

**TWENTY-FOURTH ANNUAL  
THEMATIC OPTION RESEARCH CONFERENCE**

**roots**



*"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots."*  
— Marcus Garvey

*"You can't hate the roots of a tree and not hate the tree."*  
— Malcolm X

*"Radical simply means 'grasping things at the root.'"*  
— Angela Davis

*"Contemporary architects tend to impose modernity on something. There is a certain concern for history but it's not very deep. I understand that time has changed, we have evolved. But I don't want to forget the beginning. A lasting architecture has to have roots."*  
— I.M. Pei

*"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."*  
— John Muir

*"The only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes. Change is the one quality we can predicate of it. The systems that fail are those that rely on the permanency of human nature, and not on its growth and development."*  
— Oscar Wilde

*"I don't care what baggage they dragged over the ocean. They have no right to make me carry it the rest of my life."*  
— Abigail Hing Wen, *Loveboat, Taipei*

*"There are three sources of belief: reason, custom, inspiration."*  
— Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

*"I am a strong believer in the intertwined nature of the personal and the political; I think they move together."*  
— Mohsin Hamid

*"Strange things may be generally accounted for if their cause be fairly searched out."*  
— Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

*"All that is gold does not glitter, Not all those who wander are lost;  
The old that is strong does not wither, Deep roots are not reached by the frost."*  
— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

*"When I am most deeply rooted, I feel the wildest desire to uproot myself."*  
— Anaïs Nin

*"The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight."*  
— John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

*"The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why."*  
— Mark Twain

*"Being American is more than a pride we inherit; it's the past we step into, and how we repair it."*  
— Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb"



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

The Thematic Option conference provides an opportunity for undergraduate students to enrich their academic experience by publicly presenting their ideas and research. In response to a general call for papers, Thematic Option students developed topics under this year's theme, *Roots*, to be presented as part of a panel. Each panel is composed of four to five students, with a faculty member serving as the panel's chair and respondent. A question and answer session follows the presentation of papers in each panel. Topics are reflective of students' various disciplines and interests and focus on issues ranging from politics to popular culture. Possible themes include being rooted in place; the roots of injustice; rooting out; root root root for the home team; as well as topics such as family; home; epigenetics; sources and origins; foundations; causality; growth and regrowth; connections, intimacy, and loneliness; intertwinings; separations; twists; things unseen; support systems; immigration; travel; settling down/in; immobility; terroir; life and death; nodes; speaking out and activism; essences; control; beginnings; inheritance; thirst and hunger; or the student's own unique interpretation.

## **Student Conference Coordinating Committee**

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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,  
especially in this unprecedented time.

***Dedicated to the memory of our dear friend Penny Von Helmolt, PhD.***

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# Conflicted

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

Tuesday, April 20  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m. PDT

**Darcy Chung**

## **The Failure of White Allyship in Octavia Butler's *Kindred***

*These men are all talk; what is needed is action—action!*  
—John Brown, abolitionist

In her novel *Kindred*, Octavia Butler demonstrates the necessity of radical, anti-racist allyship. *Kindred* follows Dana, a struggling Black writer who inadvertently time travels between 1970s California and early 19th century Maryland. In retelling slave narratives through Dana's more modern perspective, Butler explores the complex interracial relationship between her and her white husband Kevin. She examines the implicit power imbalance between white men and Black women, which is both rooted in history and persists today. Though many scholars view Dana's lack of resistance to Kevin's dominance as troubling, I argue that his repeated failures at allyship directly hinder her development toward independence as a Black woman. On a larger scale, Kevin's disregard for Dana's experiences and unwillingness to acknowledge his own complicity become representative of the barrier that white men can pose to social progress in the United States. Thus, through Butler's critical depiction of Kevin and Dana's unhealthy relationship, she critiques the bleak state of race relations in contemporary America and encourages in-group members of society to actively dismantle prejudiced structures.

**Taylor Perry**

## **Incorporation or Inclusion?: An Analysis of Hierarchical Conformity in Kristen Lester's "Purl"**

What is inclusion? Is it merely the incorporation of the "other" into an already existing environment, or does it require a deeper acceptance and valuing of perspective? What is the difference between such surface-level incorporation and a more involved inclusion? Kristen Lester's 2018 short film "Purl" follows Purl, an anthropomorphized and feminine ball of yarn, as she tests the limits of inclusion within a male-centric and human-centric workplace environment in which she does not fit. While on the surface, Purl's eventual inclusion within her work environment seems a laudable mark of feminism, the film also asks us to consider the lengths one must reach to be included. In this paper, I will explore Purl's initial exclusion, subsequent assimilation, and ultimate inclusion to determine the requirements of conformity within the workplace environment, as well as to understand how we can discern between Purl's incorporation within the workplace and a genuine consideration for her inclusion. Ultimately, I will explain how Purl's eventual incorporation within the environment stems from a superficial or surface-level inclusion based solely on her ability to conform.

**Yusuf Obaidur Rahman**

## **The Terrors of Class Oppression: How Horror Elements Drive the Fundamental Thesis of *Parasite***

Wealth inequality in industrialized countries has soared to unprecedented levels. The rungs on the social ladder have grown further apart, and poverty has worsened for millions. This horrifying reality lies at the core of South Korean director Bong Joon-ho's 2019 film, *Parasite*. Following the lower-class Kim family who infiltrates the wealthy Park household in their hunt for a better life, *Parasite* shocked viewers worldwide as its story transforms from a heist comedy into a darker, more terrifying narrative: the discovery of a third family in the basement of the Park home. My research will analyze horror elements in *Parasite* as key pieces of information to impart a larger theme, as opposed to tools solely to push a plot forward. I will argue that the various techniques Bong employs to build dread and thrill are fundamental to his idea that class solidarity is unachievable in the current capitalist system. Citing film professor Julian Hanich and his work *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers*, and film analyst Hea-Kyoung Koh's discussion on vertical movement in "Parasite Onward," I will explore how Bong's message gains nuance by framing class divide as a problem that is not just concerning, but viscerally terrifying.

**Grayson Wolff**

**Is *Schitt's Creek* Capable of Turning a Fantasy Into Our Reality?**

Many people dream about going from rags to riches, but those in the upper class have nightmares about losing it all. In Dan Levy's sitcom *Schitt's Creek*, these nightmares become reality for the Rose family when an embezzlement scandal reduces them from riches to rags. When the Rose family arrives in Schitt's Creek, they are welcomed, but not without a power struggle between themselves and the longtime residents of the town. Scholarly discussions around *Schitt's Creek* examine the power dynamics within the sitcom, arguing that it is a "promising depiction" of a world where the status quo is upended. But can the fantasy of *Schitt's Creek* become a reality? In my paper, I will break down the power dynamics that hook the audience to the show. Specifically, I will analyze the pilot episode, where the viewers begin to relate not to the main characters, the Rose family, but to the residents of the town. I will then expose which group holds the power in *Schitt's Creek* and argue that while the show's relatability is ultimately what makes it popular, it also doubles as the limitation that keeps *Schitt's Creek* far from becoming a reality.

**Zhu Yiqi**

**The Innovative Alien Encounter:  
The Characterization of the Human Protagonist in Lao She's *Martian Dystopia***

Is individual characterization always important for a novel? Most science fiction authors who write about alien encounters will answer: "No." In his essay, Patrick Parrinde points out that it is the new element in the constructed world that matters, whereas individual characterization becomes a secondary concern. But Lao She does not think that way. In his dystopian book *Cat Country*, Lao She shows his readers the beauty of an unconventional alien encounter. This novel no longer focuses solely on the characterization of the aliens, but also on the human protagonist. This paper argues that, in *Cat Country*, the human protagonist refuses to only serve as a flat observer of the unknown country, but rather is an active and dynamic participant who himself transforms with his increasing contact with the aliens. His transformation provides another perspective, showcasing the destructive and contaminated nature of a dystopian society. *Cat Country's* uniqueness proves that the norm is not always the best.

# History Is Written By...

Moderated by Professor William Handley  
Department of English

Tuesday, April 20  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m. PDT

**Chad Buley**

## **Whose Film is it Anyway?: Film Authorship and Ethical Storytelling in *Mank***

Who wrote *Citizen Kane*? For decades, film scholars and historians have debated whether Orson Welles or Herman Mankiewicz wrote what many consider to be the greatest movie of all time. Now, David Fincher's *Mank* has entered that conversation, depicting the writing of *Citizen Kane* through Mankiewicz's eyes. *Mank* is by no means a scholarly work, but the film's persuasive formal techniques, combined with a history-based narrative, could easily influence casual filmgoers and film scholars alike. In my paper, I study how *Mank* addresses the *Kane* debate, and larger issues of film authorship, through formal techniques and narrative structure. To determine if these choices have any real-world impact, I will explore existing scholarly research on the effects of media representation. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that *Mank* presents a biased view of film authorship, and how that representation has real-world consequences in our understanding of film history and theory.

**Patrick Diaz**

## **The Pain of Poverty: Slow Violence in *Tropic of Orange***

The racial and ethnic fabric of our country seems to fray more each day. One of the driving factors behind this issue, however, is one that we never see completely unfold—slow violence. As defined by eco-critic Rob Nixon, slow violence includes “calamities that are slow and long lasting, calamities that patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans.” While these disastrous effects often escape criticism due to their slow-moving nature, writer Karen Tei Yamashita does not allow us to overlook them in her 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange*. In this paper, I explore how Yamashita uses the characters Emi and Manzanar to depict the effects of slow violence on minority communities in Los Angeles. I argue that, in doing so, Yamashita helps the reader imagine and better understand systemic discrimination in Los Angeles—and in particular, how environmental slow violence continues to disenfranchise and oppress vast swaths of the Los Angeles metropolitan population today.

**Olivia Du**

## **“Who” is More than “Where” and “When”: Character Beyond Context in Gene Luen Yang's *Boxers and Saints***

Your birth certificate records an hour and location, but does that capture your identity? Historical fiction as a genre, including Gene Luen Yang's *Boxers and Saints*, puts context in the spotlight: communicating history is to communicate a time, place, and culture. But in analyzing character amid context, where do we draw the line? This paper highlights the tendency of scholarship, especially of historical literature, to generalize protagonists as representational. I will discuss how the temptation to overextend setting may reduce a complex character to a sum of outside influences—an inherently incomplete view. In *Boxers and Saints* specifically, I will demonstrate how Little Bao and Vibiana are burdened with external definitions at the expense of their own dimensionality by author and analysis alike; they've been unfairly expected to communicate ideas far beyond the scope of the unique individuals they are. I will reveal how this skewed interpretation ultimately becomes a crutch in understanding not just historical characters, but personal agency writ large. How can we fairly attribute culpability and credit while reinforcing a deterministic definition of life? The short answer: we cannot.

