us spend our teenage years dreading our 30s, yet *Strangers in Good Company* reshapes the idea of aging, inspiring excitement for growing old. *Strangers in Good Company* is a lighthearted movie meant to reshape society's views on aging. It depicts seven elderly women and one young woman who are stranded in the Canadian countryside while they struggle with their looming and fast-approaching death. In its quest to disavow the negative stereotypes that come along with aging, the film also brings in a uniquely feminist view in that all the actors/characters are women. This film effectively communicates the love for aging to all generations by documenting the lives of these women in a positive way. Michelle, a 27 year old woman—in contrast to the rest of the women who are all above 80—and the only woman of color, is used to convey an affinity for aging to the younger generations. I argue in my presentation that the purposeful contrast of Michelle to the other women, inspires young people to have a more positive outlook on age and encourages them to be excited to grow old themselves.

Hudson Mayfield

**Natural Lightning, Atomic Thunder:
The Technological versus the Natural Sublime in *Oppenheimer***

The sublime: the sense of awe which humans feel in the presence of something greater than themselves. Over the course of the past 79 years, humanity has been awed by the atomic age and its new and unique sense of the sublime. In his 2023 film *Oppenheimer*, director Christopher Nolan examines the story of the atomic bomb through the lens of leading Manhattan Project physicist Robert Oppenheimer. Although many viewers miss it, the film makes an effort to contrast the sublime feeling of nature with the sense of destructive technological awe. However it is almost impossible to find any film reviews which discuss the parallels between these two dueling sublimes in *Oppenheimer*. In my paper, I explore this battle of sublimes in the film's details alongside excerpts from six sources. These sources show how the conflicting use of the natural and technological sublime in *Oppenheimer* underlies a greater conflict: the struggle between the old scientific world led by scientists and the new world led by the military industrial complex and government funding, a world which continues to exist and expand today.

Leah Joi Seldon

**You've Heard It, But Do You Know It?:
A Dive into Afrofuturist Music**

Music does something to a person that words cannot describe. It complicates their emotions to a point where they can no longer fully understand them. When music becomes otherworldly, these emotions mix and create completely new feelings. This otherworldly music is futuristic because it evokes the previously unknown. For African Americans, Afrofuturist music lives in this other world because it imagines an unknown future, one without racial-based confinement. Due to African Americans' ancestral enslavement and racial trauma, Afrofuturist music erupts as a mode of self-expression and futuristic enlightenment. In his film *The Last Angel of History*, John Akomfrah dissects Afrofuturism's futuristic and African diaspora qualities. I explore the artists Sun Ra, Parliament, and Missy Elliot and their Afrofuturist music by dissecting songs and visuals. Sun Ra focuses on shifting African American consciousness regarding technology. Parliament fights hate with their infectious funk groove. Missy Elliot escapes stereotyping bounds. Each artist combines their ancestors' past with their current present and their creative mind, resulting in Afrofuturist music. I argue that their music is a cultural and community necessity because it speaks for their ancestors' past while simultaneously forming the possible futures they envision.

Significant Others

Moderated by Professor Béatrice Mousli
Department of French and Italian

Tuesday, April 16
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.
North

Marcellas Belay

Redefining Black Masculinity in *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*

In a genre saturated with stereotypical portrayals of Black men, *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* stands out as a film that opposes the conventional depiction of Black masculinity. Although existing scholarship is limited, *The Last Black Man* has primarily been studied as a film that protests urban gentrification. As the film follows protagonists Jimmie and Mont, their close friendship becomes a defining aspect of the film. I posit that *The Last Black Man in San Francisco's* depiction of intimacy in Black male friendship is what differentiates it from the established protest film genre, which relies heavily on stereotypical depictions of Black masculinity. Scholars have often approached Jimmie and Mont's relationship through the lens of sexuality, making a problematic leap between emotional intimacy and sexuality. I argue that these interpretations of the film are not only harmful but further entrench the stereotypes the film seeks to cast off. Through close reading of physical closeness and dialogue, I demonstrate the intimacy that characterizes Jimmie and Mont's friendship. It is this intimacy, I argue, that not only causes the film to diverge from the protest tradition but also operate as a form of resistance against both urban displacement and traditional depictions of Black masculinity.

Scarlett C. Kamga

In the Sunken Place: Perceiving Interracial Relationships in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*

Chris: Do they know I'm Black?

Rose: No. Should they?

—*Get Out*

Marrying outside of one's race can be a difficult choice for many despite the increasing acceptance and normalization of interracial romance. *Get Out*, directed by Jordan Peele, is a landmark film that has brought attention to the nuances of racism within interracial relationships through its focus on the relationship between Chris, an African American man, and his White American girlfriend, Rose. This essay investigates how *Get Out* is a poignant demonstration of how modern racism reveals itself within interracial relationships, particularly through the fetishization of Black men. Drawing on historical and sociological insights, I contest the notion of a "post-racial" society, asserting that ingrained biases and systemic injustices endure. Through a close analysis of Peele's narrative and the film's portrayal of racial dynamics, this essay dissects the underlying tensions within Chris and Rose's relationship. By contextualizing these dynamics within the historical legacy of racial exploitation, I reveal how *Get Out* exemplifies American society's prevailing inability to see Black bodies for more than their physicality. Ultimately, *Get Out* serves as a potent example of the damaging effects of contemporary racism, challenging viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about race and power within interracial relationships.

Oliver Leinberger

How Do You Say "I Love You"?: Challenging the Nature of Communication and Translation in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Communication with another can be conveyed through a plethora of ways, from spoken words to directed physical actions. Regardless of the means, it's how we connect with those around us, how we express thoughts and emotions, and how we imagine. And in Ocean Vuong's 2019 semi-autobiographical novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, a gay Vietnamese American boy named Little Dog utilizes written communication to draft a fragmented letter in English about his childhood to his illiterate mother, Rose. Language is clearly a communicative barrier between him and his mother, yet he decides to write anyway, knowing the only person he's trying to reach is inches away from his grasp. Why exercise language when physical actions and connection is what brings Little Dog and Rose together? Many scholars such as Dr. Birgit Neumann have approached Vuong's use of language from a translation studies and literary

perspective. While their coverage of the disruption in communication found in the novel is thorough, I am exploring further how Vuong stands as a translator not just of language but between his Vietnamese family and the rest of the world to ultimately make this unread letter finally heard by its intended recipient.

Paige Speaker

**A Sexist Work through a Feminist Lens:
Swan Lake and the Treatment of Female Characters**

What does an artist owe their audience? How much can an artist ask of their audience? In the original *Swan Lake*, the white and black swan are pitted against each other through the lens of "good" and "evil" femininity. This characterization is heavily influenced by the social culture of the late 1800s in Russia. However, due to changes in views regarding the female role and autonomy, the ballet is no longer simply about how a woman fits into a man's story, but instead how she makes her own. Rather than moving past the original to newer variations, if we as an audience can instead reshape our views regarding this ballet, lifting up a critical feminist lens, we can amend the way we watch the ballet. Additionally, this lens can then be expanded to other art as well as a means to uplift female perspectives and voices.

Edith (Xiyuan) Zhang

**Love in the Time of De-Nazified Europe:
A Political Concept of Love (and Evil) in *The Night Porter***

The Night Porter is not the only film that depicts a relationship between a Nazi officer and a prisoner of a concentration camp. However, it is the only film that deals with the aftermath of it. After a puzzling reunion between Lucia, now the wife of a conductor, and Max, the night porter of a hotel, the audience realizes in flashbacks that Lucia was once a Jewish prisoner under the Nazi officer Max and that they once had a relationship that transcended their identities. Although current scholarship of *The Night Porter* reads this relationship as everything but love, this paper offers a rebelliously romantic interpretation. Through the lens of a political concept of love introduced by Michael Hardt in his essay "For Love or Money," Max and Lucia's love is demonstrated in their dancing momentums. Yet, it is exactly the dances that reveal the dual evil of Nazism and Capitalism, according to Hardt's theory and other scholars writing about the film. This paper explores how Hardt's theory serves to expose the symbiosis of love and evil in *The Night Porter*, and the inevitability of love nevertheless.

What Does It Mean?

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

Tuesday, April 16
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.
Scriptorium

Celine Bacily

Beyond the Clock: *Ikiru* and the Embodiment of Crip Time

You were a slave to your own life.
—Novelist, *Ikiru*

Knowing that each breath brings him closer to his last, Kanji Watanabe embarks on a quest for meaning following his terminal cancer diagnosis. In Akira Kurosawa's film *Ikiru*, Watanabe's journey is depicted in a way that disrupts linear time perceptions, using flashbacks to offer insight into characters' thought processes. *Ikiru*'s non-linear structure mirrors "crip time," a concept coined by the field of disability studies that reimagines conventional notions of time as experienced by individuals with disabilities. This essay argues that exploring *Ikiru*'s non-linear structure through the lens of crip time reveals the necessity for a broader understanding and appreciation of non-traditional experiences of time. Through this analysis, Kurosawa's *Ikiru* is shown to transcend its narrative, emphasizing the value of expressing empathy before the clock runs out.

Shirley Hu

That Which Has No Importance: Postmodernism in *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*

What happens when nothing happens? Georges Perec poses and answers this question in *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*. He captures the trivial happening in Saint-Sulpice, Paris in an exhaustive list that reads: "Colors red (Fiat, dress, St-Raphael, one-ways) blue bag green shoes green raincoat blue taxi." And it goes on... for 47 pages. In the late 20th century, urban modernization stripped Paris of such cultural heritage as the city's unique architectural style and transformed it into a stereotypical urban landscape. Perec's text exemplifies criticism of urban modernization, mirroring a postmodern city enriched with sensory dimensions. He orients toward the mundane, questioning modernism's celebration of progress in urban efficiency. Analyzing *An Attempt* through other postmodern works, this paper delves into the homogenization of urban landscape detailed in Perec's meticulous observations, highlighting its impact in alienating the inhabitants while facilitating meaningless uniform motions. Further, in an examination of the narrative style, I argue that Perec is proposing an alternative perspective on urban life which values meaningful engagement and individuality amidst global modernization.

Darius Mahjoob

The Relentless Pursuit of *Happiness*: Exploring Audience Engagement with Affect Theory in Solondz's Film

Have you ever watched a film that made you root for a child predator? *Happiness*, Todd Solondz's 1998 tragicomedy, achieves exactly that as the protagonist, Bill Maplewood—a husband, father, and practicing psychiatrist—is revealed later to be a pedophile. Through a detailed analysis of Dr. Maplewood, I argue that Solondz expertly manipulates audience expectations by bombarding us with alternating scenes of comedy and horror. Using Affect Theory, defined as the confrontation of "ugly feelings," I believe *Happiness* deliberately showcases its characters at their worst in order to force viewers to question how much of their authentic selves are hidden from society. As viewers become entangled in the lives of Solondz's morally ambiguous characters, they might feel compelled to reassess their own values and beliefs. Consequently, the ironically-named *Happiness* reveals itself to be a ferocious cinematic experience that compels viewers to abandon any and all allegiances to characters. Therefore, Solondz's magnum opus acts as a mirror reflecting the complexities of human desire and the elusive nature of happiness itself. In this way, it turns out the "pursuit of happiness" has multiple definitions.