Meghana Maddali

**Going in Circles:  
Temporal Mobility and Migrant Agency in Hamid's *Exit West***

*We are all migrants through time.*  
—Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West*

Escaping from your past is hopeless. However, within circular time, running from anything is completely useless—no matter what it is, it will always catch up to you. While Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* mainly depicts a world where well-defined geographical boundaries are replaced by magical portals, where any nation seems accessible to any migrant, the novel's world is still grounded in circular time. So no matter how far migrants travel, the past casts an oppressive shadow over them. In my paper, however, I demonstrate how Hamid offers his novel's characters a means of survival against the recurrent traumas that emerge as a result of circular time; that is, he offers mobility through time, an alternative to physical mobility. I further argue that temporal mobility in *Exit West* grants characters—all of whom are “migrants through time”—agency to not only escape, but to redefine even the most despairing of presents.

Bayard Walsh

**The Intersection of History, Trauma, and Memory in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

*If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.*  
—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Is it possible to heal the wounds of slavery? In her seminal work, *Beloved*, Toni Morrison broaches that gargantuan topic through the memories of former slaves. Morrison draws her inspiration from the true story of Margret Garner, a runaway slave mother who slit her daughter's throat to prevent her from being enslaved, which functions as the basis for the novel's plot. Through her loose adaptation of the historical event, Morrison distances her writing from a retelling of Garner's story and instead uses the incident to explore the personal impacts of trauma on her characters. I contend that through colloquial language and a plot structure directed by the flow of memories, *Beloved* stresses the communal pain caused by the shared experiences of its characters, described by the term “rememory.” Rememory becomes reality, embodied by the spirit Beloved, a physical reminder of Sethe's unsettled past. Beloved forces Sethe to face her trauma, causing reconciliation as defined by the “cycle of healing.” While other scholars assert that Beloved only impacts Sethe and Denver, I argue that the ghostly presence unites the community and that she becomes a symbol of healing that is a model for those who struggle with a psychologically harming past.



# Making and Breaking the Mold

Tuesday, April 20  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m. PDT

Moderated by Professor Lydie Moudileno  
Marion Frances Chevalier Professor of French  
Departments of French and Italian and American Studies and Ethnicity

**Lauren Anderson**

## **Highway to Hell: Power and Liminality in Stephen King's *Carrie***

If the female-identifying body cannot be subjugated, she threatens the social order. If she threatens the social order, she is nothing short of a monster. In *Carrie*, author Stephen King investigates the logical outcome of ostracization: destruction. At home, outcast Carrie White endures abuse from her religious fanatic of a mother. At Ewen High, the desks are scrawled with expletives alongside her name. Once the hurt comes to a head, Carrie massacres her hometown. For Carrie, conformity is the way out; it's all red dresses and hallways where she's greeted by name. However, for Sue Snell—the beloved girl-next-door who proffers her prom date to Carrie—conformity is everything she's trying to escape. Sue is a liminal entity. She's torn between youth and adulthood, clinging to the comfort of popularity while struggling to escape a monotonous fate. In this transitory stage, Sue finds herself scrabbling for change, lest she miss this window and resign herself to a lifetime of PTA meetings and country club payments. I will argue that Sue's liminal status is the impetus for her transgressions against Ewen High's social hierarchy. At the expense of her reputation, she destroys the Sue Snell of before and thus regains control of her life.

**Emily MacAulay Eid**

## **Admiration or Patronization?: A Look Into Mary Austin's Ecologically Noble Savage**

The ecologically noble savage stereotype characterizes Native Americans as another species within the ecosystem, as they not only connect with but become a part of nature. However, scholars have disproved this trope with anthropological and archeological evidence. Indigenous people altered the environment through hunting, farming, and deforestation, and therefore did not behave as an ecologically harmless species. In my paper, I will discuss how nature writer and celebrated Native American rights activist Mary Austin uses this factually incorrect and damaging stereotype within her 1903 collection *The Land of Little Rain*. Employing this trope enables Austin to portray Indigenous people as environmental experts and then appropriate that expertise, thus lending credibility to her nature writing. Though Austin contributed to the Indian Arts Fund and fought for Indian land rights, her use of a stereotype promotes the existence of a pan-Indian culture, a concept that erodes individual tribal identity. Therefore, my goal is to remove the veil surrounding Mary Austin's often-praised contributions to Indigenous scholarship, exposing how pieces like *The Land of Little Rain* support the idea that Native culture can be appropriated for one's own benefit.

**Lauren Malkoun**

## **A Separate America: Division in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen***

One Nation under God, divisible, with liberty and justice for some. Set in a country divided by borders, laws, politics, race, and gender, the book *Citizen: An American Lyric* by poet and critic Claudia Rankine discusses what it means to be an African American citizen. Using lyric poetry, Rankine evokes immense emotion for readers regardless of background, calling the boundaries of empathy into question. The unification of the audience creates a community of its own which Rankine shatters through visual and written dichotomies, reminding each person of their identity. Thus, personal identity brings into question whether the non-African American audience can ever fully understand the implications, trauma, norms, stereotypes, and all of the fine print that is associated with being an African American citizen. This paper will investigate Rankine's ability to both unite readers and divide them through diction and visual effects. While diction throughout *Citizen* plays an important role, this paper will specifically attribute the reinforced emphasis on themes of division to the use of visual effects throughout the lyric.

**Amelia Marvit**

**“Regarded as obscene”:  
Censorship and Tropes in Preston Sturges’ *The Lady Eve***

How do you feel about censorship? Perhaps it makes you feel outraged, or maybe even afraid. Not Preston Sturges, though, director of the screwball comedy *The Lady Eve*. *The Lady Eve* was made during the Hays Era, when the Hays Code dictated what could and could not be shown in movie theaters. Enforced from 1934 to 1952, it banned everything from branding animals to “miscegenation” (romance between people of different races) in American movie theaters. Classical Hollywood film expert (and former USC TO professor) Nora Gilbert argues that censorship is counterproductive because it expands the definition of what is “scandalous”—and, by extension, interesting. Thus, the mundane becomes taboo, and filmmakers are newly incentivized to create “scandalous” content however they possibly can. For example, Alfred Hitchcock got around a rule restricting kissing to three seconds by having his actors break apart every three seconds. I argue that Preston Sturges, however, takes a less adversarial and yet much more effective approach to fighting censorship. My paper examines how a single scene in *The Lady Eve* encapsulates Sturges’s unique argument against censorship: it is not that he believes it is wrong, per se, but that it makes for predictable—and, thus, boring—cinema.

**Oliver Tom**

**McCarthyism Meets Camp:  
Politics of Queerness in *Suddenly Last Summer***

The question of queerness in Tennessee Williams’s works has been widely debated in the fields of literary and cinema studies. Williams was openly gay in his private life, but his plays offer a far more nuanced and ambiguous portrayal of queerness. In his 1958 play, *Suddenly Last Summer*, Sebastian Venable, a sexual predator, is killed and cannibalized by the boys that he abuses. Many scholars have discussed *Suddenly* as being either homophobic or camp; however, the ambiguity of the interaction between these two concepts has been largely ignored. Adopting a historicist lens, I argue that Williams strategically employs homophobia in order to meet a mid-20th century audience at their level of understanding of sexual identity. He then covertly subverts this homophobic content by queering the form of the play, utilizing camp tropes to both immerse the audience in queer culture and to subtly critique the gender and sexual norms and discriminations of the period. By closely examining the seemingly contradictory interaction between the homophobic caricaturization of Sebastian and the campness of Williams’s writing within the hostile sociocultural context of the 1950s, I shed new light upon the neglected understanding of *Suddenly Last Summer* as an intentionally homophobic queer work.

# Symbolic Gesture

Moderated by Dr. Christopher Muniz  
The Writing Program

Tuesday, April 20  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m. PDT

**Charlotte Fowler**

## **A Force of Mother Nature: The Power of Gender Roles in *To the Lighthouse***

With great power comes great pressure to conform. Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is a character that knows this all too well. Mrs. Ramsay holds influence over almost every other person in her social circle due to her charisma and nurturing aura. The source of Mrs. Ramsay's sway over others is her perfect performance of what was expected of women during the Victorian era. Many scholars have drawn the connection between Mrs. Ramsay's acceptance of her role as homemaker to the power she holds over her social circle, but this is often where analysis stops. They imply that Mrs. Ramsay's power is microcosmic for the influence of gender roles over Victorian society as a whole, but fail to show how Woolf establishes this relationship. My paper actualizes this connection by analyzing Woolf's use of storms as a symbol of Mrs. Ramsay's power inflated to a larger scale. I argue that Woolf highlights the temporary, yet destructive nature of storms to apply these characteristics to the power of gender roles. The power society grants to those who conform to these roles is not absolute and even poses danger to those who do not bend to its will.

**Michelle Munguia**

## ***Carrie*: Yet Another Girl Meeting Her Demise (A.K.A. Her Period)**

The horror genre is littered with works that have succeeded in adequately identifying and challenging social norms and anxieties. Stephen King's debut novel *Carrie* is not among these. The novel's narrative follows Carrie White's evolution from "pig" (as her classmates designate her) to princess (as prom queen)—transforming Carrie from a resigned victim of physical and psychological abuse to a powerful and vindictive superhuman who destroys an entire town in her quest to avenge herself. Academic analyzes may assert that Carrie's character arc demonstrates the progressiveness of the horror genre by turning her femininity from a source of weakness and trauma to a source of strength and catharsis. However, I will argue that *Carrie*'s finale—in which Carrie dies a roadkill-esque death—fails to empower Carrie by stripping her of any agency and dignity she acquired throughout the narrative. Through my exploration of the historical taboo surrounding the female body, contemporary attempts to destigmatize menstruation, and the gendering dynamics of the monster trope, I will argue that *Carrie* appears superficially progressive while, in reality, the novel reinforces the historical degradation of the female.

**Joanna Park**

## **Let's Go On A Drive: The Significance of Vehicles in *Tropic of Orange***

We take a drive on the 110 and sit in the comfort of our cars humming along to the radio, but do we ever think about how our daily commute impacts other populations? Karen Tei Yamashita explores this question in her novel *Tropic of Orange*, which follows seven individual characters who eventually cross paths due to the single event of a car crash. In this paper, I delve into how this seemingly innocent mode of transportation actually has a deeper significance. Yamashita uses the vehicle, a popular symbol for American identity and freedom, to paint contrasting images of the rich and poor of Los Angeles. By doing so, she exposes the deep poverty gap connected to these intersecting issues of wealth, identity, and environmentalism, encouraging us to rethink how our lifestyle affects marginalized populations, beginning with the everyday use of the car in our lives.

Mia Prange

**Cooking Queers:  
Self-Cannibalism and the Queer Struggle in Virgilio Piñera's "Meat"**

*Was that postscript the price that the flesh exacted from each?*  
—Virgilio Piñera, "Meat"

How far would you go to eat meat? Would you eat your own flesh as a substitute? In Cuban author Virgilio Piñera's short story "Meat," we see a small town devolve as a meat shortage drives the townspeople to cannibalize themselves. Utilizing Piñera's life and other historical and queer analyzes as context, I contend that this devolution represents the queer struggle for self-agency, which Piñera himself experienced in prerevolutionary Cuba. Through an analysis of the short story's queer subtext and sexualized language in reference to meat and flesh, I argue that the act of eating meat is representative of queer self-agency and expression in an oppressive society. The meat shortage forces self-cannibalism to act as a surrogate for this freedom, a surrogate which queer people were forced to accept—allowed to express themselves only as long as their expression did not threaten the established culture. This substitution is destructive as the town, evocative of the suppressive Cuban society, refuses to offer another solution to the meat shortage. Thus, with no other option, the townspeople destroy themselves in their quest for meat. Although often overlooked, this visceral tale of townspeople turned self-cannibals gives us a brief but incredibly meaningful look into what it meant to be queer in prerevolutionary Cuba.

Eileen Zong

**Echoing Calls:  
Finding the Proving Grounds of Race and Masculinity in *The Call of the Wild***

What makes a man? As modern ideas of gender have changed, "masculinity" in turn has become harder to define. However, certain traits like strength and aggressiveness are still commonly thought to be the "right" kind of masculinity—an evolutionarily proven gender role. Though written about a dog, Jack London's *Call of the Wild* crosses species lines to perpetuate this gender role. The novel follows a dog named Buck whose journey from pet to wild predator is a *bildungsroman* that metaphorically depicts a successful transition from boyhood to manhood. His writing reveals that American society has long seen nature as the proving grounds of manhood. Furthermore, Buck's ancestral "call" suggests that normative masculinity is genetically coded. By cross-examining historical sources from the 20th century and contemporary interpretations of *Call of the Wild*, my paper argues that these evolutionary definitions of gender are socially constructed to justify white male dominance in nature and civilization alike. Through this interrogation, I propose that normative American masculinity is not only rooted in our country's expansionist past, but has also pervaded the popular mind with a racist sentiment. In our so-called progressive society, why do we still idealize the traits that have justified oppression?



# Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Tuesday, April 20  
6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m. PDT

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

**Zachary Gitlin**

## **Just Like a Woman: Stephen King's Failure to Reinvent Horror's Female Archetype in *Carrie***

Stephen King exploded into literary popular culture and the horror scene when he released *Carrie*, his debut novel, in 1974. Carrie White's story teaches readers a lesson on the consequences of bullying the "wrong girl." Carrie's own ostracization and manically religious mother fuel her contempt and hereditary telekinetic powers. The result is a prom night from hell and the destruction of Chamberlain, a quaint town in Maine. Though *Carrie* served as opening act to Stephen King's fame-filled career, King's problematic utilization of female subjects has been criticized. I will explore Stephen King's gross overuse of lurid and sexualized language in *Carrie*. Throughout the novel, *Carrie's* narrative is derailed by acute descriptions of the female body and detailed sex scenes. I will then move to center my presentation on Stephen King's verbally stated goal when creating *Carrie*: the invention of a new, progressive female archetype in horror. However, I will reveal that Carrie White's character actually conforms to historical female models that consistently resurface in horror. In my presentation, we will discover how the flames that burn Chamberlain serve as a symbol for the misogyny that corrodes Stephen King's attempt to reinvent horror's female archetype.

**Mia Kaufman**

## **Does *She's the Man* Actually Just Reinforce that She'll Never Be The Man?**

While society today is the most progressive it has ever been, opening up about gender or sexuality is still something surrounded by negative stigmas. Thus, when mass media represents topics like this as acceptable or unacceptable, the audience it reaches can be significantly impacted. This is exactly what occurs in Andy Fickman's 2006 film *She's the Man* where Viola Hastings has to cope with the loss of her school's women's soccer team. In an uncharacteristic fashion, she chooses to engage in cross-dressing and poses as her twin brother at his boarding school in order to play for their men's soccer team. While she is portrayed as strong enough to compete with the boys, she also has to balance her mother's pressures to be the perfect lady and take part in a debutante ball. At first glance, this film is depicted as celebrating and highlighting social and cultural growth through the acceptance of gender fluidity and the promotion of feminism. However, this paper argues that *She's the Man* actually reinforces gender and sex norms. In order to understand why the film does this, I will present Marxist lenses and theories that demonstrate the importance of mass media following the dominant social beliefs of the time in order to generate profit and garner success in consumer culture, while not caring about the impact this has. At the time the film was made, social constructs were beginning to expand, so *She's the Man* addresses the liberal ideas that were beginning to gain popularity, like feminism and gender fluidity; however, the dominant ideology of the time was still more conservative. Therefore, in order to succeed in the box office, the film actually undermines these ideas by reinforcing the typical gender roles and, in the end, showing Viola as only significant because of her beauty and her body. This has extreme significance for the younger audience the film is aimed towards because it then creates a complicating dynamic for what is acceptable in society and what is not and raises the possibility of confusing the stigma around social and cultural norms like feminism and gender roles.

**Ally Kim**

## **State Protection and Liberty: The Issues of Gender Inequality in *Persepolis***

The following analysis of the graphic novel and film *Persepolis* by Jane Satrapi addresses the paradoxical relationship between state protection and liberty in Iran after the Iranian Revolution. The essay specifically argues that state protection may be used as an excuse to take away the liberties of certain communities within the nation. To support this argument, the paper not only close-reads different scenes in the film to see the effects of state-driven gender

discrimination against females in Iranian society, but also connects the film to various secondary sources to add context and show the causes of such political injustice present in the film. Through the close reading of two scenes, one which takes place in Iran and the other in Austria, and the works of Sarah-Jane Fisher, Diego Maggie, and Jennifer Rickel, the analysis of *Persepolis* ultimately highlights the dangers of abusing state protection to divide and discriminate against communities and enters the conversation surrounding feminist orientalism.

**Vani Sanganerla**

**The Invasive Roots of Revolution in *Parasite*:  
Infiltrating the Labor Nucleus and the Capitalist Psyche**

In Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, there is one means of resistance for the Kim family: invasion. The Kims strategically invade and infiltrate the Park household's labor nucleus, invisibly unionizing and redistributing capital from the Park mansion to the Kim semi-basement. However, as they clash and compete with the Parks' former housekeeper Moon-Gwang and her husband Guen-Se, *Parasite* unravels the colonial framework that presides over the Kims' psyche and compels them to displace Moon-Gwang and Guen-Se from their access to economic survival. The dissonant duality of their invasion, as a result, helps us locate a type of revolution that does not operate in direct opposition to, but rather in accordance with the system of the oppressor. Using Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, I situate the commodification of freedom as a basis for the Kims' combative and protectionist resistance. Furthermore, the works of Lacan, Marx, and Fanon establish the psychological foundation of the Kims' imperialist actions and delineate an uncanny resemblance between history's displays of colonial violence and that of the Kims. I argue that the Kims' neoliberalized psyche predisposes them to become proxies of colonial authority, and thus, their model of resistance traverses from a unionized to militarized design akin to colonial violence.

**Shashwat Singh**

**An Escape into Nature:  
Anthropomorphic Naturalism and the Destruction of Wilderness**

Nature is what we make of it, and books such as Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* are critical in forming our understanding of the natural world. In the scholarly community, such novels are perceived as naturalist for their glorification of nature and establishment of it as a static, deterministic entity. In the case of *The Call of the Wild*, the author anthropomorphizes—which means imbuing non-human objects with human characteristics—his canine protagonist, Buck, and idealizes nature to such a level that readers become enamored with a false perception of the natural world. My paper uses the historical context that forms the basis of *The Call of the Wild*'s popularity in conjunction with the novel's anthropomorphism to answer the question: how does anthropomorphism create a false representation of nature for readers, and what is the effect of this manipulation? I argue that *The Call of the Wild*'s anthropomorphic characteristics hid Jack London's selfish monetary motivations and simultaneously fed readers' craving for wilderness escapism in the early 20th century. A consideration of this argument exposes the dangers of anthropomorphically naturalistic writing, particularly because it becomes an avenue for encouraging apathy towards the destruction of wilderness in the real world.

# Form and Function

Moderated by Professor David Albertson  
School of Religion

Tuesday, April 20  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m. PDT

Allison Fiedler

## Politics of Self: The Individual and Communal You in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*

You pick up Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*—a work of lyrical poetry flooded with experiences of racism and microaggressions. The text places you in the middle of these racist interactions. You are the reader, but with a simple shift of tone or change of pronoun, you become the racist perpetrator or feel like the story's victim. Rankine places much of *Citizen* in the second person, asking the reader to hear the truth as if it was their own lived reality. But the second person is only one of many ways Rankine situates the reader in and about the African American experience. In my paper, I will discuss *Citizen* as a metanarrative exploring individual storytelling as a means of exposing collective Black trauma. Through disorienting internal organization and the use of the pronoun 'you,' Rankine offers the reader Blackness from many different social, economic, and cultural lenses to highlight the experiences African Americans share despite being such a diverse and complex group.

Prat Mamidi

## How Many Spider-People?: The Significance of Supporting Characters in the Spider-Verse

*That person who helps others simply because it should or must be done,  
and because it is the right thing to do, is indeed, without a doubt, a real superhero.*  
—Stan Lee, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*

What defines a hero? Can ordinary people become superheroes? Following Miles Morales' journey from a typical Brooklyn teenager to a villain-fighting superhero, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* brings together a diverse group of alternate "Spider-people," including Spider-Woman, a 1930s detective, a sci-fi anime girl, and an anthropomorphic pig. Indeed, anybody can be a superhero! This paper will focus on three supporting characters: Spider-Man Noir, Peni Parker, and Spider-Ham. Are they just blueprints of the original Peter Parker character? Do they play any direct role in driving the story? Would the film *Into the Spider-Verse* function without them? This paper will explore these questions to uncover the significance of these characters. On the one hand, a quantitative analysis of their introduction sequences and a comparative study of the hero's journey suggest that the Spider-Verse could do without them. On the other hand, the shifting practices of Hollywood's studios and the transmedial elements in the Spider-Man cinematic universe indicate the pertinence of these characters.

Manasvi Vora

## Mirror Mirror On the Wall, Who's the Coolest Girl of Them All?: Complexities of the Compact Scene in *The Lady Eve*

Mirror mirror on the wall, who's the coolest girl of them all? None of us. I really thought we moved past having to be the "cool girl" all the time. Clearly, Jean, the protagonist of Preston Sturges' 1941 film, *The Lady Eve*, never got the memo. Jean Harrington, quick-witted cruise ship con artist, spends the film attempting to seduce naive, rich Charles Pike for his money, staying one step ahead of all the other women who want him. In an early scene, Jean pulls out a compact mirror to surveil both Charles and the other women, using it as a camera to narrate their failed attempts to get his attention. I argue that her specific use of a mirror is progressive, considering scholar Veronica Schanoes' analysis of how mirrors are commonly and historically associated with female vanity. I argue that when Jean uses her compact, she subverts the stereotype, stepping into a directorial role that empowers her. However, this scene is more complex than scholars consider, as Jean differentiates herself by mercilessly mocking the other women around her. Throughout the scene, Jean's empowerment is presented at the expense of other women, making her use of the compact both progressive and reductive at the same time. Her presence as the "cooler girl" reminds us of the value of female solidarity—that vanity is not a damnation, and avoiding stereotypical femininity does not make you inherently better.