Xavier Ramirez

**Third Space or No Space:
Leisure in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"**

*The nature of a third place is one in which the presence of a "regular" is always welcome, although never required.
Membership is a simple, fluid process of frequent social contact, renewed each time by choice of the people involved.*
—Ray Oldenburg

Leisure and work. Life and death. In response to being confined in a small cubicle, the scrivener Bartleby employs the passive linguistic resistance of "I'd prefer not to," illuminating a stark contrast between work life and the pursuit of leisure—a discontent that is deeply rooted within his physical work environment. To alleviate this discontent, I propose the concept of a third space, defined by Sociologist Ray Oldenburg as a physical space outside of your home (your first space) and work (your second space). These public havens transcend the binary categorizations of home and work by offering solace, community, and the opportunity for self-reclamation in a world fueled by productivity. By exploring the concept of a third space through the lens of Bartleby's narrative, I highlight the profound implications of leisure deprivation and answer questions such as: What is the importance of leisure? How do third spaces contribute to a reevaluation of contemporary work dynamics? And how do third spaces foster societal well-being? More importantly, I want to ask you: Are you happy with your work?

Tom Xu

**Transcending Rationality:
Love and Decision-Making in the Unfathomable Sublime of *Interstellar***

Is rationality or love more important in decision-making? Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* includes many critical moments that echo this question. Many behavioral economists and psychologists prioritize rationality in decision-making as championed by theorists like Herbert Simon. I argue that such an assumption fails in both scientific and emotional contexts when set against the backdrop of unprecedented environmental and spatial challenges. *Interstellar* highlights instances where rational decision-making falters due to inadequate information and overwhelming emotional stimuli, as exemplified by the characters' encounters with extreme danger and moral dilemmas. *Interstellar* advances the argument that love, a profoundly human emotion, serves as a superior guide in scenarios where rationality and empirical knowledge prove insufficient. Through the characters' experiences, Nolan portrays love as a transcendent force capable of guiding human actions beyond the limitations of logical reasoning, suggesting that in the vastness of space and the face of the unknown, emotional bonds provide crucial direction and motivation. This analysis argues that *Interstellar* not only challenges rationality in the face of complex, existential threats but also celebrates the unpredictable and powerful role of love in human decision-making.

Where Does It Hurt?

Moderated by Professor Amy Ogata
Department of Art History

Tuesday, April 16
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m.
South

Celia Jane Hagler

Feel What I Feel: Uncovering Trauma and Mental Health in *Blood and Guts in High School*

Exploitation can be used as an avenue for advocacy. Throughout her controversial 1984 novel *Blood and Guts in High School*, Kathy Acker pushes the limits with a narrative filled with kidnapping, incest, human trafficking, cancer, and death. Acker's novel follows Janey Smith from ages ten to fourteen when she passes due to cancer in a way that magnifies and complicates the turbulent reality of trauma. Looking past the excess of *Blood and Guts in High School*, readers begin to form a new understanding of the complexities of dealing with mental health struggles on a daily basis. Janey's struggles detailed in this gut-wrenching novel provide readers with a glimpse into the sometimes excessive pain that comes from living with constant trauma, perhaps helping them understand their own trauma. In this way, Acker's novel is a manifesto for the trauma of dealing with mental health. My presentation explores the mind of Janey—seen in the diaristic, stream-of-consciousness writing of the novel—while analyzing Acker's often criticized postmodern writing style. Ultimately, I dig into Janey's life, actions, and unfortunate death with the goal of understanding how literature can help us navigate a world rife with mental illness.

Sienna Jackson

Reflected Memories: Depictions of Grief in Otsuka's *The Swimmers*

*It's just like flying. The pure pleasure of being in motion. The dissipation of all want. I'm free.
You are suddenly aloft. Adrift. Ecstatic. Euphoric. In a rapturous and trancelike state of bliss.
And if you swim for long enough you no longer know where your own body ends and the water begins
and there is no boundary between you and the world. It's nirvana.*
—Julie Otsuka, *The Swimmers*

Waves break, and legs kick. The pool is where the swimmers come to escape their pain. For Alice, the central character of Julie Otsuka's novel *The Swimmers*, grief has woven itself into countless aspects of her life. Sublime, transcendental experiences have been endlessly categorized and defined, yet, not enough scholarly attention has been paid to the concept of grief as a process that is sublime. In fact, grief is a coalescence of not one, but two sublimes: one positive and one negative, but both equal in their capacity for transcendence. Viewing both versions of sublime grief as a collective experience resolves its dualistic consequences. In this way, *The Swimmers* itself is an act of reconnection. By exploring her family's generational pain and trauma, Otsuka resolves her own mind-body dualism. On a smaller scale, unresolved grief will lead to harmful mind-body dualism in individuals and the breaking down of familial bonds. On larger, generational ones, it presents the possibility of the next generation inheriting emotions from traumatic experiences. It is only through the resolution of the negative sublime grief that we are able to achieve the positive; by doing this, we can finally fully transcend.

Veronica Kuo

A Life in Review in *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf Impels A Life of Review

The certainty of death is often explored in life; some pursue legal help to divide their assets, others make bucket lists to fully experience what life has to offer, but still others explore the inevitability of death in novels, movies, and art. Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* depicts sullen imagery of late life, yet boasts of the meaningfulness of late life in Bernard's stream-of-consciousness. Through a new connection to Erik Erikson's Model of Psychosocial Development, we understand the disputed connection between imagery and soliloquy and reassess true psychological success at the end of life. This paper argues that Bernard exemplifies meaningful reflection in late life, in turn, questioning the definition of success Erikson laid out. What makes reflection meaningful and how does meaningful reflection cause meaningful action?

Mariya Shareef

**The Silence between Words:
Trauma and Immigrant Families in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous***

Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* depicts the devastating impact of war, cultural displacement, and communication barriers within an immigrant Vietnamese American family. The narrative, constructed as a letter to his illiterate mother Rose, reveals her unhealed trauma from witnessing violence as a child. This manifests as PTSD and contributes to her violent outbursts towards her son, Little Dog. Limited by language barriers and cultural isolation, Rose perpetuates a cycle of abuse. Drawing upon scholarly research examining child maltreatment within immigrant communities, I plan to highlight the correlation between parental trauma, lack of education, and communication barriers with the risk of child abuse. Additionally, the research accounts for the cultural context of a traditional Vietnamese family, who are typically heavily influenced by Confucian values. Understanding the cultural nuances will also allow external support systems, like therapists, to play a vital role in breaking these cycles of abuse and promoting healing from intergenerational trauma.

Sammie Yen

**Circles and Circles:
Narrative and Trauma in Silko's *Ceremony***

*And in the belly of this story
the rituals and the ceremony
are still growing.*
—Leslie Marmon Silko

Narratives hold a unique power to provoke, entertain and inform. While they are commonly understood as modes of self-expression, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* argues that narratives restore and mend one's interiority. Although the novel received criticism for assimilating into Western forms of literature, Silko carefully navigates the topic of Indigenous storytelling with nuance as she recounts the perspective of young mixed-Indigenous veteran Tayo, who struggles to reconcile with time, remembrance, and place (all constituent features of narrative) in a post-World War II world. Ultimately, Silko demonstrates the progression of Tayo's skepticism to acceptance of Native American narratives, a metamorphic comprehension that successfully sets him on the path of recovery from his PTSD. Using Cathy Caruth's theory of cognitive wounds and voices and Jin Man Jeong's notion of a return to a repressed history, I seek to disentangle competing cultural narratives and illuminate how *Ceremony* constructively utilizes storytelling as a means for self-healing. I intend to synthesize threads of narration, trauma, and memory as an inextricable tapestry that not only nurtures Indigenous survival but is also the crux of Native American vitality.

Altered States

Moderated by Dr. Krishna Narayanamurti
Thematic Option Honors Program

Tuesday, April 16
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.
Carnegie

Melissa Arce

Unmasking the American Dream:

Exploring the Illusory and Intangible Pursuit of Success in Anthony Minghella's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

The Talented Mr. Ripley's portrayal of characters like Tom Ripley, Dickie Greenleaf, and Freddie Miles explores themes of class, deception, and social mobility. Tom Ripley, a master of deception, cons his way into Dickie's luxurious lifestyle. Tom enjoys this luxury, if not without a few teasing remarks made at his expense, until Freddie Miles makes his screen debut. Portrayed as boisterous and obnoxious, Freddie is the picture of generational wealth, taste, and a carefree attitude. Using scholarship that explores the American dream, the limits of the confidence-man, and social mobility, I examine how Tom adapts to fit in and how his lack of knowledge and experience in wealthy spaces ostracizes him. If Tom is an exemplar of the American dream through his adaptability, charm, and work ethic, then Freddie is the poster boy of generational wealth with his skill in leisurely activities, a wealth that moves in silence, and a lifelong curated taste that can easily see right through Tom. This essay aims to offer a differing perspective on Freddie's death and character, which are not only used as plot devices but also serve as a symbolic representation of all the ways Tom is a fraud and cannot pass in his new identity.

Isaac Ashe-McNalley

***The Green Knight* and the Value of Knighthood**

Do societal expectations propel people towards self-destruction? David Lowery's *The Green Knight* explores themes of existential terror in the face of the societal expectations of knighthood and masculinity as it changes Gawain's single sin of cowardice into many examples of failure as he tries and fails to show that he can be a great knight. Critics have looked at this film as a subversion of chivalry by showing that Gawain is actually motivated by self-centered desires, and thus is punished by the Green Knight. This critique doesn't account for the idea that chivalry itself is a masculine standard of violence that insights gothic terror in those who try to live up to it. If Gawain can only learn his lesson through violence, is the cycle of violence destined to continue? I examine how the natural sublime acts against societal pressures and therefore against the gothic sublime. The Green Knight acts to personify both of these forces in one figure who spurs on both Gawain's revelations and mistakes. I argue against the idea that chivalry is a masculine ideal, and that through accepting his failures Gawain is able to transcend the gothic sublime and free himself from the cycle of violence.

Sam Clark

Beyond the Brain:

The Rise of Psychedelic Cognitive Enhancement

If there were such a thing as a true "smart drug" that one could take to improve their mental capabilities without downsides, who among us would refuse such an offer? Of course, no such thing exists, which would appear to be part of the message endorsed by the 2020 television miniseries *The Queen's Gambit*, wherein main character Beth Harmon abuses pills that improve her chess performance but also suffers from withdrawal and side effects that make her eventually wean off the pills. However, the show's visual depiction of the pills' effects seems to point in a different direction than the typical narrative regarding cognitive enhancing drugs. Beth experiences hallucinations in line with psychedelic substances, rather than the sedative she is shown to be ingesting, that enable her to visualize the chess board and find the optimal move. I argue that the show unintentionally promotes the cognitive enhancing traits of psychedelic substances, as while the show depicts negative side effects to paint Beth's use in a negative light, real world research has found the benefits depicted in the show to be accurate while no negative effects have been traced to psychedelics. One could have the near superhuman mental capacity that enables Beth Harmon to defeat the world's best chess players without the downsides that the show uses to try and dissuade and condemn the use of such substances, undermining the makers' intended message of growth and girl power with one promoting shortcuts and unnatural performance enhancement.

Kory Johnson

**The Results Are In!:
Personality's Relation to Queer Identity in *Cat People***

"Meow." "Bark!" "Grr." When we hear these sounds, we think of our fuzzy companions back home, but do we stop to think of how much our preferences in pets affect our personalities? In Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People*, we meet Irena, a woman whose cultural history paints women with sexual desire as dangerous panthers, ready to kill when they give into their lust. Irena's transformation into a panther has been widely interpreted as symbolic of queer intimacy, but few critics discuss how that queerness is related to Irena's personality independent of her transformations. This essay delves into the intricate relationship between Irena's transformation, LGBTQ+ social stigma in 1940s media, and the connection between pet preferences and personality archetypes. By analyzing how *Cat People* draws on social perceptions of queer identity, my paper aims to complicate our understanding of the link between queer identity and personality traits. Drawing on critical discussions surrounding the film's representation of queerness and the influence of animal symbolism, this study offers a nuanced exploration of how societal views shape both cinematic narratives and individual self-perception.

Nicole Yu

**Fragile Cleanliness:
Unveiling the Illusion of Perfection in Tati's *Playtime***

Jacques Tati's 1967 film *Playtime* presents a futuristic portrayal of Paris as a pristine and hygienic utopia, meticulously crafted to exude an aura of perfection. However, this illusion of cleanliness is shattered by the chaotic events unfolding at the Royal Garden restaurant, where the fragile facade of perfection crumbles amidst comedic missteps and absurd rituals. Through a detailed analysis of the dinner scene in *Playtime*, this paper explores the broader implications of Tati's commentary on modern society's pursuit of progress and cleanliness. Drawing parallels between the film's motifs and real-world historical and sociological contexts, this paper reveals how the relentless pursuit of an unattainable standard of cleanliness often leads to inefficiency, displacement, and social marginalization. This paper delves into the symbolic significance of marginalized individuals, who are often labeled as unclean, in sustaining the societal framework despite being sidelined by the pursuit of an immaculate image. By examining the intersection of hygiene, societal norms, and technological advancement, this paper offers a nuanced understanding of the delicate balance between appearance and reality in the quest for societal advancement. Ultimately, Tati's *Playtime* serves as a thought-provoking reflection on the fragility of modernity and the essential role played by those deemed unclean in sustaining the illusion of perfection.

Designing Women

Moderated by Professor Anthony Kemp
Department of English

Tuesday, April 16
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.
Gutenberg

Emily Amador

**Unsung Heroines:
Guiding Males Toward Self-Healing Journeys in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony***

...Until the lions have their own historians, the history of hunt will always glorify the hunter.
—Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe's poignant words echo through Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. The narrative serves as a testament to the transformative power of storytelling in the Laguna Pueblo culture: a mechanism that transcends literary boundaries and art form to serve as a necessary tool for liberation from the shackles of PTSD and the pervasive legacy of colonialism. Disconnected from his ancestral past, Tayo languishes in a viscous vegetative state while his incessant thoughts plague him. To merely interpret *Ceremony* as a chronicle of Tayo's journey to self-discovery just grazes the tip of the iceberg. At its core, the journey Tayo pursues is entirely dependent on the contributions and guidance of women. Despite facing social ostracization for his mixed-identity and PTSD, it is women who offer him a pathway to self-acceptance and refuse to abandon him. Contemporary scholarship primarily focuses on Tayo's journey toward self-acceptance, neglecting to acknowledge the indispensable role of women. Thus, I heed Achebe's words and amplify the voices and contributions of women, shifting from Western-centric analysis to a lens that embraces the Laguna Pueblo culture.

Kendall Arjoon

**Your Body Is Not Your Own:
Gender and *Black Swan***

Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* is a haunting exploration of the world of ballet in which exploitation and objectification are rife throughout its history. The film vividly portrays the never-ending pressures imposed by the industry and its stakeholders such as ballet directors and parents. As we follow the character of Nina Sayers, we witness her pursuit of perfection formed by the abusive dynamics of her manipulative mother and sexually abusive ballet director, who project their desires upon the ballerina. This continual exploitation and abuse results in the creation of an inner conflict between her two sides, the white and black swans, symbolic of the conflict between freedom and possession. I seek to explore the historical and ideological context through a close reading of Nina Sayers to understand how a culture of abuse within the world of dance has formed.

Arsalan Ghogari

**"Lovely Girl" or "Infectious Human Waste"?:
Marla, Riot Grrrl, Feminism, and the Characterization of Femininity in David Fincher's *Fight Club***

Since the release of *Fight Club*, scholars have extensively debated the film's characterization of masculinity and masculine ideologies, placing special emphasis on the two main male characters, the hypo-masculine unnamed narrator and his hyper-masculine alter-ego Tyler Durden. Yet, while the men-in-crisis aspect overtly dominates not only the film but also the film's scholarship, a closer look at the character of Marla Singer, the only female character in the film, brings to light a different political and cultural movement that dominated the 1990s: the Riot Grrrl Movement. Born as a reaction to the rejection of women from male-dominated punk spaces, Riot Grrrl was a sub-movement within third wave feminism, aimed at integrating women into male-dominated spaces where they were told they did not belong. To think of Marla's entry, then, into the male-only film *Fight Club* is interesting. Isn't it a bit odd that we're introduced to Marla at a testicular cancer support group, meant only for men? Thus, through this paper, I offer a feminist reading of *Fight Club*, showing how the film draws inspiration from the Riot Grrrl Movement of the 90s, positing Marla as a Riot Grrrl. By doing so, I shed light on how femininity is characterized in a supposed male-only film.

Yutian (Claire) He

**Exoticism and Enlightenment:
The Secrets behind the Female Characters in *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring***

In the tranquil yet deceptive stillness of a floating temple, Kim Ki-duk's 2003 film *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* unfolds a narrative that transcends seasons, delving into the profound yet troubled waters of desire, redemption, and the quest for enlightenment. As the coming-of-age tale of a young monk raised by an older monk, *Spring* is dominated by male perspectives. Notorious for his provocative depiction of women, Kim creates problematic female characters in *Spring*: a girl who resembles the temptress stereotype depicted in Buddhism and a "faceless" woman who dies overdramatically by tragically falling through a hole in ice. While many researchers focus on the film's cinematic techniques, this paper examines the portrayal of female characters with consideration of Kim's reputation in South Korea and his international acclaim, particularly in Europe. The seemingly misogynistic portrayals of women in *Spring* are the result of Kim's attempts to dramatize and idealize "Eastern" concepts such as Buddhism to appeal to a European audience rather than an Asian one, essentially for marketing purposes. The film's allure for Westerners lies in its portrayal of exoticism, immorality, and profanity. After all, who doesn't want to watch a magician-like monk write with a cat's tail and teenagers from a relatively conservative culture engage in sex in the wild?

Meihui (Lily) Wu

**Navigating Tradition and Liberation:
Gender Dynamics in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon***

In the mesmerizing world of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the characters navigate a turbulent landscape where desires clash with social expectations. Boldly abandoning her familial responsibilities, Yu Jen embarks on a secret affair with a roving thief and defies convention by rejecting the teachings of a revered master. Meanwhile, Yu Shu Lian adheres to her father's legacy and struggles with the constraints of Confucian gender norms, forever hiding her love and suffering the consequences of tragedy. As the story of Jen's daring theft of the legendary Green Destiny Sword unfolds, the tensions between the social restrictions of the Qing Dynasty and the liberation of the individual are made clear. This paper intends to dissect the subtle interplay between collectivism and individualism through the nuanced portrayal of the characters, revealing the complex dance of self-consciousness at all levels of society. Ang Lee's masterful narrative technique challenges deep-rooted gender stereotypes and social constraints, prompting viewers to consider the boundaries of personal autonomy within the framework of a rigid social contract. As the characters grapple with their inner truths, the film becomes an engaging meditation on the quest for liberation and the realization of one's true self in the midst of traditional constraints.

Internal Dispute

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

Tuesday, April 16
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.
North

Ava Grosely

**“I am not a storyteller”:
Belonging while Cultural Landscapes Shift in Delfina Cuero's *Autobiography***

Pain and persistence are two qualities audiences observe when reading Delfina Cuero's *Autobiography*. Although the narrative tells the story of Cuero's life and showcases some rituals of the Kumeyaay people within Southern California, Cuero states, “Nobody just talked about these things ever,” to show herself as an individual simply sharing her accounts. This hesitant narration complicates the scholarly debate around her work as fitting into the literary trope often perpetuated by Western culture of documenting the lives of Indigenous peoples as tragic. I argue that Cuero's life defies that trope as it accords to the aesthetics found in Gerlad Vizenor's definition of “survance,” a term used in Native American studies that often alludes to “a sense of narrative presence over absence, nihility, and victimry.” While the history in *Autobiography* exceeds even the life of Cuero herself, it adds to an ongoing discussion about how to consume Indigenous stories ethically. Through close reading Cuero's point of view, this paper establishes how the ambiguous narrative and resistance to storytelling offer a more individualized understanding of Indigenous identity, especially in the borderlands region.

Qianwei Guo

**Bereaved Mother, Lonely Housewife, and Woman:
Dorothy's Conflict of Identities in *Mrs. Caliban***

Developing a romantic relationship with a gigantic, green, frog-like creature who coincidentally knows how to speak English may not be very common, but it happens in the world of *Mrs. Caliban*. Rachel Ingalls' novel revolves around a multi-faceted character, Dorothy, whose life changes dramatically after she mysteriously meets a monster called Larry. Throughout the novel, Dorothy's actions are complex and seemingly contradictory. Past scholarship has analyzed *Mrs. Caliban* from a feminist perspective, interpreting Dorothy as being constrained by her gender role and societal expectations. These studies mainly focus on how Dorothy is perceived by other characters, trying to draw conclusions about her character while only paying attention to one of her identities or relationships. Building on their arguments, this essay analyzes the contradictory life of Dorothy through her own experiences and intrinsic conflict. This essay argues that by creating a character with so many complex and contradictory motivations, Ingalls constructs a multi-dimensional character who transcends the typical labels that define housewife and mother. She also demonstrates that Dorothy's social prison is as multi-faceted as she is.

Sydney Hurter

**You Aren't Pointeless:
Human Value in the World of Ballet**

Corporations are not the only place where you can feel replaceable. How often has the world made you feel like you were as worthless as a beat-up pointe shoe? Through character analysis, Aronofsky's *Black Swan* becomes an example of the psychological damage a negative culture has brought through undervaluing human life. Society has acknowledged the importance of human life, yet ballet companies continue throwing away dancers at the peak of the industry, deeming them worthless. But what if the “problem” can become the solution? I argue that the crisis in the ballet world can help repair the rest of the world. Dance Movement Therapy, or DMT, is a new movement-based therapy for mental health and encouraging physical movement. DMT and positive mental health awareness are the solutions our world needs to not feel so pointless and get back to the soul of humanity.

Joy Ndamukunda

**Exposing the Real Message of Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*
Through Its Portrayal of Nathan**

Movies warning about the potential calamity caused by an uprising of conscious AI are nothing new. Thus, it is understandable that when discussing *Ex Machina*, critics and viewers alike mainly read the film as a warning against conscious AI, especially as the film ends with Ava, the AI machine created by Nathan, escaping, leaving two human men dead. However, it may come as a shock that Alex Garland, the film's director and writer, did not intend for his movie to be perceived this way. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Garland states, "My position is really simple: I don't see anything problematic in creating a machine with a consciousness, and I don't know why you would want to stop it existing. I think the right thing to do would be to assist its existing." In addition, in an interview with *TechCrunch*, Garland states that the movie asks viewers to "just take a leap of faith" when it comes to the development of conscious AI. Though this may be surprising, I contend that through the characterization of Nathan and the symbolism in the film, Garland's beliefs about AI are made apparent.

Daniel Pirich

**"I wish I knew how to quit you":
Costuming in *Brokeback Mountain*'s Enduring Legacy**

So what we got now is Brokeback Mountain! Everything's built on that!
—Jack Twist, *Brokeback Mountain*

"Everything" might not be built on Ang Lee's 2005 hit *Brokeback Mountain*, but a lot of America's queer acceptance certainly is. The popularly-coined "gay cowboy movie" tells the doomed story of lovers Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar in the 1960s. A massive hit with audiences and critics alike, it propelled the conversation around queer rights to the forefront of American consciousness. It is lauded by scholars for its bold and unrestrained portrait of the queer experience, but its portrayal, particularly visually, of the queer experience is frequently under analyzed. This paper seeks to analyze the oft-unrecognized costume work in *Brokeback Mountain* in order to glean insight into both the film and the current state of American queer rights. It delves into discussions of gender, conformity, and homogeneity expressed visually through clothing. This paper asserts that understanding the vision of queerness America became conditioned to accept is essential to codifying and protecting gay rights from attacks today.