Miguel Walsh

**The Sublime's Timeline:  
Excavating the Roots of Quantum Physics Through *Interstellar***

*Maybe we've spent too long trying to figure all this out with theory. So listen to me, when I say that love is not something we invented. It's observable, powerful. It has to mean something. Love is the one thing that transcends time and space.*

—Amelia Brand, *Interstellar*

In *Interstellar*, director Christopher Nolan, armed with a crew of astrophysicist consultants at his side, arrives at a two-pronged dilemma: how can he accurately depict a concept that eludes human visualization, quantum physics, and also explore one of the most difficult to understand concepts in science, all in an understandable film? To visualize the invisible, Nolan enlists an unlikely filmmaking device: the Kantian sublime. Using Immanuel Kant's tenets of the mathematical sublime, Nolan both visualizes and explains quantum physics wordlessly. Philosophy, more concerned with normativity than empiricism, has stereotypically been pegged as a metaphorical "younger sibling" and taken a backseat to modern science. Despite conventionally not being seen as one and the same, Nolan's wizardry in seamlessly using sublime aesthetics to demonstrate quantum physics raises questions about how different they are. Through a cinematographic analysis of *Interstellar*, joined by a close reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and a survey on the influence of Kantian aesthetics in writings of early quantum physicists such as David Bohm, I will demonstrate that Nolan's wielding of the sublime to visualize quantum gravity inadvertently raise the possibility of the sublime and quantum physics not being distant relatives, but direct descendants rooted in each other.

Melissa Zhang

**Perspectives in Parallel:  
Moral Complexity in Gene Luen Yang's *Boxers and Saints***

*Researching the Boxer Rebellion, in the beginning, I really honestly felt I was trying to choose a side.  
And I really couldn't, you know?*

—Gene Luen Yang

Often people jump to conclusions without learning about all perspectives of a story. Without multiple perspectives, it is difficult to determine which side may be "good" and which side may be "evil." These labels can be reductive and prevent people from understanding the complexity of situations. Gene Luen Yang's two-volume graphic novel, *Boxers and Saints*, follows Little Bao's and Four-Girl's experiences during the Boxer Uprising of 1899-1901 in China. Told from two perspectives of the same event, *Boxers and Saints* is deeply rooted in themes of identity, culture, and religion. I will argue that Yang wrote *Boxers and Saints* to highlight the importance of viewing the Boxer Uprising from both perspectives, rather than just labeling either as "good" or "evil." I will also explore the parallelisms between the Boxers and the Saints to illustrate that the two cultures are more similar than initially assumed. By understanding this parallelism, it becomes difficult to choose the "right" side. In highlighting this moral ambiguity, I argue that Yang hints toward the broader complexity of history and the idea that one should not jump to a label. If the author himself cannot choose a side, why would you?



# Growing Pains

Moderated by Professor Lanita Jacobs

Departments of American Studies and Ethnicity and Anthropology

Tuesday, April 20  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m. PDT

**Marina Di**

## **Trauma is More Than Skin Deep: How Traumatic Experiences Foster Personal Growth in *Bastard Out of Carolina***

*We can reframe and recast our lives—  
not with lies, not with deceptions, but with the truth of who we are and of who we are choosing to become.*  
— Sandra Marinella, *The Story You Need to Tell: Writing to Heal from Trauma, Illness, or Loss*

Emerging adulthood can be a confusing period for adolescents: we are in a transitional phase, striving for independence but simultaneously defined by our environment. What is worse, children experiencing sexual abuse—lacking the voice and intellectual framework to process traumatic experiences—tend to root their identity in their painful past and struggle with a sense of inferiority. In Dorothy Allison's 1992 autofiction, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the reader is introduced to Bone Boatwright and her miserable coming-of-age story set in 1950s South Carolina. Bone frequently experiences sexual insults and negligence from family members, all the while combatting society's gendered expectations and stereotypes. As silence serves as a perpetuation of trauma's tyranny, this paper examines how ineloquent children like Bone attempt to internalize shame and explore survivorship by themselves. Instead of viewing trauma as completely destructive, this paper focuses on how trauma provides victims the key to an unrestrained space where they can safely rewrite and explore the traumatic experience through fantasies. Overall, this paper first discusses why trauma provides victims a chance to explore survivorship and then examines the role of fantasies in helping victims claim a new and undefined identity from the traumatic past.

**Sana Jayaswal**

## **The Female Savior: Exploring the Emergence of a New Female Archetype in *Suspiria***

*Suspiria* follows the transformation of seemingly naive Susie Banon, who, we presume, unknowingly joins a witch coven disguised as a contemporary female dance company in Cold War Germany. However, Susie is eventually revealed to be Mother Suspriosum, a powerful, ancient witch who kills the corrupt members of the coven. As a way to understand Susie's transformation, many critics haphazardly classify Susie into common female horror archetypes such as Carol Clover's Final Girl trope or that of a traditional witch. However, I will complicate the associations of feminist empowerment with the Final Girl and concept of the witch by revealing a dependency on "the male gaze." I propose that Susie represents a new, multifaceted archetype who obtains autonomous empowerment absent of men. I will utilize concepts such as sexuality, The Savior, and authority to further define the proposed archetype and reveal how she achieves authentic empowerment. Ultimately, Susie reveals how *Suspiria* enables a more progressive direction for females in horror films.

**Dominic Pak**

## **The Influence of Black Relationships on Morality in Octavia Butler's *Kindred***

*Slavery of any kind fosters strange relationships.*  
—Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

How much of our morality is truly influenced by the people that surround us? And how can broad terms such as "family" and "morality" be defined? Octavia Butler addresses these questions and many more within her novel *Kindred*. In this novel, Butler unifies historical fiction and science fiction to tell the gripping story of a Black American woman's time travel between 1970s California and the pre-Civil War plantation of her ancestors. *Kindred* explores themes of family, morality, and identity throughout the novel. As a complex and genre-defying text, *Kindred* has generated scholarly discussion around the interplay between morality and the relationships between its characters. Much of the scholarship on the importance of biological and chosen family focuses on the interracial

relationships within the novel. My own argument aims to extend beyond interracial relationships to understand Dana's relationships with other Black characters, chosen and biological, and the way this novel speaks to the history of kinship and chosen family amongst Black Americans throughout history.

**Alisha Soni**

**Time, Place, and Space:  
A Journey of Self Identity in Hamid's *Exit West***

*In this group, everyone was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was.*  
—Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West*

What does it mean to be a migrant? Is it strictly someone who moves through space from one location to another? Or is it possible that a person who remains in a singular place for their entire life can also be a migrant through time? Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* considers such questions via Nadia and Saeed, a pair of young migrant lovers who flee their unnamed hometown in the midst of a tumultuous civil war. Nadia and Saeed represent the experience of those who are simultaneously citizens and migrants—and the ability to identify as both complicates the nature of their personal identities. In my paper, I combine postcolonial theorist Amanda Lagji's theory of the "new mobilities paradigm" and scholar Liliana Naydan's analysis of the role of technology in *Exit West* to demonstrate how mobility and immobility via the use of technology allow Hamid to manipulate time and distance to affect the development of the characters' attachments to their cultural identities and each other. In doing so, I argue that his work suggests even though space may be divided by physical borders, those who are mobile and those who are not share collective experiences that depend on one another to occur.

**Oliver Swack**

**Anthropocentrism and Transhumanism in *Ex Machina***

What does it mean to be human? Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* explores principles of humanism through the premise of the Turing Test—a test that gauges a machine's ability to possess human-like intelligence. While audiences and critics both primarily focus on the humanoid Ava's capabilities and consciousness, they fail to analyze the film through the lens of Caleb, the coder who tests Ava. From knowingly signing a hazardous contract to helping Ava escape the house and being left behind, Caleb ultimately makes some questionable decisions. By specifically analyzing Caleb, an interesting power dynamic in relation to Caleb's free will is brought to light. Building off of scholarly work that points towards the theme of egoism in *Ex Machina*, I argue that by taking a deep look into Caleb's varying levels of agency—and through that lens his ego—Garland subliminally asserts that modern society is meddled with by anthropocentrism, or human egocentrism.

# Identity Crisis

Moderated by Professor Vanessa Schwartz, Director  
Visual Studies Research Department  
Departments of Art History and History

Tuesday, April 20  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m. PDT

**Madelyn Kennebeck**

## **Not God's Gift to the World: The Idolization of *Nausicaä*'s Animinist Ideology**

Despite Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä and the Valley of the Wind* being grounded in Shinto animism and the complexities of the human-nature relationship, many critics project an image of Nausicaä as an "eco savior" onto the originally humble and grounded narrative. *Nausicaä* follows the survivors of humanity living in a post-apocalyptic world dominated by an encroaching forest of poisonous fungi and giant insects. The titular Nausicaä hails from one such society, the idyllic Valley of the Wind, and works to reconcile these warring factions. My paper intends to reassert Miyazaki's original intent of *Nausicaä* as a story that promotes humanity's need to take an active role in respecting our environment. I will argue against the notion that Nausicaä's role in fulfilling the prophecy holds more relevance to the themes of the narrative than her empathy and intellectual curiosity. Nausicaä doesn't have divine nature powers or any profound skills; her strength comes from being an engaged and proactive member of her world—something that we all can be. The need for activism in the environment is an issue that we do not have a silver bullet for, and *Nausicaä* reminds us of our responsibility to come together and address the world's problems.

**Chika Ojukwu**

## **"And there I was, certified a bastard by the state of South Carolina": The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly of Identity Formation in *Bastard Out of Carolina***

Growing up sucks. Not only is your body beginning to change in weird and often mysterious ways, but you are also struggling to figure out who you are in this entire world of being. During these formative years, your identity is only a budding concept, one not yet fully developed, but itching to take form. In *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison, Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright is also growing up—and it sucks. Bone resides in 1950s South Carolina as a poor, female, and illegitimate child, which proves to create a dissonance in Bone's identity. Having no knowledge of her father and being labeled a "bastard" forces Bone to form her identity within the confines of what society places on her. In this paper, I intend to dissect the efforts that Bone makes to form her identity while she has a conflict occurring inside of her. Looking at this alongside the concepts of the female *bildungsroman* and the intersectional coming of age story, I aim to decipher whether one can create their identity despite the presence of a fiery brand dictating who they are supposed to be.