It's Not What You Think

Moderated by Professor Hector Reyes
Department of Art History

Tuesday, April 16
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.
Scriptorium

Audrey Akane Chew

Dystopian Utopia: *The Deep's Many versus the One*

We need utopia, but to try to think utopia, in this world, without rage, without fury, is an indulgence we can't afford.
—China Miéville

Dystopia and utopia are considered antonyms, yet the line between them blurs in the novel *The Deep* by Rivers Solomon. Utopia here is depicted as the *wajinru* society in the ocean, where there is no gender, capitalism, food scarcity, or loneliness. Except while everyone else lives in blissful ignorance, one individual, the Historian Yetu, is burdened with the responsibility of keeping the clan's 600 years of memories. In a world where community and individualism are never mutually exclusive, and where that paradise is dependent on homogeneity, Yetu's burden raises the question of whether an individual's suffering is justified. This essay argues that the breakdown of the utopia in *The Deep* is due to the dissonance between individuality and the larger *wajinru* community. This essay then asks you to reconsider utopia through the lens of Salvage-Marxism, as explained by Megen de Bruin-Molé, proposing we instead take a pessimistic stance, throwing away our hope for a perfect world while still seeking improvement in our lives.

Margaux Dambacher

Shadows of Significance: Hiroki Tanaka and Asian Complicity in *Get Out*

Yeah, what doesn't make sense: old Japanese dude, billionaire comes; he wants to buy a Black guy.
—Jordan Peele

This paper examines Asian complicity in anti-Black racism and the intersectionality of race while also serving as a critique of Jordan Peele's problematic characterisation of the only Asian character, Hiroki Tanaka, in his film *Get Out*. Drawing on peer-reviewed sources and essays surrounding the portrayal and significance of race in *Get Out*, this paper investigates how academic discourse raises important questions about the objectification and commodification of Black bodies (throughout history and in a contemporary neoliberal society) and existing positive relationships between African Americans and the Japanese. By employing a combination of close textual analysis and theoretical frameworks from critical race theory and post-colonial theory, this paper illuminates the ways in which existing conversations surrounding African American and Asian racial relationships fail to address the cinematic evidence in *Get Out* by overstating historical influences and losing site of Tanaka's characterisation. Additionally, this paper explores the problematic stereotypes superimposed on Tanaka by Peele (as a quiet, subservient, asexual character) in a way that trivializes the Asian experience. This paper aims to contribute to ongoing discussions in the field of cinematic arts and critical race studies by providing nuanced insights regarding how directors can play with the significance of seemingly unimportant characters in film.

Mariano Frare-Finnerty

Delving into Morality: *Cannibal Holocaust's Provocative Depiction of Death and Its Impact on the Audience*

Disturbing. Revolting. Sickening. All these are apt descriptions for Ruggero Deodato's 1980 Italian horror film, *Cannibal Holocaust*, which has long been considered one of the most disturbing and controversial movies ever made. Regardless, *Cannibal Holocaust* has amassed a cult following since its release and has continued to be debated for nearly 50 years. *Cannibal Holocaust* is about a documentary film crew that gets killed in the Amazon Rainforest by cannibals in the area, and the rescue mission enacted to find their lost footage. One half of the movie is devoted to replaying that footage which contains the movie's most notorious scenes such as the graphic depiction of human

deaths and the killing of animals. In my paper, I argue that *Cannibal Holocaust* heightens the experience of death for the viewer, causing them to experience death intimately and provocatively. By doing so, Deodatto's film forces its audience to come into close contact with and participate in death, making watching this film a truly unique and fruitful way of engaging with death.

Parth Joshi

Video Ga(y)mes and the Next Queer Civil Rights Movement

Fewer than 1 in 3 know someone who is transgender, and fewer than 1 in 5 know someone who is nonbinary.
—The Trevor Project

Video ga(y)me creators stand at the front line of the new queer liberation movement. In 2023, there were 510, if not more, anti-queer bills introduced in America, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. However, game developers have the unique ability to combat bigotry with gaming. *GENDERWRECKED*, developed by Ryan Rose Aceae, demonstrates how video games can educate those who would otherwise never interact with real, messy queer stories. As a choice-driven, first-person, clicker game, players directly engage with 2SLGBTQIA+ narratives and identities. This paper creates new literature on the importance of video games in social movements by analyzing the current state of queer playables in the gaming industry, the platforms where queer games are developed, and interactivity's importance when connecting with 2SLGBTQIA+ stories. Consequently, by offering players the freedom to engage with queerness however they choose, this essay proposes that video games constitute a radical, emerging mode of queer advocacy. And, the best thing about games like *GENDERWRECKED*? Learning about identity from genderqueer monsters.

Shaakhini Satchi

The Dead Songbird Still Sings: How Death Offers Creative Liberation in *Strangers in Good Company*

It's rare that we see a multidimensional older woman portrayed on screen the way we do in Cynthia Scott's film, *Strangers in Good Company*. The "older woman" in film is typically relegated to a stereotype: a sage, wise beyond her years, or a wicked witch cackling at your misery. Instead, in this film, we follow a group of seven complex, industrious elderly women and their bus driver when their bus breaks down on the way to an unknown destination. Operating through the mode of docufiction, the film employs a fictional conflict to explore the real life stories of the women we follow. Of these women, I focus on Constance, the most isolated of the group, who is often seen contemplating her mortality in silence rather than helping the collective survive. Though Constance may seem to represent the oppressive unhappiness that is thought to come with aging, I argue that Constance actually finds a creative purpose in coping with her mortality. Specifically, I use the film's motif of the songbird to explain how the film portrays the confrontation with death as liberating for women constrained in their lives, affording them creative liberty where they were previously denied.

Subvert Your Gaze

Moderated by Professor Brett Sheehan

Van Hunnicks Department of History & Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures

Tuesday, April 16
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.
South

Emma Chen

Reinterpretation of *No Longer Human* through Surrealism and Horror

This paper examines Junji Ito's 2019 manga adaptation of Osamu Dazai's 1948 novel *No Longer Human*, a hallmark of Japanese literature. The stark difference in medium, genre, and audience has resulted in an adaptation that both captures the essence of *No Longer Human* and distorts the story to be much darker than originally intended. Dazai's frank tone may lend comfort to readers, sometimes distracting one from the dark contents of the story, which include suicide, alcoholism, sexual abuse, and drug addiction. Ito's style is the exact opposite. He aims to disturb, shock, and confuse audiences with his elaborate illustrations of violence, gore, and body horror not present in Dazai's version. Ito's changes to the original story mainly consist of added plotlines and exaggerated surreal imagery. I explore how Junji Ito's experience as a renowned horror *mangaka* shaped his interpretation of the story and the effect that these changes have on the narrative as a whole. Trigger warning: this paper mentions sexual abuse, child abuse, suicide, self-harm, drug abuse, and alcoholism.

Ashwin Hariharan

"We had never known them": Female Agency and Sex in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*

In the United States of America of today, the expectation is that, regardless of gender, every human can receive any education they earn, work any job they are qualified for, and live their life however they choose. However, a mere 50 years ago, the era of the suburban housewife reigned supreme, essentially mandating that the greatest accomplishment of a female's life should be her maintenance of a household consisting of her husband and children. Within Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, the Lisbon sisters are constantly bogged down by a patriarchal culture that dictates how they should look, how they should act, and even who they are allowed to be. The neighborhood boys narrating the novel as a singular entity are crucial in censoring the sisters' voices. Utilizing Megan Behrent's analysis of 1970s suburban captivity narratives and Lee Edelman's concept of reproductive futurism, I define the specific restrictions under which the sisters exist. From there, I explore the male gaze and its dominance in the novel to articulate how Lux Lisbon escapes her figurative chains and reclaims her female agency, and that of her sisters, through the critically important, life-giving action of sex.

Selina Hui

The Le Guinian Hero: George Orr's Paradoxical Motivations in *The Lathe of Heaven*

Imagination is the instrument of ethics.
—Ursula K. Le Guin, "Some Assumptions about Fantasy"

With the rise of technological innovation, Western society has become increasingly fixated on advancing the world, inadvertently worsening environmental and societal impacts. In *The Lathe of Heaven*, Ursula K. Le Guin reimagines a world where her protagonist, George Orr, possesses the supernatural ability to dream worlds into existence, all while grappling with conflicting ideologies. Although past scholars describe Orr as a "young Western hero" and a savior, few studies have addressed characteristics that don't align with the vision of a "Western hero." Thus, I complicate conventional readings of Orr by viewing him as an atypical hero who strays from Joseph Campbell's monomyth framework as he faces the moral implications of his "effective dreaming." By analyzing Orr's journey throughout the novel and contrasting it with key elements of Campbell's hero's journey, I establish Orr as an atypical hero driven by a myriad of paradoxical ideologies and beliefs. Le Guin's portrayal of Orr as an unconventional hero not only subverts the traditional monomyth of heroism but also reveals profound truths about reality and the broader human experience, leading us to question whether a morally "correct" path for human progress truly exists.

Colin Kerekes

The Deliberate Distortion of *Daisies*

Upon first glance, Věra Chytilová's seminal Czech New Wave entry *Daisies* is the epitome of abstract and bizarre. The film portrays two women, both named Marie, on a quest to be as bad as they perceive the world they are confined to be. It is an experience colored by experimentation, from technological interference evoking mechanical, wartime imagery to unnatural performance styles and a subversive narrative structure. These elements appear anarchist: a spit in the face of cinematic conventions which closely mirrors the Maries' rebellion against Czech conservatism. However, this paper seeks to explore the deliberate within the seemingly random. The Maries disdain polite society, yet they hardly implement radical efforts to reorganize the status quo. Their goal is to be noticed for their rebellion as individuals, rather than to incite tangible changes. The film delineates this journey as ultimately unsuccessful, and its unconventional aspects consciously situate the Maries as pawns in a larger system. Because of this, they lack humanistic qualities, which reveals to the viewer that the Maries are proponents of a society they attempt to dissociate from, putting the validity of their revolt into question.

Tammy Wang

**A New Swan Song:
Queering Ballet with Bourne's *Swan Lake***

Gay? Queer? But it's just a swan. Can a prince fall in love with a defiant, male swan? Matthew Bourne's revolutionary *Swan Lake* turns the ballet world around, blending the grace of a classic with a bold, queer twist. In his rendition, the female swans are replaced with a troupe of male dancers. Themes of gender fluidity and the subversion of norms are brought to the forefront by Bourne's imagination. This paper delves into the heart of Bourne's masterpiece, exploring its passionate choreography, striking costume design, and visceral audience reactions. The ballet is not only queered, but it also invites a profound reevaluation of identity, narrative, and beauty in the performing arts. This *Swan Lake* emerges as a beacon of cultural change, urging everyone to see beyond the mainstream to the boundless possibilities of expression.

Anatomy of Autonomy

Moderated by Dr. Richard Edinger
Thematic Option Honors Program

Wednesday, April 17
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.
Carnegie

Ali Bhatti

How *Fight Club* Embraces Agency and Femininity and Criticizes Greek Fraternities

There's a new fraternity popping up across the country, and it's probably one that you've never heard of. Project Mayhem—spearheaded by Tyler Durden—is recruiting more men day by day, and they're all “very, very pissed off.” *Fight Club* juxtaposes Project Mayhem against the overarching structures of fraternities, mocking and critiquing the processes of both entities. Project Mayhem, similar to fraternities, has a pledging process in which new members are hazed, their self-identities denigrated and agencies stripped in order for them to join the organization. This, for Tyler, is the only way men can be “[set] free” in a generation raised by women. However, the film itself does not share the values of Tyler, using the unnamed narrator, colloquially known as Jack, to express that. Jack rebels against Tyler and embraces Marla Singer, a symbol of agency and femininity. Jack and Marla watch Project Mayhem self-destruct and destroy skyscrapers, a phallic symbol of masculinity (a masculinity they are trying to find through Project Mayhem). This self-destruction aligns with fraternities as they are clamped down upon by universities due to their irresponsible hazing practices. What is the importance of agency and femininity in these spaces, and are Greek fraternities sustainable?

Shima Konishi-Gray

***The Matrix* Unveiled: Neo's Path to Self-Actualization**

It's 1999. You're seated at the movie theater with your friends, clutching your popcorn, and anticipating the global sensation about to unfold on screen: *The Matrix*. Directed by the Wachowski sisters, the film features protagonist Neo, who discovers that his world is a simulated reality controlled by evil AI machines. He is prophesied as “the One” to save and liberate all of humanity. As a result, Neo embarks on a hero's journey of self-actualization: one reaching to his fullest potential. By analyzing scholars Maslow, Campbell, and William's theories alongside various scenes throughout the film, I interrogate what it means to be a hero. Given the lack of academic discourse on the Oracle, I highlight the significance of her role in Neo's journey. She guides him to what is necessary for his path, rather than attempting to force his predetermined destiny. Despite the debates on whether or not Neo is the “Real Hero,” I argue that this ultimately doesn't matter. His journey reveals how anyone, irrespective of their identity and defined fate, can become a hero through the process of self-actualization. Neo proves that you don't need permission to be a hero; you can simply take action.

Mallory Moon

The Undone Button: The Undoing of Control in *Jeanne Dielman*

In Chantal Akerman's 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, viewers follow Jeanne over a span of three days. Jeanne, a widowed housewife, is framed through Akerman's meticulous long shots as she performs her daily chores, routines, sex work, and eventual murder of her third-day sexual client. However, Jeanne's level of control over her routine starts to unravel only after her orgasmic experience with one of her sexual clients. Initially, Akerman's choice of shooting pattern displays the importance of the level of control Jeanne possesses over the audience through Jeanne's normal duties and movements. As the film progresses to the third day, this control has dwindled, leading to small mistakes represented by decreased camera boundaries and, even more critically, an undone button in her wardrobe. While the choice to murder could be interpreted as a sadistic attempt to retake the control over the camera Jeanne initially had, I instead explore Jeanne's motive through the lens of her wardrobe alongside the camera's progressive insight into her routine. As the mistakes prevail in Jeanne's routine after her unexpected pleasure, I ask what about her wardrobe is also leaving her unexpectedly undone, exposed, and out of control.

Alana Snyder

**“Sink into the floor”:
The Sunken Place, Autonomy, and Racism in *Get Out***

Jordan Peele’s 2017 film *Get Out* examines neo-racism through the use of Black body horror. Central to the film is the employment of the horror trope of invasion and transformation of the human body, more specifically the Black body, portrayed through Peele’s imagined hypnotized state, the "Sunken Place." While scholars have analyzed Peele’s message about racism and how it relates to the American gothic in depth, there is significantly less filmic analysis of the Sunken Place: its significance to the film in general, and how it helps categorize the movie as part of the horror genre. Building on the scholarly conversation, this paper argues that the Sunken Place represents human consciousness and agency and reveals how Black autonomy—or the lack of it—and racism are inextricably linked; racism objectifies Black people and usurps their power. I argue that a deeper analysis of the Sunken Place and its relation to human autonomy sheds light on the history of systemic racism within the United States and how it continues today.

Ruolan Wu

**Unveiling Illusions:
Dynamics of Power and Agency in *Story of O***

The tenuous and complex dynamic of power and agency in *Story of O*, an erotic novel anonymously published in 1954 under the name Pauline Réage, extends beyond its sensual narrative and into its impact on the real world. The novel tells the story of an eponymous Parisian fashion photographer as she consents to a life of sexual slavery. O is subjected to a series of painful and degrading sexual tortures, and while she initially protests and tries to escape, she eventually becomes immersed in her role. Specifically, feminist critics argue that O’s experiences in her interaction with her sadomasochistic masters throughout the novel debases feminist ideologies. Furthermore, some feminist scholars claim that despite the feminine pseudonym, *Story of O* must have been written by a man. In order to verify this, however, I present on the concepts of consent and safe words, as well as the significance of the novel’s female authorship. By delving into the dynamics within the characters and authorship in *Story of O*, I shed light on the novel’s impact on female sexuality and agency, both in the narrative and in real life.

Environmental Studies

Moderated by Professor David Albertson
School of Religion

Wednesday, April 17
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.
Gutenberg

Anura Deshpande

Preservation in the Face of Progress: The Monster of Ignorance in Bong Joon-ho's *The Host*

Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall, he will end by destroying the world.
—Albert Schweitzer

Exploring environmental degradation, the global influence of the United States, and a viral outbreak, acclaimed director Bong Joon-ho's *The Host* weaves an intricate masterpiece illustrating calamity and the necessity for human action. The film follows the Park family, which runs a food stand in South Korea. Tragedy strikes when an amphibious monster mutated by pollution steals away Hyun-seo, the Parks' youngest daughter. Putting aside their differences, the family members strive to rescue her from the monster amidst environmental chaos and the looming presence of U.S. control. While the current scholarly conversation on this movie dissects each of these problem areas individually, this essay examines the film's *mise-en-scene* and actual historical inspirations to reveal these disasters' underlying, shared catalyst, arguing that the true monster of *The Host* is not merely a fearsome creature lurking in the depths of the Han River, nor any external threats themselves, but rather humanity's own collective apathy to what endangers our future.

Matthew Ginsburg

Greener Pastures: The Presence and Purpose of Nature in Dystopian Environments

*Whoa, oh, mercy, mercy me
Oh, things ain't what they used to be, no, no.*
—Marvin Gaye, "Mercy, Mercy Me (The Ecology)"

In the opening words of this powerful song, Marvin Gaye immediately throws listeners into an American eco-dystopia, a society bereft of any trace of the natural world, leaving only overcrowded and overregulated concrete city streets. The intrinsically American ideals of freedom and individuality have historically gone hand in hand with images of lush nature and escape from urban society. I argue that an intentional absence of nature actually emphasizes the role of nature in the dystopian worlds of Tom Paxton's "Whose Garden Was This?," Marvin Gaye's "Mercy, Mercy Me (The Ecology)," and Richard Fleischer's *Soylent Green*. This in turn leads to the idea that nature and the freedoms that inherently come with it serve as a true foil to the dystopian system. Thus, nature's purpose within the dystopian environment is to serve as a physical representation of the freedom and individuality that the dystopias seek to oppress. More deeply, while nature is consistently used as a foil to dystopian society (or at least as an escape from it) the use of nature in this way helps us better understand the concepts of happiness, individuality, and general freedom that are widely and innately associated with nature in America.

Olive Kimbrell

The World Revolves Regardless: Anthropocentrism in *The Lathe of Heaven*

What is your most internalized bias? How does it affect your ability to communicate? These difficult questions are underscored in Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* in which a power-hungry anthropocentrist commandeers the "effective-dreaming" power of a meek, Daoist patient. Via disappearing populations, ultra-wise aliens, and an erupting Mount Hood, Le Guin explores the principles of *wu wei* and their ability to morph into dangerous malaise. She also explores the way a deep love of humanity can transform into a rejection of humanity's essential flaws, leading to destruction. George Orr, an implied Daoist, and Dr. Haber, a clear anthropocentrist, are vehicles through which to understand these respective ideologies, but only the most extreme interpretations thereof. It matters little

which of them is ultimately right, only that both of them lack nuance, and therefore both cause harm. Le Guin's own nuance toward her characters functions as a metaliterary lesson: perhaps Dr. Haber is antagonistic, but he has good intentions; perhaps George Orr is a protagonist, but his flaws lead to the unwitting destruction of dimensions. It is neither anthropocentrism nor Daoism that is at fault for the cataclysms birthed by Orr's dreams; it is extremism.

Lily Morse

**Todd Haynes' *Safe*:
A Satirical Take on Whitewashing in Climate Fiction**

Environmental justice scholar Robert Bullard writes that communities of color are disproportionately affected by "environmental illness" and environmental health hazards. Yet many examples of "environmental fiction," speculative literature that deals with environmental issues, do not reflect this reality. Instead, they appropriate the experiences of women of color and transpose those onto White women in future dystopias. In the 1995 film *Safe*, Todd Haynes covertly satirizes the frequent whitewashing of BIPOC suffering and environmental health concerns. *Safe* is a work of climate fiction that follows Carol White, an upper-class, White housewife living in suburbia. The film follows her experience with increasingly severe symptoms of a mysterious environmental illness due to a sensitivity to chemicals. While on the surface, the message of *Safe* may be one of empathy for Carol's suffering, I argue that it is a commentary on Carol's "White fragility." Through visual framing, distancing techniques, and an ironic clash of perspectives, Haynes critiques the limits of Carol's experience with environmental illness.

Face the Music

Moderated by Professor Suzanne Hudson
Department of Art History & Roski School of Art and Design

Wednesday, April 17
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.
North

Jack Murchison

**"Where do the lights come from?" "Same place as the music.":
Musical Diegesis and the Fourth Wall in *Woman at War***

Why would I talk to you? The reader, that is. Why might it serve me to reach across time and medium to address the person whose eyes are darting across the words I'm now typing? These are questions without easy answers, but one might suggest there's something compelling about the conscious reminder that you are consuming a carefully constructed piece of work. The 2018 environmental thriller/comedy *Woman at War* takes the risk of poking at the very artifice which lies between camera and viewer in order to establish the feeling that there's just something not quite right going on, and that maybe, just maybe, this feeling of unease is indicative of a larger—one might say more climate-centric—problem towering over our species as a whole.

Analicia Scoggins

**Shuffling the Deck Does Not Prevent Getting Dealt a Bad Hand:
The Ongoing Battle of Being Black in America and Kendrick Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d city***

In the game of life, we are all dealt our fair share of cards, some promising, others seemingly stacked against us. Much like a hand of poker where every draw holds the potential for victory or defeat, Kendrick Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d city* lays bare the realities of navigating a world where the odds are often stacked against you. The album perfectly embodies ongoing struggles endured by Black communities in America, particularly within the context of Compton, California. Through intricate storytelling and introspective lyricism, Lamar offers listeners an unfiltered glimpse into the complexities of growing up as a young Black man. Scholars have analyzed the album's various elements, highlighting how each track serves as a chapter in Lamar's narrative. However, I argue that *good kid, m.A.A.d city* goes beyond an individual narrative, revealing the systemic injustices faced by Black individuals. This paper contextualizes Lamar's narrative within the broader historical, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic landscape of Compton, challenging stereotypes and shedding light on the systemic injustices faced by the Black community. So, does listening deeper to Lamar's album allow us to truly grasp the challenges faced by Black individuals navigating a society that systematically marginalizes them? Or does it merely scratch the surface?

Benny Woodward

**Art's Human Mission:
Freedom and Poetry in Chopin's Mazurkas**

*Music speaks the most universal of languages,
one by means of which the soul is freely, yet vaguely inspired; but then is at home.*
—Robert Schumann, "Aphorisms" from the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*

Robert Schumann wrote these words to poetically characterize the role of the music critic in one of his many criticisms of musical life in the 1830s. In modern times, the art of music criticism has relatively receded since its height during Schumann's lifetime; yet, many of the same questions in the field are still relevant today. How do we interpret the extremely subjective and intimately personal nature of expression in a composer's music? Even more pressingly, how do we understand music as modern listeners of composers from bygone eras, when the original meaning of their works has faded into the backdrop of music history? In this paper, I engage with these questions in a novel form of interdisciplinary music analysis of the poetic affectation in Chopin's late "Mazurka in A Minor Op. 59, no. 1." Using Audre Lorde and Maner's theories about poetry and inner quietude as a lens, I show how this mazurka creates a progression from pensive interiority to poetic ecstasy in order to free the profound depth of Chopin's feelings through music.