**Hudi Potash**

## **No Place like a Severed Home: Race, Gentrification, and Belonging in Joe Talbot's *The Last Black Man in San Francisco***

There truly is no place like home for *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*'s Jimmie Fails. Having grown up in modern San Francisco, Jimmie fights against the tides of gentrification to save his childhood home. But ultimately Jimmie is unsuccessful, left with no home and several broken relationships. My paper examines the intense attachment that Jimmie feels towards his home. I will explore Jimmie's status as a Black man in a settler city and how that impacts his relationship with the idea of home. I will examine how storytelling is used to fight back against white violence and how white violence disregards these stories further. I will also explore how his relationship with home bleeds into his relationships with friends and family, showcasing gentrification's violent impact. Ultimately, Jimmie lives in a tragic irony where he needs a home to be safe, but his inability to have a home only causes more pain.

May Song

**Eat Me:  
The Consumption of the Asian Woman  
in Franny Choi's "To the Man Who Shouted 'I Like Pork Fried Rice' at Me on the Street"**

*But at the same time, I'm guilty, too. Guilty of playing this role. Letting it define me.  
Internalizing the role so completely that I've lost track of where reality starts and the performance begins.*  
—Charles Yu, *Interior Chinatown*

When white Western society conjures a perception of Asian women, it sees “Asian Butterflies” and “Dragon Ladies.” Asian women are not really human, these stereotypes tell us, but instead fetishized images to hunger for. Franny Choi's poem "To the Man Who Shouted 'I Like Pork Fried Rice' at Me on the Street" acts as a response to a catcaller's proclamation, “I like pork fried rice” to the speaker, an Asian woman. In an attempt to force the catcaller to confront his own perversion, the speaker hypersexualizes herself to a disturbing and uncomfortable degree, with ambiguous success. The speaker succeeds in confronting her catcaller with the morbid, cannibalistic undertones of his statement, but can only exact her revenge once she has been consumed and thoroughly sexualized herself. Drawing primarily from bell hooks' theory of cultural commodification and Celine Shimizu's discussion of hypersexuality, I argue that what sets "To the Man..." apart is its willingness to explore the possible futility of completely dismantling fetishization. By blurring the lines between self-inflicted sexualization and empowerment, "To the Man..." refuses to be a one-note, artificial empowerment narrative and instead provides nuance in the conversation around the fetishization of Asian women.

Melinda Xia

**Hilariously Hysterical:  
Laughter and Identity in *The Day of the Locust***

Laughter is contagious. When it is an authentic emotional response, laughter spreads a common feeling of joy. But when laughter is used artificially to integrate oneself into the surrounding culture, it reflects hysteria and becomes a virus-like mechanism that dismantles individualism and subjectivity. Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* traces how different character archetypes in interwar Hollywood become mechanized in a capitalist culture that encourages mass consumption. Hollywood's inhabitants constantly desire the excitement and passion often portrayed in media, and attempt to fulfill this desire by integrating artificial performances in reality. This method of consumption is accompanied by a form of laughter that is grotesque: a previously authentic response manipulated by dissatisfaction from unfulfilled desires. My paper address how laughter traces fading individuality at the hands of a disillusioned population that has been corrupted by capitalist consumption. I will examine how immobility is disguised through artifice, and pose this question: is resistance to capitalist tendencies effective in preserving identity?



# It's Only Natural

Moderated by Professor Megan Luke  
Department of Art History

Tuesday, April 20  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m. PDT

**Addison Gregory**

## **If Beavers Could Talk: Applicable Environmentalism in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe***

In Narnia, beavers talk, cook, and sew; people can be turned to stone with the flick of a wand; and the season stays the same for years as a result of dark magic. Narnia, of course, is the enchanted land C.S. Lewis creates in his 1950 fantasy book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. This fanciful, surreal setting with striking differences from Earth's environment seems like it would prevent readers from easily applying the environmental themes within the book to real life. Yet, I will argue that despite its escapist tone, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* greatly influences the environmental consciousness of its readers. For although readers consciously focus on the obvious disparities between the environment of Narnia and that of the real world, they are only able to visualize the fantastical setting of the book by invoking the earthly environment they know, thereby unconsciously linking the two worlds. Ultimately, I assert that by presenting environmental morals in a mode where they are not evaluated with the rationality of real-world considerations, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is able to engage a broad and diverse audience in ways that explicitly environmental texts cannot.

**Lily Kubala**

## **The Coyotes Aren't Alone, But You Are: Mary Austin's Views on How We Should Live**

Living the "right" way—in many ways, this concept is a question without an answer, an impossibility in the modern world. It brings up questions of defining what "right" even means, and, more importantly, defining "wrong." On the threshold of modernization, as she watched manifest destiny beginning to spread through California, Mary Austin began to form a very clear picture of the right way to live, defined in her mind by a respect for nature and cultural ties to the land. By delving into her most famous work, *Land of Little Rain*, this paper will explore how Mary Austin defines living correctly, as well as ask the question if Austin herself was living correctly. Studying Austin as one who lamented a system while being part of it forces us to question whether anyone can live contrary to the system in which they are engrained. By looking at Austin's definitions of the right and wrong ways to live through her writing and her life story, it seems that some perfect form of alternative living is nothing but a dream.

**Andrew Vu**

## **SigAlert!: Freeway Fires in *Tropic of Orange***

Thirty-one deaths. Ten thousand buildings damaged or destroyed. And 4.1 million acres of land burned down—twice as much as the year before. 2020 was the worst wildfire season in California history, and the statistics were alarming. However, these dramatic events can invite us to look back at how wildfires have been featured in literature, particularly in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*. In this novel, Yamashita imagines a "firestorm" erupting on Harbor Freeway in Los Angeles when oil tankers collide with traffic. This becomes an urban catastrophe, disrupting traffic and everyday life for the characters. Drawing on the work of environmental scholars, my paper will do a close reading of the firestorm in *Tropic of Orange*. Through the firestorm and the multiple perspectives featured in her novel, Yamashita exaggerates and critiques the ways in which Angelenos have responded to disaster in Los Angeles. She invites us to reflect on how we respond to disaster today, something which may be increasingly significant to our survival in the Anthropocene.

**Louis Sek Lung Wong**

**Post-Apocalypse and the Disregard of Ego  
in Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind***

*Just hold on tight to [granny], children. The Ohmu will come. There's nothing we can do about it.*  
—Obaba, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*

*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* sets forth many of the themes that are now the defining hallmarks of a Studio Ghibli film. Ideas such as ecological feminism, generational divide, and pacifism make their debut in what is often referred to as one of the greatest animated films of all time. *Nausicaä* is set in a post-apocalyptic environment that marries those themes into a cohesive display of nature versus individuality. Current scholarship shows how *Nausicaä* saves nature by disregarding an ego-centric viewpoint, entering ecological time, and all within a utopia/dystopia. I contribute to this discourse by discussing why those decisions were made. This “why” is explored through a close-reading of the text through the post-apocalypse lens. I argue that post-apocalypse ordinarily encourages individuals to rely on technology against their environment—and that the only way to break free from that paradigm is to have the empathetic capacity to disregard one's ego. In other words, I recognise the thematic complexity of *Nausicaä* and then attempt to explain how post-apocalypse instigates her empathetic disregard of self in favor of nature.

**Leo Zeng**

**Connecting the Dots:  
Gender, Technology, and Environmental Injustice in Nnedi Okorafor's "Spider the Artist"**

The natural resource crude oil, which powers our vehicles and other petroleum products, has been both a curse and blessing for many countries, especially the delta region of Nigeria. Being a global commodity, crude oil instigates conflicts that essentially concern the battle for power in global politics. In Nnedi Okorafor's "Spider the Artist," Eme, an African woman who reflects great adversity in her home and the environment surrounding her, is deprived of the opportunity to procreate due to the exploitation of oil by Western powers. Knowing that procreation is frequently used to define women's value to society, African feminist Judith Byfield notes that Nigerian women actually use “motherhood” as a platform for their political growth and interest in achieving equality in public affairs. But what of environmentally-induced infertile women? In Eme's case, she transfers her anger and disappointment with environmental injustice to her affinity with the product of oil exploitation: the artificial intelligence spider that was made to protect the pipelines from intrusion. Ironically, a product designed to eliminate hope in the Nigerian people ends up helping Eme to dissociate from the pain of environmental injustice and regain the faith to keep living. Seemingly, technology has filled the void caused by the destruction of the environment. However, it does not resolve Eme's lack of voice in societal issues, let alone represent her opinion on the fundamental government policy on the environment.

# Location, Location, Location

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

Tuesday, April 20  
7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m. PDT

**Eujean Doo**

## **Beyond Borders: Migrant versus Native Identities in *Exit West***

In a world without borders, who is the migrant and who is the native? Once one becomes a migrant, is it ever possible to stop being a migrant? In the world of *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, the novel's protagonists, Nadia and Saeed, migrate across the world from an unnamed hometown to Mykonos, London, and Marin, California. Magical doors, which appear mysteriously and randomly, become portals through which one can instantly travel thousands of miles. Hamid's incorporation of magical realism eliminates our current understandings of national borders and migration journeys, and allows us to consider how definitions of migrant versus native identities (and the border between them) are not just determined by physical movement, but are relational, permeable, and socially constructed. Drawing from postcolonial theory, psychoanalytic theory, and critical race theory, I will examine how concepts of native/migrant identities, (il)legality in migration, (im)mobility, and statehood, are influenced by race, class, collective consciousness, melancholic identity, and power and control.

**Kenna Horgan**

## **Cosmopolitan Regionalism in *The Day of the Locust*: A Regional Critique of Modernity**

With its elaborate characterization of the Angeleno and topographical appraisal of Hollywood, *The Day of the Locust* by Nathanael West is viewed by many as a paragon of literary regionalism. Scholarly consensus exists with respect to West's invocation of the regionalist mode. However, disagreement remains regarding the extent to which West critiques the regionalist movement and its embedded isms by presenting a deliberately satirized regional work. In this paper, I analyze the modernist rejection of regionalism and penchant for the cosmopolitan, grounding my inquiry on Raymond Williams' modern postulation that "the key cultural factor of the modernist shift is the metropolis." This modern shift from the rural to the citified and the region to the metropolis has already been well-documented. However, the residual effects of regionalism on modernist metropolitanism has yet to be explored. I will argue that in an attempt to reject literary regionalism in favor of a cosmopolitan view, West extends his critical scope and demonization of the Los Angeles community to modernity at large. I will also theorize a new modernist writing style: cosmopolitan regionalism.

**Daniel Kos**

## **One Way or Another: Exploring Character Agency and Decision-Making in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West***

Nadia and Saeed's story in Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* seems to be one of difficult, life-altering choices. Yet, their arduous circumstances, such as fleeing civil war and surviving refugee camps, often steal their control over these choices, leaving them with little agency. Throughout the novel, it appears that Nadia and Saeed confront this overwhelming loss of control through their nascent romantic relationship and the hope of agency they will have in their future together. But when they reach the supposedly utopian American west coast, the couple discovers that their relationship was not one based on desire, but rather one of existential necessity all along. As they find themselves no longer in the danger that forced them together, both use their newfound control to go their separate ways. I will examine Michael Perfect's "Black holes in the fabric of the nation': Refugees in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*" and its interpretation of Nadia and Saeed's relationship. I will also discuss how I disagree with the analysis of the two protagonists' agency over their lives once they reach America in Liliana M. Naydan's paper "Digital Screens and National Divides in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*."