Sinan Yurday

**Dickie Greenleaf:
*The Talented Mr. Ripley's False Jazz-Lover***

Dickie Greenleaf loves jazz. At least, that's what he would like us to believe. In this paper I explore the intricacies of Dickie Greenleaf's character in Anthony Minghella's 1999 film *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. My analysis challenges the superficial view of Dickie as merely an antagonist, arguing instead that his portrayal as a supposed jazz enthusiast is pivotal for understanding the film's narrative and character dynamics. Minghella's decision to replace Patricia Highsmith's original character trait of painting with jazz is interpreted not as a genuine passion but as a means for Dickie to escape the societal expectations of New York. Although scholarly works by Kristen Poluyko and Todd Decker approach this idea, I argue that they miss the essence of Dickie's superficial love for jazz. I suggest that Dickie's interest in jazz is not born out of true love for the music but is a deliberate act of identity construction aimed at differentiating himself from his father. By analyzing Dickie's interactions and the strategic use of jazz within the narrative, I conclude that Dickie's professed love for jazz is emblematic of his broader quest for individuality and societal acceptance, positioning his relationship with jazz as a facade that mirrors his internal and external conflicts.

Managing Expectations

Moderated by Professor Paul Lerner
Van Hunnicks Department of History

Wednesday, April 17
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.
Scriptorium

Ruben B. Chavarria

Alien Humans: A Critique of the Master and Slave Dynamic in a Posthuman Context

In a way, humanity is defined by its impregnability, by its uncontested domination over the natural world. How, though, would human identity change in a world where our status as apex life forms must be shared, or worse, given up? In Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild," humanity must coexist with ginormous, 10-foot insect aliens. To understand the relationship between the two, and by extent, the relationship between humanity and any future intelligent life-forms we may interact with, the two are cast into a master and slave dynamic. As we know it, the master and slave dynamic exists between two beings of a like-species, yet requires the slave to be animalized. Therefore, the master is always considered to be human, and the slave always regarded as an animal. Interestingly, in the context of "Bloodchild," it is instead the most vile form of animal, an insect, that takes up the role of master. While the master and slave dynamic is useful at understanding human identity when humans take the form of the slave, this paper seeks to explore why it fails at explaining the role which the alien master has in shaping human identity in a posthuman context.

Sam Ingram

White Privilege Sucks: Trivializing Racism in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*

"There aren't many funny Black people left." At least, this is what Paul Beatty claims in his satirical novel, *The Sellout*. In this story, the narrator, Me, goes to extreme lengths to draw attention to his hometown of Dickens, California after it has been suddenly erased from history. Me decides the only way to restore Dickens' status is by reintroducing segregation and slavery within his majority-Black town. Why, you may ask? To make it appealing to White people. Beatty explains how Black people historically have acquired some protection and social status through their association to White people. As a result, they often must entertain White audiences to receive their acknowledgment or approval. Likewise, Beatty exposes how many Black individuals have diluted or "whitewashed" themselves to amuse White people—for instance, Black stand up comedians. He reveals that modern comedians have diminished their humor by relying on superficial "race jokes," which often make fun of White privilege. Although these jokes might shed light on racial inequality, *The Sellout* raises an important question: does critiquing White privilege really accomplish anything, or should we focus on widespread racism?

Garrett Michaud

Vaslav Nijinsky as a Theorist: The Academic Censorship of an Original Thinker

This abstract has been prepared in such a way that is appealing to you, the reader. Vaslav Nijinsky was an artist who experienced psychosis while he wrote his *Diaries*. This psychosis has led to his work being analyzed or discussed only in the context of medical predicament. This has occurred because 1) in academia, it is difficult to view work outside of the context in which it was created, and 2) it is written in an experimental way that is confusing or challenging to most readers. The unfortunate reality is that there is a wealth of knowledge within this writing that has been overlooked due to academic type-casting and human stereotyping. By close reading Nijinsky, hopefully a long-standing tradition of avoiding challenging or non-conforming work in the broader academic setting can be reversed. But perhaps this abstract being written to appeal to you, the audience, has power over me, the writer, and reveals a deeper complexity within the censorship of free thought.

Andrew Nguyen

**Be a Man:
Toxic Masculinity and Queerness in *Brokeback Mountain***

Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* presents a version of queer love as "forbidden love." In doing so, Lee sheds light on the underlying cultural elements that vilify queer love. These stigmas force the film's protagonists, Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, to enter into a cycle of trauma that perpetuates misogyny and homophobia. I argue that to maintain some level of control and power in the face of homophobia, Jack and Ennis subscribe to the strict rules of traditional masculinity at the cost of losing their individuality and liberty. The act of upholding these standards breeds misogyny and perpetuates a system of toxic masculinity that oppresses Ennis and Jack's ability to love. This paper also reflects on the role of emotional regulation in deconstructing masculinity, ultimately breaking the cycle of trauma.

Keaton Orava

**Escape from a Desert Cage:
Place and Gendered Mobility in *The Monkey Wrench Gang***

A grizzled cowboy gallivants through the desert, unbound by the confines of civilization. He is the hero of the American frontier myth and, as an analysis of Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* reveals, the reason for the failure of the eco-sabotage movement. Abbey's novel follows a group of four eco-saboteurs committed to destroying infrastructure that encroaches upon their beloved wilderness. But what is wilderness? In the traditional sense, it stands for swathes of so-called untouched land worthy of human protection. However, environmental historian William Cronon argues that wilderness and humanity are intrinsically linked through the history of the frontier and its misogynistic myths. Through a tone that teeters between natural reverence and crass irony, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* perpetuates the old-fashioned archetype of a man escaping from overly feminine urban life to prove his masculinity in the wild. Furthermore, the lack of mobility (as defined by Krista Comer's feminist critical regionalism) afforded to the Gang's only female protagonist upholds limitations on who belongs in the American West. These implied restrictions that exist in the philosophical dimension of the American West limited Abbey's audience, and, in doing so, stemmed the growth of the eco-sabotage movement.

Push / Pull

Moderated by Professor Beatrice Sanford Russell
Department of English

Wednesday, April 17
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.
South

Elliot Broth

The Illusion of Freedom Is Everything: A Cautionary Tale from the Hopeless Commander

Sympathy for the Devil is not a new idea, yet remains a puzzling one. Particularly in a world of intense patriarchy, it seems horrific to not immediately condemn someone who is free from and upholds a degrading, sexist system. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Commander is one of a handful of characters who have multiple servants, a wife, and a handmaid, or child-bearer, under his constant authority. These women, along with all women in the Republic of Gilead, are forced into demeaning and strict roles that establish them as second- (or third-, or fourth-) class citizens to each other and to men. It may seem as if the answer to freedom is allowing all people to achieve a higher role in the hierarchy; however, the true answer is to dissolve the hierarchy itself. Despite the Commander's unopposed power over his servants, he forms a personal relationship with the main character, a handmaid named Offred. He is at the top, yet he lacks connection. Examining the relationships throughout the novel reveals the universal unhappiness of all people under a patriarchy. Even the Commander's role, though it may be a role of power, leaves him (almost) completely hopeless of achieving any real freedom.

Gwendoline Hoch

How to Be Free: The Issue of Freedom and Love's Liberation in *Água Viva*

We breathe, we exist, and we live. Yet in our state of being, we are startlingly—sometimes fearfully—captive. These are the existential meditations Clarice Lispector explores in her 1973 novel *Água Viva*. Throughout *Água Viva*, Lispector invites the readers to examine just how free our existence is, by presenting her understanding of the universal realities of time, death, and the utility of written language. By examining such thematic concerns, Lispector raises the argument that existence is constrained and bounded by time, death, and the inadequacy of language to accurately communicate her intended thoughts. Such "unfreedoms" that emerge in *Água Viva* become experienced phenomena for Lispector. Here, the term "unfreedom" is used to refer to the existential boundaries of time, death, and language's inadequacy, all components that limit Lispector's experience of freedom in *Água Viva*. However, Lispector is able to find an answer to her unfreedoms, thus finding liberation. Specifically, I argue that Lispector's recognition of and approach to the idea of love is used to break free from her existential unfreedoms. In a world troubled by the seemingly inescapable confines of the universe, *Água Viva* encourages us to resist such boundaries and seek a state of being where love transcends time and liberates us from death.

Xander Lee

The Hierarchy of Dreams: Dreams and Aspirations in Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*

Everything dreams. The play of form, of being, is the dreaming of substance.
—George Orr, *The Lathe of Heaven*

The sleeping "dream" and utopian "dream" share the same word for a reason: both are illusory and reflective of our internal desires. In the bizarre case that our dreams become reality, how much control should we have to pursue them? Ursula K. Le Guin ponders this question in her philosophical science fiction novel *The Lathe of Heaven*. Dr. William Haber, a psychoanalyst with ambitious hopes of social change, believes that we should always try to change the world for the better. George Orr, adherent to Daoist passivity and free from all desire, believes there is a way of the world that you must follow. Dreams and aspirations are inevitable. Orr's dreams have the power (or curse) to alter reality, and Haber is happy to use that to make the world a better place. Are dreams something to avoid, to pursue, or to actively manage? Surprisingly, Eastern Daoism and Western psychoanalysis may lead to the same answer. While some dreams can be dismissed as egoistic impulses cloistered from the demands of reality, the best dreams reflect and respond to the physical world. Regardless, we must first uphold the radical choice to keep dreaming at all.

Cesar Serrano

**The Black Swan:
A Queer Icon**

Queer can be used as a verb, that is, a process, a movement between viewer, text, and world that reinscribes (or queers) each and the relations between them.

—Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*

Throughout Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* and Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot*, queer identity is used as a vessel to highlight the oppressed experience of marginalized identities. White protagonists Nina and Billy are deemed "Black," not by the color of their skin, but by their bodily expression and suppression. Race, gender, and sexual expression are deemed "Black" by society, yet these films solely highlight queerness. Why? The queer experience becomes synonymous with the marginalized experience of "reinscrib[ing] (or queer[ing])" one's perceived identities. The role of the black swan is used as a catalyst to demonstrate that no matter your identity, anyone can be queered—even Billy, the straight White boy. By reconstructing our perceived identities, black swans teach us to find the transformative power within our suppression, transforming the black swan into a queer one.

Prajna Wankawalla

***Freaks:*
A Circus of Self-Discrimination**

The living torso, the bearded lady, conjoined twins, and bird girl. Stepping into the world of Tod Browning's *Freaks*, viewers meet these characters, or freaks, and plenty more over the course of the 62-minute cinematic masterpiece. Browning's film captivates audiences through a horrific portrayal of deformed circus sideshow performers navigating a world fraught with societal prejudices and norms. Most scholarship about *Freaks* has presented discrimination as a tool that the film deploys to distinguish between the "normal human characters" and the "freaks." However, it is my argument that Browning's intentions are actually closer to satire. Therefore, my presentation focuses on the discrimination prevalent within the freaks' community of Browning's film. In doing so, my presentation sheds light on how both humans and freaks share a tendency to discriminate against those they deem inferior. So, in an ironic way, discrimination binds humans and freaks together.