**Aaron Michael Shields**

**The Black Utopia and Its Variations:  
Analyzing the Differences Between Afrofuturism as Seen in Butler's *Parable of the Sower*,  
and Africanfuturism as Seen in Okorafor's "Spider the Artist"**

This paper examines how the Black Apocalypse, a period marked by the displacement and oppression of African peoples during the Anthropocene, was responsible for the origins of the Black Utopia as African peoples sought to escape a world in which they were exploited by capitalist interests for monetary gain. However, the discourse on the creation of a Black Utopia in Black speculative literature was dominated by Afrofuturist perspectives until the beginning of the 21st century. Although the creation of a Black Utopia was previously seen as an aspiration solely belonging to the African American community, Black Speculative literature has now expanded to include African perspectives in its discourse. This inclusion has been extremely beneficial as it has shown that Afrofuturism focuses more on the intersection between African American culture and technology while simultaneously disregarding African cultures. In response, Africanfuturism was created to bring focus to African cultures and their ideas. Focusing on Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Nnedi Okorafor's "Spider the Artist," this paper illustrates the similarities and differences between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism and their connections to the Black Utopia as seen in current Black speculative literature.

**Amirta Srinivas**

**Nature versus Nurture:  
The Seed of Prejudice in the Graphic Adaptation of *Kindred***

The 19th century set the stage for the civil rights movement that shook the nation, terminating previous ideologies of segregation and prejudice that infiltrated society as a result of the institution of slavery from centuries prior. Damian Duffy and John Jennings's graphic novel adaptation of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* illustrates the impacts of an environment on an individual's psyche. The novel progresses with flashbacks taking protagonist Dana back from her 20th century modern life to 19th century Maryland filled with slavery and racial prejudice. As a Black woman, she experiences the prejudice typical of the era; however, her perceptions regarding equality that she brings into the discriminatory past are ones from her present life. The various color palettes and variance in frame size and dialogue length all add to the humanistic element of the graphic novel, demonstrating harsh realities of prejudice and an individual's succumbing to them. In my essay, I will discuss how Dana and Rufus, the child she cares for, progress throughout only to succumb to the expectations of the society around them. Therefore, I argue that racism and prejudice are taught, not innate.



# Authorial Intent

Moderated by Professor Devin Griffiths  
Departments of English and Comparative Literature

Wednesday, April 21  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m. PDT

Allanah Grant Elster

## **From Exploitative to Empowering: How Framing *Jennifer's Body* as a Queer Narrative Shifts the Film From "Trashy" to Iconic**

The early 2000s were brimming with pink-saturated, witty, teen girl comedies. The 2009 film *Jennifer's Body* in many ways fits this category...but with more demonic sacrifice than *Mean Girls* or *Clueless*. The horror-comedy *Jennifer's Body* was critically panned when released. Some critics stated that the film was too sexy for a horror film while others complained it was not sexy enough for a film promoted with half-naked pictures of Megan Fox. Years later, critical feminist analysis has given *Jennifer's Body* a cult following, appreciating the subversive intentions of the female writer and director. Arguably, this reexamination goes beyond the lens of feminism and can be attributed to the film being repositioned as explicitly queer as opposed to exploiting queerness. The main characters, Jennifer (Megan Fox) and Needy (Amanda Seyfried), have a recognizable brand of adolescent homoeroticism which culminates when they passionately kiss midway through the film. While creators intended this kiss to be indicative of a complicated, romantic relationship, viewers in 2009 could not fathom that a kiss between feminine starlets could be more than a marketing ploy. When *Jennifer's Body* is viewed as a queer-centered narrative though, new meaning and value can be found in the tragically misunderstood film.

Hannah Jane Gardiner

## **"A thousand pities": The Atypical Villainy of Mr. Ramsay**

*The whole course of human experience is replete with autistic people.*  
—Christa Mullis, *Reflection on Autistic-Coded Characters and Fans in Fandom*

When neurotypicality becomes the unnamed default, then neurodiversity becomes the threatening deviance. In Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, awkward academic Mr. Ramsay stumbles into the role of the villain. He is not inherently villainous, but his inability to comprehend the world around him renders him contemptible and pitiable to the other characters. Although scholars have discussed Mr. Ramsay's importance as an antagonistic father and husband in Woolf's novel, they have failed to specify what makes him seem so easily unlikable. I argue that Mr. Ramsay is an autistic-coded character whose stereotypical traits perpetuate common misconceptions about people on the spectrum. I, as an aspiring autistic scholar, aim to offer an explanation for Mr. Ramsay's strangeness—his inability to conform to what is normal—by analyzing him as an autistic-coded character. I will discuss how we can perceive Mr. Ramsay as autistic-coded (what specific traits and behaviors he displays), and then analyze the significance of his implied neurodivergence. By tying Mr. Ramsay, the "villain" of *To the Lighthouse*, to traits that are typically associated with autistic people, Woolf implies that autistic traits, and thus autistic people themselves, are worthy of being vilified.

Lily Guilfoil

## **Light Is Knowledge Is Power: An Evaluation of the Enlightenment Utopia through Le Guin's "The New Atlantis"**

*What else do we need?...What else do we need, besides power?*  
—Ursula Le Guin, "The New Atlantis"

Ursula Le Guin's "The New Atlantis" tells the tale of two separate, yet intrinsically connected journeys through a dystopian America. In the first, we follow protagonist Belle as her husband and his associates make a scientific discovery needed to power lights. In the second, narrated by an unknown member of the new Atlantis, a continent surfaces in the ocean, rising from darkness into...more darkness. Through these sister tales, Le Guin establishes a connection between light, power, and knowledge. While it might seem that Le Guin reaffirms Enlightenment

thinker Francis Bacon's assertion that "Knowledge itself is power," I argue that this understanding of Le Guin's story is limited; a simple equation of light, knowledge, and power obscures the complicated relationship that this association entails. Thus, Le Guin criticizes the Enlightenment Utopia—a utopia defined by knowledge resulting in change for the better—instead offering an alternative cure for dystopia: hope.

**Madeline Sellinger**

**Mary Austin's Entrance to Literary Nature:  
Absent Objectivity in *The Land of Little Rain***

The Manifest Destiny era of American history is one of the most well-studied and well-documented in both literature and art. The push west by white settlers in the early 20th century, as well as the resulting colonization and Native American genocide, was justified by claims of approval and encouragement from God. What generated such confidence in these colonizers that the west was full of unused land, resources, and opportunities? Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain*, first published in 1903 as a serial release in the *Atlantic Monthly*, is credited as a hallmark documentation of the early American West, featuring detailed descriptions of the landscape's both physical and metaphysical qualities. Austin's work was one of the first of its kind in the literary nature genre because women were typically neither welcomed nor accepted as capable of writing artistic and poetic works that still retained scientific accuracy. I will explore Austin's novel, *The Land of Little Rain*, to determine the point at which it shifts from observational or depictive to unrealistic and harmful, and continue on to address how her subtle ideological portrayals of Native Americans and their culture generated a damaging form of syncretism. I will examine how Austin's use of the literary nature genre and her blending of the romantic with the real disfigures and misportrays the American West, and how such disfigurement laid the groundwork for the wave of colonization to come.

**Cora Sverdrup**

**Hidden Histories:  
The Push to "Look Behind" in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen***

As Americans, we like to think, to believe, that we are not our history. With the current social environment rooted in the origin of slavery, many Americans appear content to leave the past in the past. However, as Claudia Rankine reminds us in her book, *Citizen*, the past never leaves us. It lives on inside us. And in turn, our current perception of and orientation within the world is dependent on our historical origins. Within *Citizen*, Rankine provides a compilation of poetry, anecdotal prose, and image media that describes the very ways in which racism has manifested in the past and persists today. In my paper, I will demonstrate how Rankine approaches the relationship between historical context and emotional reality as a system that both allows American racism to persist and forces those subject to it into the background. Ultimately, Rankine's *Citizen* both implicates the white reader in its words and validates the affective harm felt by non-white readers as made common through our white-oriented American situation.

# Contributing Factors

Moderated by Professor Lucas Herchenroeder  
Department of Classics

Wednesday, April 21  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m. PDT

Ava Becker

## **Displacement of Happiness and the Road to Contentment: The Sublime in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse***

"I wish I were happy." "If only I could go on that vacation." "If only they liked me back." "If only things were like they used to be." These "if only" statements are common amongst people today; they romanticize the past and the future in hopes of regaining contentment with life. While many theorists have analyzed this natural inclination to "displace" happiness on to past and future events, the relationship between the actualization of the sublime and contentment with the present has been widely unexplored. In her 1927 novel, *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf addresses these desires by depicting the Ramsay family at their beach house as friends come to visit. The son, James Ramsay's, desperate attempts to reach a nearby lighthouse and the family painter, Lily Briscoe's, determination to finish her portrait illustrate this tendency to look to the past or future for happiness. Through Woolf's illustration of these characters, this essay argues that the unrest caused by the displacement of happiness is only remedied by a sublime realization which fosters contentment with life. A profound comprehension of Woolf's writing illuminates that only the sublime can reduce longing to fulfillment and mitigate the need to ask "if only."

Nathan Kim

## **Music in the Web: *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse's* Secret World of Sounds**

Watching a film is always an exhilarating experience, but hearing the music and feeling it move through your body is what truly ingrains the movie in one's memory. Peter Ramsey, Rodney Rothman, and Bob Persichetti's *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* revolves around Miles Morales, a high schooler from Brooklyn, who gets bitten by a radioactive spider and joins forces with Spider-people from other universes to battle the evil Kingpin and stop him from destroying the city. The film is known for its artistic fusion of the comic book style with the movie medium, but what makes it stand out is its music. Thus, although the art is exceptional, in my paper, I will explain why the music, especially the hip-hop genre, is the most compelling aspect in the scope of Miles's journey into becoming the Ultimate Spiderman, strengthening the story in conjunction with the art and building up to his climactic leap of faith. It invokes emotions of comfort, discovery, and inspiration that connect with audiences and leave a lasting impression on them. And this comes simply from the common denominator of music.

Shruti Shakthivel

## **To Understand History, You Must Experience It: Challenging Power and Family Dynamics in Butler's *Kindred***

*Gone With the Wind[s] version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage was more than I could stand.*  
—Octavia Butler

Imagine you are whisked away to Antebellum Maryland by your great-grandfather each time he is on the verge of death. You save him, but what would you do if you learned that he falls in love with a woman his family has enslaved, and that your grandmother is the product of repeated rape? In *Kindred*, the protagonist Dana must choose between saving her great-grandfather Rufus's life or protecting her great-grandmother Alice from him. In the end, she decides to preserve her lineage by aiding Rufus's pursuit of Alice, staying only until her grandmother is born. Building on the work of other scholars, I explore how Dana's decision is rooted in learning about why the Black enslaved individuals have children despite knowing those children will be enslaved too. Do they build families out of love, or is it a selfish act? To answer these questions, we must understand how Dana, a Black woman, challenges the power structure on the plantation. And by examining Dana's identity as a writer, readers are encouraged to consider how her role—and by extension the novel's role—is a means to amplify the narratives of enslaved Black individuals that were silenced for so long.

**Jiaming Shi**

**Cultural Incompatibility:  
How Foreign Influence Contributes to the Satirical Utopia Constructed in Lao She's *Cat Country***

Throughout the history of the 20th century, many underdeveloped states in Asia and Africa were forced to undergo the process of assimilating to foreign culture following the success of the colonial powers. However, these convergences could be ineffective at bringing social progress. Lao She's *Cat Country*, for example, introduces a declining cat kingdom on Mars characterized by corrupted ruling elites and lazy ordinary citizens. The novel highlights the cat men's inability to initiate meaningful and long-lasting social reforms by borrowing successful experiences from other civilizations, which leads to their eventual extinction caused by a group of alien troops. The primary incentive of writing this novel is to reflect social problems in 20th century Chinese society that has witnessed a series of failed reforms based on Western ideals. This paper contends that foreign influence serves as the most significant factor in constructing a satirical utopia in *Cat Country*. Through a combination of a series of elements representative of foreign origins that haunt the cat kingdom, Lao She effectively voices his distress over reform failures in the Chinese society at that time, which explains why it fell behind other Western states.

**Shaneen Upal**

**Connection in Utopia:  
What Marriage Means in "The New Atlantis"**

Does marriage have a place in utopia? Ursula K. Le Guin's novella "The New Atlantis" imagines a futuristic United States in which marriage has been outlawed. Belle, its protagonist, is not only married, but spends her time imagining a better world than the one in which she lives: a world where human beings are deeply connected to nature. Yet while a focus on connection with nature is something that would be expected in an ecological utopia, a focus on marriage is not. This is what makes "The New Atlantis" unique. Scholars of Le Guin's stories, such as Kathleen Spencer, note that they are preoccupied with "communication growing out of isolation." In my paper, I analyze Le Guin's inclusion of marriage as a form of connection and communication in "The New Atlantis." Moreover, I assess how this inclusion of marriage creates a utopian work, and argue that Le Guin shows it to be an essential precondition for utopia and humanity's integration with nature. Through this analysis, I seek to answer why Le Guin once said that the central theme of her works is "marriage," and how tradition informs visions of the future.

# On the Basis of Sex

Moderated by Professor Heather James  
Departments of English and Comparative Literature

Wednesday, April 21  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m. PDT

**Kristin Nguyen Dickson**

## **Men: The Real Bastards in *Bastard Out of Carolina***

Men's objectification of women eliminates women's individuality and choices, resulting in the commodification and weaponization of women. The actions of men innately impact the physical safety, mental stability, and sexuality of women of all ages. Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* follows Bone, a young girl coming of age in 1950s South Carolina. Throughout the novel, Bone's step father, Daddy Glen, forces mental chaos upon her, crippling her emotional state and reducing her self-worth by abusing, molesting, and gaslighting her. While it is evident men are culpable for the manipulation and exploitation of women, society's enabling of men lets emotional and physical violence against women continue unchecked. This paper will differentiate between the impacts of socialization and the actions of men while examining the role women play in oppressing one another. In this community, women are heavily socialized to rationalize and justify men's behaviors. At times, women assume the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed, encouraging complacency and allowing systems of oppression to continue.

**Scott Gilman**

## **Peeping Tom: The Problem with Being Seen in *The Talented Mr. Ripley***

Of all the reasons to murder someone, why does everyone like "because you hate yourself for being gay" the best? It may be true for Tom Ripley, but it is hardly the only of his handful of interesting reasons for homicide. *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, a 1999 film directed by Anthony Minghella, depicts the poverty-stricken Tom Ripley lying his way into a caste of upper-class American youth living the good life in Europe in the 1950s. There, he falls in love with the wayward son of a shipping mogul, murders the object of his affections, and steals his identity. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is a story of class stratification, artistic ambition, and the stealing of another's skin, but many scholars hyper-focus on one topic: "Tom Ripley is gay. Why so?" *The Talented Mr. Ripley* depicts a man with frenzied desire who is deeply uncomfortable with having his desires seen. This discomfort leads him to his violent actions. However, this is often oversimplified to discomfort with only his homosexual desire and violence born of his alienation as a closeted gay man. This essay will examine a pattern of scenes—sexual and nonsexual in nature—in which Ripley stares at an object of his desire, is caught looking, and reacts poorly in order to examine how Ripley's discomfort is not solely tied to his sexuality, what the film is saying about the vulnerability of desire as a whole, and how there may be an alternate reality where Ripley murders a man over something entirely different from his sexuality.

**Aya McNamee**

## **The Sublime Nature of Motherhood in *Beloved***

The concept of motherhood and its intertwined nature with the expectations of womanhood as well as the power of a mother's love and devotion is a universal theme displayed throughout countless pieces of literature, including Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Sethe's complex relationship with motherhood is often analyzed by critics as synonymous with her experiences in slavery, as her devotion to her children fuels her pursuit for freedom and the ultimate act of violence that then isolates her for the rest of her life. Building on Teresa Washington's work on how a spiritual force called "Àjé" plays into the mother-daughter relationships in the novel, I will introduce the idea of the sublime elements present in the maternal relationships that constitute *Beloved*. I contend that the complex and overwhelming nature of Sethe's experiences in motherhood is fundamentally sublime as the extension of her sheer love for her children and demonstrated through her traumatic experiences with slavery, giving up her sense of individuality and bodily autonomy, and committing the ultimate act of love and violence in killing Beloved. Sethe's experiences as a mother are many things, but the awe-inducing power of a mother's love as portrayed in *Beloved*, no matter how raw or brutal, is something that cannot be ignored.



**William Ortell**

**Systemically Unequal:  
How Patriarchy Encourages Dystopia in Le Guin's "The New Atlantis"**

What will ultimately be the repercussions of modern-day patriarchy and gender inequality? Esteemed feminist writer Ursula Le Guin explores this question in "The New Atlantis," a story set in a dystopian United States where citizens are badly repressed and the climate crisis threatens civilizational collapse. In this crumbling society, the female protagonist Belle consoles herself with dreams of a continent rising from the ocean—a "New Atlantis"—free from the societal and ecological regression brought about by the "men who make laws, and enforce them." Pulling from the writings of Greta Gaard, I argue that Le Guin takes an ecofeminist perspective in her story, suggesting that the perpetuation of patriarchal power structures has played a direct role in societal and environmental problems seen in the dystopian United States. By describing instances of inequality that some brush over, Le Guin provides a useful tool in identifying problematic modern-day trends. Through her connection to our present society, she ultimately suggests that we must work to minimize our modern gendered societal inequality if we intend to avoid arriving at an outcome as disastrous as the one she depicts.

**Anusha Vadlamani**

**Sometimes Losing an Arm Is Better Than Having a Man:  
Exploring Limitations to Belonging in Octavia Butler's *Kindred***

Our identity is defined by the moments we experience in life, the surroundings we grow up in, and the people we live our days with. A few, chosen moments can influence our identity forever. Unless, of course, our identity is not ours to begin with. What if it is determined by someone else's whims? What if it was rooted in the mere existence of another? This paper will answer these questions with the graphic novel rendition of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* in mind. In *Kindred*, Dana Franklin, a Black woman living in the 1970s is tied to the white men in her life: her husband in the present day and her ancestor in the past. I will employ the Family Systems Theory by Dr. Murray Bowen, which states that an individual can only be understood if looked at as part of a family unit. I will answer why I believe Dana's identity as a Black woman can only be found by examining the relationships that she shares with the white men in her life. I will explain why a Black woman's identity being founded in the presence of white men is all too like current society and the struggles that women of color continue to face today.

# Reality Check

Moderated by Professor Margaret Russett  
Department of English

Wednesday, April 21  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m. PDT

Nicole Iwamasa

## **Beyond the Stripes: Dismantling the “Tiger Mother” in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous***

*I’m not a monster. I’m a mother.*  
—Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*

What happens when your mother is a monster? In Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Rose is not just a mother; she is also an abuser, victim, daughter, and more. Centered around a Vietnamese immigrant family, the novel begins with scenes of Rose physically abusing her young son as he helps her navigate a country foreign to her through his stronger command of English. Readers might see Rose as a monstrous “Tiger Mother,” a trope attributed to Asian mothers wherein they assert domineering control over their child while neglecting emotional needs. This reductionist narrative in Western culture demonizes non-white mothers, turning them into objects the story manipulates rather than subjects with their own agency. While scholars have explored this with Black motherhood, few have attempted to do the same with Asian mothers. I will examine Vuong’s use of structure, context, and iconography as they deconstruct motherhood and its relation to identity. My essay argues that Rose transcends stereotypes and gains subjecthood, providing her with a hybridity uncommon to Asian mothers in Western narratives. Vuong creates a space where Rose can exist as both mother and monster, where a “Tiger Mother” has both claws for hunting and a pelt for sharing warmth.

Gabby Márquez

## **Why Can’t Butterflies Sting Like Bees?: Deconstructing the Immigrant Stereotype in Karla Cornejo Villavicencio’s *The Undocumented Americans***

The media has chosen one of two dehumanized images to portray undocumented immigrants in America: a parasitic worm or a fragile butterfly. Through the lens of Karla Cornejo Villavicencio’s book *The Undocumented Americans*, my paper will analyze the different stereotypes tacked onto immigrants and the damaging effects they have had on the community. I will center the conversation around an essential question: how does *The Undocumented Americans* confront the imagery of immigration and disrupt the common stereotypes projected onto immigrants? My paper examines how Cornejo Villavicencio debunks the myth of the American Dream through her use of *testimonio* and societal critiques that depict the daily battles immigrants face. I argue that Cornejo Villavicencio helps undocumented immigrants reclaim their own individual bodies and labor by humanizing the immigrant experience and revealing who immigrants truly are. Ultimately, Cornejo Villavicencio redefines what an American is: an immigrant.

Saya Sarma

## **No Brains, No Problem: The Detrimental Misnomers of Cannibalistic Zombihood**

Eating people is bad. Choosing to eat people is worse. These rules are pretty standard for Western society, so when it comes to cannibalism, we are less than forgiving. But when zombies eat people, we roll out the red carpet and nominate them for a BAFTA. The 2004 film *Shaun of the Dead* takes zombie appreciation to a new level; as a comedy, or rather a “zombedy,” it can actually convince audiences to laugh at cannibalistic corpses. This positive reaction mimics our response to anthropophagists—those desperate individuals who eat others to survive disasters. Because we think they have no other choice, we shower anthropophagists and zombie-bite victims with compassion as they dine on human flesh. But the zombies in *Shaun of the Dead* have a choice; and still, audiences applaud as they limp sluggishly closer to their next victims. My paper seeks to analyze the fine line between cannibalism and anthropophagy, and the effects of negative nomenclature on zombie and nonconformist acceptance in Western society.