Form and Function

Moderated by Brian Arechiga
Department of English

Wednesday, April 17
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
Carnegie

Kailyn H. Bryant

The Chills of the Past from African American Literature: *Beloved*

Our silence. Our cries. Our struggle. All silenced by the lack of understanding of generational trauma. Not being able to pinpoint the feeling African Americans experience while reading African American literature that is based on historical precedent has been normalized; however, it is there. It's strong. It holds meaning. In *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, we are shown a family navigating life post-enslavement. The main character, Sethe, is forced to tend to a family while they all still recover from the unjustly inherited trauma of being enslaved. She has also lost her baby and continuously deals with loss throughout the storyline. The novel shows how this trauma can cause readers to experience a feeling that is constantly compared to the feeling of beauty by scholars like Marc Reyes-Connor. I argue that this uncontrollable feeling when reading this text can be described instead as the gothic sublime. When reading *Beloved*, the constant image of being free is then followed by the unspoken truths inherited with being free. Furthermore, the awe we get comes from the overwhelming feeling of pride and nothing short of generational strength. Mislabeled this feeling can be a cause for setbacks within the Black community.

Jay Campanell

Just a Girl: Class and Empathy through Imagery in *Persepolis*

"Fundamentalists," "fanatics," and "terrorists" are all words Marijane Satrapi has heard used when describing the Iranian community. To aid in remedying this issue, she wrote the autobiographical graphic novel *Persepolis* about her experience growing up as a child during the Iranian Revolution. It has been dissected by scholars since its original release in 2000, but much of the scholarship on it has focused on Satrapi's split identity: she appears stuck between the Western and Eastern worlds. In this paper, I argue that scholars have overlooked the crux of Satrapi's identity: her socioeconomic class. Through close reading of the story and imagery in the graphic novel, we can recognize how her privileged class status affects her experience. Through Satrapi's choice of imagery, we can find a more nuanced Marji whose story doesn't speak for an Iranian monolith but allows for a more personal narrative to be uncovered, ultimately fulfilling the goal Satrapi had when writing this novel: to evoke Western empathy for the Iranian people.

Araceli Greany

Look. At. Everything.: Deconstructing Marxist Feminism and Narrative Oddities in *Blood and Guts in High School*

It has always been the goal of exploitation texts to rewire the brain. They challenge readers to think outside the box. But how far is too far? Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* intertwines Marxist feminist ideas with narrative innovation, challenging readers to reconsider traditional societal norms surrounding women, sex, and power. The whirlwind plot follows the journey of a young Janey who navigates adolescence amidst the backdrop of complex relationships with men and a reluctance towards personal discovery. As a symbol for the commodification of desire, Janey exemplifies how heterosexual intercourse is nothing but oppressive towards women, regardless of consent. While reading this book, you better take a closer look at everything. Acker's usage of intriguing narrative anomalies such as plagiarism, Persian poems, and "memories" leave a lot to be discovered about women and their sexuality. As we delve through the labyrinthine plot and bold language, Acker communicates her ideas on feminism and its close ties to a capitalist patriarchy; much like the ideas of feminist author Andrea Dworkin in her text *Intercourse*. *Blood and Guts in High School* serves as a lesson on the power of experimental formats in uncovering new dimensions of storytelling. Join me in a discussion of an exploitative text that stands the test of time as its readers aim to uncover why the familiar becomes unfamiliar, and the boundaries of writing are blurred.

Pavithra Harsha

**Lost in Translation:
Syntax and Language Barriers in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous***

What if the mother tongue is not only the symbol of the void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out?
—Little Dog, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

What would you say if no one could hear you? Would you feel stifled or free? Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is addressed to an audience that will never receive his message, written in the form of a letter from Little Dog, a first-generation Vietnamese American, to his illiterate mother, Rose. Rather than telling a single, chronological story, the narrator explores several fractured storylines simultaneously. While the novel addresses intergenerational trauma in its content, the syntax tells a parallel story by reflecting the challenges of the language barrier between Little Dog and Rose. In addition to illustrating the limits of Little Dog's communication, I argue that the novel's syntax allows Vuong to reject colonial expectations of assimilation and create a work that reflects both his Western and Eastern identities. Ultimately, Vuong asserts through the fragmented syntax that the brokenness of immigrant communities is worthy of discussion and even celebration.

Landi Jiang

**Conjunction Junction, What's Your Function?:
Exploring Asyndeton in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"**

What does "and" have to do with activism? For former grammar teacher Audre Lorde, syntax proved vital to communicating her message. Lorde provided a novel framework for enacting social reform in her 1977 essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." She understood poetry as a tool for introspection and self-awareness, allowing once-hidden emotional realities to surface and inform broader social change. Certainly, the semantic content of "Poetry" is striking on first read, but her grammar is equally distinct. Specifically, Lorde frequently omits the coordinating conjunction "and," utilizing a rhetorical device known as asyndeton. This device is often used to create a sense of importance, as seen in Caesar's "I came, I saw, I conquered." I argue that Lorde uses asyndeton to emphasize action words, thus creating a syntactic call-to-action. Further, by omitting "and," Lorde syntactically models her activist ideal of social interdependence and celebrated individuality. Combining computational linguistics and literary analysis, I examine the effects of Lorde's syndetic choices on transforming language into action.

From a Certain Point of View

Moderated by Jennifer Heine
Department of English

Wednesday, April 17
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
Gutenberg

Jennifer Cole

Everybody Loves Waymond: Asian American Masculinity in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

You are capable of anything because you're so bad at everything.
—Waymond Wang, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

The blockbuster *Everything Everywhere All At Once* brought the infinite possibilities of the multiverse into the life of an Asian woman, Evelyn. This movie touches on many topics: mother-daughter relationships, generational trauma, depression. However, I'd like to look at the character of Waymond, Evelyn's husband. At first, he seems to be the lighthearted comic relief that also puts forth the message of the movie. But I'd argue that Waymond provides a case study of Asian male stereotypes and the impact they have on family and livelihood. Asian American stereotypes affect Asian men and women differently. Where Asian women are hypersexualized, Asian men are stripped of their sexuality and viewed as effeminate and less manly. By looking at scholars' work on Asian American masculinity, I argue that the main-universe version of Waymond has more feminine qualities that lead others—including his own wife—to view him in a negative light. On the other hand, the Alphaverse portrays Alpha Waymond as hegemonically, or traditionally, masculine. These various Waymonds not only fill out the definition of masculinity but also show the role of societal power structures in creating these definitions of masculinity.

William Fynn Kerruish Jarrett

***Return of the Obra Dinn* and the Existential Fear of Dying**

Memento mori. Remember that you will die. In modern life, the memento mori is too oft forgotten, consciously replaced by our obedience towards the treadmills. Hence, we require something to put us in our place, to remind us that life and its quarrels have no meaning in the absence of death. In my essay, I investigate one such something, the video game *Return of the Obra Dinn*, published in 2018 by designer Lucas Pope, which places the player in the role of an insurance investigator discovering the "fates" (primarily the causes of death) of the 60 passengers of the ship Obra Dinn, which is now abandoned. Using certain existential and metaphysical concepts, I analyze the game's efficacy and method in evoking existential reflection on death. I conclude that *Return of the Obra Dinn* is effective in evoking existential reflection because of its systematic rejection of attitudes which might distract one from the fear of death, but also because of its creation of meaning in the game world and its vulgarity which makes the death presented more material to the player.

Sage Murthy

The Camera with a "Pistol Grip": How Tommy Orange Grapples with the Fraught Nature of Indigenous Storytelling in *There There*

What is the difference between a camera and a gun? In his novel *There There*, Indigenous author Tommy Orange explores what it means to be an Indigenous storyteller through the striking image of young-adult Dene Oxendene's "pistol-gripped camera." Though this camera is only used for the objective task of documenting Indigenous stories in Oakland, Orange chooses to depict it in a very violent way. By drawing parallels to how both cameras and pistols "shoot" things, Orange makes a connection between violence and storytelling. Is storytelling inherently violent or intrusive? With a focus on the under-analyzed figure of Dene Oxendene (an alter-ego for Orange), this paper delves into the nuances of Indigenous storytelling and how Orange tackles the conflict of depicting violence "authentically."

Kalani Staudacher

**Organization in Physical and Digital Structures:
Architectural Meaning in Borges' "The Library of Babel"**

How do you keep things from getting lost? When you put an object in a place, what meaning do you associate with that place, and why? In Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Library of Babel," the titular library is a labyrinth, an endless series of hexagonal rooms containing shelves full of books. Each room is identical, except for the content of the books, each containing unique, random combinations of twenty-five symbols. The inhabitants of the library hopelessly search for meaningful books within the infinite, identical rooms of the structure. But it is not just the randomness of the books that contribute to their feelings of despair. Borges describes a structure that strips away all sensory stimulation, lacks meaningful features, and guides its inhabitants on a never-ending quest for knowledge with no road markers. Studying Borges' fictional library reveals that the way we organize space deeply influences how we process meaning. This discussion touches on the relationship between design and sensory experiences, the prevalence of architectural metaphors in organizing our thinking, and how structures provide us with physical, mental, and spiritual senses of direction.

Yifei Wang

A Present Absence in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

Céline Sciamma's film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* tells a touching story of two women, Héloïse and Marianne, who are passionately in love but have to be separated. Paintings are a main theme of the film as Marianne is a painter paid to paint Héloïse by her mother. This paper examines three portraits Marianne makes for Héloïse and one portrait of Héloïse made by others and explains how the film uses them to connect the concepts of painting, absence, and desire. Many may argue that the paintings in the film serve as an indicator of the end of their love since the portrait of Héloïse is for her future husband and the portrait of Marianne will have to forever be hidden in a book. In this paper, I argue that both paintings Marianne made for Héloïse prolong their love for each other because they serve as a form of absence. This absence, constantly suggested to them by the portraits, ignites their longing and desire and enables them to carry the love they had for the rest of their lives. This invites the reader to explore the question of whether the seemingly bad ending between Marianne and Héloïse is in reality the best possible form of their love.

How to Be

Moderated by Professor Amy K. Cannon
Thematic Option Honors Program

Wednesday, April 17
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
North

Lindsay Augustine

Professional Drop Outs: Odell's Placefulness Revolution and the Van Life Movement

No student would ever define school as happiness. College has its good moments, but most students enroll because society demands it. But what if we didn't? What if, as Jenny Odell asks in *How to Do Nothing*, a book exploring the damage of productivity, "you pack all your things in a van, say, 'F*** it,' and never look back?" That's how I would drop out, not just of school, but of society. Instead of becoming a corporation's human machine, I would travel in my van, exploring the wonders of the world. Odell would argue that van life is a half-baked version of revolution, claiming that a community in place is the only solution to the consequences of productivity. However, by using Epicurus' political theory—that justice is the ability of each individual to pursue their happiness—van life can be interpreted as a political act. Travel, and therefore van life, augments individual happiness and identity, as it contributes to eudaimonic pleasure (pleasure derived from overcoming a challenging experience). I explore the idea that happiness is political, as it engages with the individual on an emotional, humanistic level; it's revolutionary because its sole purpose is not the efficiency of the state.

Lauren R. Clark

Unveiling the Illusions: Appearance versus Reality in *Don't Worry Darling*

In a society where illusions separate appearance from reality, living in a so-called idealized world is not always what it seems. Especially in today's society, false realities are becoming increasingly prevalent in the age of digital media, though even before social media's emergence, appearances were still pressured and arguably more restrictive. In Olivia Wilde's 2022 film *Don't Worry Darling*, set in what appears to be 1950s suburbia, the citizens of Victory Housing strive to paint the picture of a perfect life in their utopia. Yet what appears is not necessarily the truth. Men and women both have a reputation, or more realistically, an image to upkeep. The lives of women in particular are constrained under the coercion of their husbands. My research explores the idea of appearance versus reality, supplemented by the themes of gender dynamics and societal tensions within the film. The question is whether it is more worthwhile to live a two-faced life, in which all appears well from the outside, or to express one's trials and tribulations of life publicly, yet risk ostracism and judgment from society. My paper argues that Wilde's film advocates for speaking the truth and achieving one's true self-actualization in life.