We often use literature to escape the horrors of the real world. But what happens when we rely on escapism to the point where necessary change in the present becomes impossible? Le Guin explores this through her short story "The New Atlantis," in which Belle writes a story about a continent rising from the depths of the ocean. She depicts the secondary plot through italicized sections interrupting the text, with important moments of crossover between the two. To Belle and the reader, this structure blurs the line between what is "real" in Belle's world and what she imagines. I argue that this qualifies "The New Atlantis" as what Carl Malmgren defines as meta-science fiction. It exposes the dangers of science fiction when the distinction between fiction and reality becomes obscured. However, the writing that Belle uses as an escape strangely features a more oppressive environment than what she lives in, with ominous descriptions of unrecognizable creatures and intense pressure from water. By examining the analysis by Anne Maxwell and Donna Maloy, I conclude that this choice comments on the impact of literature on humanity's perceived powerlessness within a degrading society, and how writing becomes a source of resistance.

# Space/Time

Moderated by Professor Brett Sheehan  
Departments of History and East Asian Languages and Cultures

Wednesday, April 21  
5:00 p.m. - 6:15 p.m. PDT

**Haneen Almodaweb**

## **I am Afraid to Own a Body: Examining Temporality and Trauma in *Beloved***

Does all that is disremembered cease to exist? Toni Morrison's *Beloved* recounts a narrative once silenced, the trauma of slavery placed in a void beyond the physical realm. By drawing on the work of cultural historians and feminist studies scholars, I assess *Beloved's* exploration of the erasure of a race's narrative and their attempt to recreate it through "rememory," recalling traumatic memories that were once forgotten. Bridges, both literal and figurative, are a prominent motif in *Beloved* that allows for the recollection of traumatic memories of slavery. Sethe, an escaped slave, and the ghost of her dead baby, Beloved, are introduced as remnants of a past of slavery. While Sethe transcends space and latches onto a physical body she maintains no autonomy over, Beloved never fully materializes into a physical form. Hovering between the past and present, the protagonists are denied a foothold in reality. The untangling of the motif of bridges invites a conversation on the dislodging of the Black experience and Black voices. Examining the transposition of time into space as a repository for traumatic memories reveals a relationship between temporality and the manifestation of trauma into fragmented memories, their transience attributed to the marginalization of Black voices.

**Leopold Chen**

## **Between Fantasy and Reality: Addressing the Neoliberal Refugee Narrative Through Magical Doors in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West***

The setting of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* is mostly grounded in realistic depictions of the refugee crisis, with the exception of the inclusion of magical doors. These doors allow people who step through to instantaneously travel to another location regardless of country or distance. In the book, refugees, including protagonists Nadia and Saeed, stream through these magical doors causing a complete breakdown in national borders. Although at first this breakdown of national borders is met with resistance, sometimes violent, the tone of *Exit West* is ultimately optimistic and depicts a future where refugees are able to find new beginnings and integrate into new societies. This paper will explore how the inclusion of these magical doors interacts with the neoliberal refugee narrative. Hamid includes these magical doors to explore the possibility of closing the distance between natives and refugees, a distance that has been created and maintained by the neoliberal refugee narrative.

**Maya Sabbaghian**

## **The Price of Home: Destructive Gentrification in Joe Talbot's *Last Black Man in San Francisco***

Gentrification is not for the privileged in Joe Talbot's 2019 drama *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*. Rather, Talbot characterizes the privileged as oblivious to the struggles of the film's protagonist, Jimmie Fails (and those like him), as he attempts to reclaim the home he grew up in. This paper seeks to examine the complexities of attachment to place, especially to those most victimized by gentrification. With Jimmie's case in particular, home is portrayed as a source of comfort and security, associated with a certain rootedness that he derives from being able to occupy it. Yet, home is at the same time a vulnerability for those who are at risk of losing it. In fact, when Jimmie is kicked out of his red-trimmed abode, he is left with a sense of deep loss and disillusionment. As such, Talbot's film ultimately illustrates the notion that being able to have and love a home is a luxury that minorities in gentrified neighborhoods cannot easily afford.

Michael Solomon

**The Failings of Ethiopianism in *Of One Blood***

*Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.*  
—Psalms 68:31

Inspired by the promise of this verse, African American writers and thought leaders throughout the early 19th century helped forge the Afro-Atlantic literary-religious tradition known as Ethiopianism. Ethiopianism's mythical prophecy provided a sophisticated point of origin and shared history for African Americans and the Black diaspora at large. Although it maintains a final goal of diasporic unification, Ethiopianism fails to provide agency and consideration to native Africans. The influence of Ethiopianist ideas surrounding homeland and sovereignty in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* primarily takes root in the unbalanced dynamic between her white-passing African American protagonist, Reuel Briggs, and his fictional ancestral homeland Telassar, Ethiopia. Despite being ashamed of his hidden African heritage, Briggs finds himself declared heir to the throne of a kingdom he apparently views as inferior. Much like the tradition of Ethiopianism itself, Hopkins's novel centralizes the ambitions and experiences of African American characters, leaving the native Africans in *Of One Blood* as eager subjects. As such, Ethiopianism's overwhelming presence in *Of One Blood* drives a forceful wedge between the two communities that the author seeks to connect.



# At the Intersection

Moderated by Dr. Corinna Schroeder  
The Writing Program

Wednesday, April 21  
6:30 p.m. - 7:45 p.m. PDT

**Sarra Hussien**

## **The Intersection of Race and Gender within *The Underground Railroad***

Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad* follows the journey of Cora, a young slave on a cotton plantation in 1850s Georgia, who attempts to escape enslavement despite her family's generational reservations about the value of freedom. By rendering the underground railroad as a literal system of transportation, Whitehead provides a postmodern twist to an otherwise conventional account of historically racialized violence aimed at Black individuals. Many of the experiences of oppression and subjugation that Cora and other Black women in the novel face are a result of the effects of the patriarchy as well as racial society. In this paper, I will analyze the impacts that the intersectionality of race and gender have on women of color within the novel. In addition, I will argue that the impacts of the structural overlap between these two factors complicates the characters' view of freedom as well as their internal conflict between endurance and rebellion.

**Ishaana Khanna**

## **Snakeskin: Multiplicity and Malleable Identity in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands***

*I remain who I am, multiple and one of the herd, yet not of it.*  
—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*

The symbol of the snake has always been entrenched in duality—antitheses coexisting within the same body—but within contemporary vernacular, it is almost exclusively representative of one thing: deception. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, deeply rooted in its inherent multiplicity of form, narrative, language, and style, carries within it the conception for a new identity—a consciousness handed its strength by people on the borders of law, language, land, and life; the intersections one, and yet multiple. While scholars have extensively studied this consciousness alone, I analyze its representation, the serpent, and its use in both describing and lending power to those it encircles, as well as its conflicting and complex iterations throughout history; specifically, the pre-colonial serpentine in Anzaldúa's invocation of Coatlicue, the Aztec mother goddess, and the colonial, Biblical snake. While many critique that an identity that is named and represented births essentialism, and thus, discrimination, I argue that Anzaldúa's consciousness is malleable and amorphous much like human identity itself, and, through this invocation of Coatlicue, both relies on and thrives in its hybridity.

**Nivea Krishnan**

## **Patriarchal Politics of Violence: Black Female Subjugation in *Of One Blood***

Liberation is a constant struggle for several marginalized groups. In this fight for something beyond mere survival, there exists a clear convergence of oppressive structures. Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* brings this intersection to life through its Black female secondary character. The central storyline about a white-passing Black man's self-discovery and exploration of a hidden society of African excellence obfuscates the struggle for freedom of his romantic interest, Dianthe. While Reuel eventually assumes his "rightful" place as king of the hidden city, Dianthe's sorrowful demise at the hands of a white male abuser points to the need for an intersectional conversation in the context of structural violence. This paper contends that prevailing racialized and patriarchal norms make the Black woman's fight for freedom all the more futile and isolating. Through lenses of white patriarchal domination, psychological disorders, and generational trauma, I analyze Dianthe's role as the embodiment of physical, mental, and structural oppression. Her battle, in and of itself reduced to a subplot of Reuel's own journey, prompts us to critically examine the ways societal roots in racial and patriarchal hierarchies make even inalienable rights a privilege.

Jamie Ma

**Myriam Gurba's *Painting Their Portraits in Winter*:  
Utopia for Queer Women of Color**

How can a queer woman of color, socialized to live in a society that ultimately was not made for her, construct the ever elusive utopia? Is the notion even possible, when most literary utopias are not inclusive? In her collection of short stories, *Painting Their Portraits in Winter*, queer Chicana author Myriam Gurba constructs, alludes to, and challenges identity-based utopias, investigating what exactly “utopia” means for a queer woman of color—or her ghost. Both the living and dead characters share similarities in gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Yet, it is the ghosts that breathe life into the work, intricately detailing the lingering weight of trauma and the emotional turmoil that accompanies it. This paper, in conversation with Gurba’s work and scholarly research examining feminist/queer utopia, magical realism, and spiritual activism, seeks to examine the intersection between non-socionormative identities, history and trauma, and utopia. *Painting Their Portraits in Winter* curates a literary utopia in which queer women of color can find solace, reflection, and empowerment. The otherworldly aspects of Gurba’s work demonstrate the validity of utopia despite impermanence, tangibility, or globalization, building havens for those seeking for one.

Audrey Xia

**"I like you very much. Just as you are":  
Bridget Jones' Rejection of Self-Perfection**

With every generation, from the late 19th century newly independent woman to the present-day “post-feminist” woman, the representation of the “new woman” shifts in popular culture and the media. When *Bridget Jones' Diary* was published in 1996, readers praised Helen Fielding for the authenticity of Bridget Jones’ character; Fielding painted a compelling picture of contemporary women that struck home with those dealing with the same struggles with relationships, career, self-image, and other issues. However, she also received criticism, with many finding her story to be anti-feminist and problematic. In this paper, I explore *Bridget Jones' Diary* through the lens of consumerism and its relation to promoting ideals of self-perfection. I will also tackle the inherent connection between feminism and consumerism, and how that impacts readers’ interpretation of Bridget Jones’ character. Ultimately, I argue that Bridget Jones is not documenting the struggles of a woman who wants to change, but rather a woman who has intentionally relinquished control of her life. Despite being a book that seems to offer nothing but a guilty pleasure, *Bridget Jones' Diary* is actually a subversive novel as it depicts an empowered woman who rejects perfectionist ideals perpetuated by consumerism and instead practices self-acceptance.

# Creative License

Moderated by Professor Hector Reyes  
Department of Art History

Wednesday, April 21  
6:30 p.m. - 7:45 p.m. PDT

**Claire Fausett**

## **Rebelling Against