Jamie Kim

The Unbecoming of I: Deconstruction and Reformation of Identity in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*

How do you define yourself—your outline, your identity—if others do not exist? This is the idea explored by the harrowing ending of the 1997 Japanese animation series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. In the aftermath of an apocalypse where all human beings have been merged into one collective consciousness, viewers follow the soul of troubled 14-year-old protagonist, Shinji Ikari, who initially doubts the value of individuality in a world of social alienation and loneliness. Such existential questions have inevitably led scholars to draw from the works of Freud when analyzing his psychological development; however, they offer an inadequate understanding of the disintegration and formation of identity that occur in the show's finale. Therefore, this essay explores the works of Lacan—specifically his theory of the mirror stage in *Écrits*—as a supplement to dissecting the philosophical underpinnings of *Evangelion's* narrative. By introducing this secondary approach, I illuminate a new means of understanding the complex idea of "self," as it applies both to the show and to our own lives.

Ben O'Connor

**Glorifying or Educating?:
How *good kid m.A.A.d city* Reveals Deeper Truths behind the Power of Rap**

Rap is a controversial genre of music because of its often profane and extreme lyrics. However, rap is a much deeper art form than commercialized violence. By analyzing the lyrics of Kendrick Lamar's 2012 rap album *good kid m.A.A.d city*, I argue that his album is critical to urban Black history because of its raw and honest storytelling. In this paper, I explore the recurring themes of materialism and peer pressure that explain the reasons behind Lamar's misguided actions. I also engage with existing scholarly discussions about the history of Compton and the history of rap music to provide context to the harsh conditions he was living in. Additionally, I explore how albums like *good kid m.A.A.d city* are at the center of discourse among young people worldwide. Although it isn't explicitly a protest album, *good kid m.A.A.d city* serves as an anthem for people resisting a system that is pitted against them.

Amir Reza Tehrani

**Living Water, Living Words:
Exploring the Instant-Now in *Água Viva***

I am before, I am almost, I am never.
—Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*

"I want to grab the word in my hand. Is the word an object?" Clarice Lispector throws this bizarre question at readers like a grenade early in *Água Viva*, exploding their preconceptions about language, time, and existence. Through a close reading that illuminates lived experience (phenomenology), my presentation delves into Lispector's daring quest to capture the elusive "instant-now," a wild ride through the "incommunicable kingdoms of the spirit." Throughout *Água Viva*, Lispector's fragmented form and sensory-rich language become the secret weapons in her literary rebellion, immersing readers in an embodied experience that is as thought-provoking as it is profound. Thus, when Lispector declares, "I am before, I am almost, I am never," she's not just speaking for herself; she's giving voice to the absurdity and beauty of the human condition. In a world that often feels like a cosmic joke, Lispector's *Água Viva* reminds us that the punchline is ours to uncover—if we are brave enough to keep turning the pages.

Know Your Worth

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

Wednesday, April 17
7:15 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.
Scriptorium

Yufan (Kevin) Chen

The City Plays with People: Glass as Ideological Cage

Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional, but ultimately unavoidable.
—Haruki Murakami

How does glass influence people? There must be times when at least some of us directly walk into a transparent glass door. Besides tricking our vision, glass also significantly impacts our social and psychological environments. Glass, both as a physical object and symbol, mediates our interactions with the world in its capacity to reveal, distort, or even deceive. Alienation is thus formed, as what we see is always through reflection, and what we think is always through implicit influence. Across the city downtown, people work behind the glass windows of skyscrapers and do window shopping in front of glass counters. This essay utilizes Jacques Tati's *Playtime* with architectural critics and psychoanalysis, revealing that such massive glass design causes alienation through objectifying people, providing a misalignment between perceived and actual positions within the urban social hierarchy, and finally transcribing the capitalist ideology to let people voluntarily participate in capitalist production every time they look outside at the metropolis through glass.

Joshua Feldon

Deserted: Lessons on Consumerism in Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain*

*Nobody owns anything but everyone is rich—
for what greater wealth can there be than cheerfulness, peace of mind, and freedom from anxiety?*
—Thomas More, *Utopia*

Utopia isn't out of reach, Mary Austin argues. We must only learn how to grab it. While thinkers from Thoreau to Emerson have pitched nature as an antidote to Western society's overconsumption problem, Austin offers a fresh interpretation of the human-nature relationship in *The Land of Little Rain*. Austin champions what literary scholar Beverly Hume calls "a refined appetite to subvert the deleterious effects of a land-consuming capitalist ethos." These words emphasize how putting a price tag on a piece of land devalues it. Early on, Austin describes her land-flipping neighbor's field as covered in "mischief and greed." It's a place entirely void of wonder. The price tags invite comparison and prevent people from seeing the land's intrinsic value. Abandoning this "capitalist ethos," Austin builds a fictional utopia called El Pueblo de Las Uvas, an appealing model society with a notable lack of materialism. So if utopia requires an "anti-materialist stance," what does Austin's book say about the modern-day? The answer is simple: it says we're living in a dystopia of Orwellian proportions. But, importantly, it also says there's a way out.

Sabeeh Mirza

"Black is in fashion!": Racial Capitalism in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*

You have been chosen because of the physical advantages you enjoyed your entire lifetime.
—Roman Armitage, *Get Out*

What does it mean to be valued by society? Is it to be diverse? Fit? Young? All three are plausible in the modern day and are explored in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* as main character Chris navigates through a plot by the Armitage family to seize his body and replace his brain with that of a White person. While many argue that the fetishization of the Black body is the crux of the film, they fail to ask why, omitting the role of racial capitalism in the coding of value upon productive figures. I argue that the emphasis on physical ability severs the body from the soul, viewing

individuals as bodies to be used. An analysis of the overt capitalist influences in the film, such as the auction for Chris's body, illuminates the enduring influence of slavery and anti-Blackness in American institutions as they shift in a way that shields them behind a mask of liberalism and progress. This paper argues that fetishization and the actions present in *Get Out* are driven by commodification, as White people desire the perceived productive potential of the Black body, obscuring racial capitalism from public view.

Ruth Sanchez

**Existentialism in *Ikiru*:
The Potency of Toyo Odagiri**

How differently would you live if you only had six months? In the existentialist film *Ikiru*, Akira Kurosawa presents the realities of living in a bureaucratic world. The protagonist, Mr. Watanabe, diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer, embarks on a journey of self-discovery in hopes of finding his purpose. Through his journey, Mr. Watanabe forges a profound relationship with Toyo Odagiri, a young woman who embodies the essence of existentialism by living each day to its fullest potential. Many scholars, including psychologists and sociologists, have explored existentialism in *Ikiru* but have yet to include how influential Toyo was on Mr. Watanabe. I offer a unique perspective while extending the viewpoints of many scholars by focusing on an overlooked character, Toyo, and her impact on Mr. Watanabe. Toyo is the most relatable character and is the best example for us. She lives a fulfilled life rather than being a "successful" individual in society. Her influence on his existential journey is transformative, a testament to the potency of her character. I invite you to reflect on the people who have changed the trajectory of your life. What does it mean to live to your fullest potential? What is the purpose behind your life?

Tina Wang

**Oppressed or Liberated:
Navigating Women's Value Proposition in *Mrs. Caliban***

What's the role of women in society? Rachel Ingalls's novella *Mrs. Caliban* introduces a reflective narrative by creating a non-traditional male protagonist, a frogman-like monster, Larry. This essay, however, seeks to identify women's value proposition from both traditional male and female perspectives. Drawing on the framework of the human-to-commodity model, it delves into the enduring issue of the commodification of women, thus identifying the actual societal issue that leads to the gender inequality depicted in *Mrs. Caliban*. Specifically, it focuses on the female protagonist, Dorothy, her husband, Fred, and her best friend, Estelle. The paper explores manifestations of different pathways of social commoditization and their implications: men's violent consumption of women. It also investigates the root cause of women's failed struggles to break free from the commodified mindset imposed on them by examining whether Estelle's male outlook aligns with her internal values. Ultimately, the essay demonstrates that a successful normalization of women as commodities, indicated by *Mrs. Caliban*'s gender politics, results in a hierarchy that serves men's oppression of women.

Special Affects

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

Wednesday, April 17
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
South

Micah Eisenberg

The Night Porter: **Defy Fascism with Laughter**

“THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL PICTURE OF OUR TIME!” is the theatrical poster subheading for Liliana Cavani’s 1974 Italian film *The Night Porter*, about an ex-Nazi rekindling a sadomasochist relationship with his former concentration camp inmate. Some scholars believe that Nazism is an overused aesthetic metaphor for sadomasochism and that *The Night Porter* doesn’t contribute to this metaphor in any new way. However, I argue that Cavani’s film does add to the Nazi-sadomasochism conversation which is exposed when the characters perform the roles of Nazi and prisoner through sadomasochistic sex games—and then, importantly, laugh. This laughter illuminates Cavani’s bold message that mocking performance acts as a framework for resisting fascism continually. Not only does Cavani’s message define fascist defiance but, I also argue, this framework metaphysically defines artistic expression.

Vic Grzesiuk

I Love Old Lesbians!: **Exploring Beauty and Aging in *Strangers in Good Company***

It’s no surprise that with age, our attitudes about beauty change, but have you ever considered how our sexuality plays a role? After watching Cynthia Scott’s *Strangers in Good Company*, a docufiction film cast with primarily old women, I wondered how one’s background affects their attitudes on beauty and aging as they, well, age. In Scott’s film, the seven elderly women share valuable information about their lives (documentary) and await rescue in the Canadian wilderness (fiction). Current scholarship on *Strangers* explores the film’s genre, but information about the film’s depiction of elderly homosexual women and their sexuality’s influences on attitudes is limited. Because of this missing knowledge, I wanted to use Scott’s film to add to the conversation by exploring Mary Meigs, the film’s sole lesbian. As such, I draw on feminist and queer theorists to illustrate how their theories illuminate Mary’s performance and discussion of her life. I also draw on insights from Mary’s “making-of” book, *In The Company of Strangers*, to further explore the various attitudes towards beauty and aging seen in the film. Through exploring Meigs, I add to the limited conversation surrounding attitudes toward aging and beauty in the gay community.

Aidan Shuler

The Fruitless Struggle for Utopia in Rivers Solomon’s *The Deep*

A utopia is an unobtainable perfect society, but should it even be desired? In Rivers Solomon’s *The Deep*, the author depicts a society of merfolk, the *wajinru*, before and after a decision to share traumatic memories collectively. I compare the two stages of this society—when their history is kept only by a Historian and when their history is remembered by everyone—to see which is closer to a perfect society by examining each through the lens of Thomas More’s idealized *Utopia*. Then I look at what it says about Solomon’s position regarding what a society should strive for. Scholars agree that the *wajinru* in the second half of the novella are a stronger community. However, I argue that the starting *wajinru* community is closer to More’s *Utopia*, thus turning my attention to how and why Solomon demonstrates that a strongly united society is preferable to a utopia.

Happy Wang

Leadership Failures and Lessons in “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

When thinking about ways to learn leadership skills, what are you thinking? Online courses, or company white paper that is full of professional terms? Why not directly gain practical lessons and skills from classic short fiction? In Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Bartleby is a mild, productive, but stubborn employee who always responds to his employer with “I would prefer not to.” He is certainly a unique and difficult character to deal with.

Still, I believe the lawyer is also worthy of blame, as his leadership failure results in his inability to manage Bartleby's insubordination, affecting his office operation. From indecisive reaction to excessive compromise, I analyze how the lawyer goes wrong in his interactions and decisions dealing with Bartleby. In addition, I discuss powerful strategies the lawyer could have used to prevent resistance and maintain office order. Through critically engaging with this literary work, everyone can receive new and valuable lessons in being a responsible and sound leader today.

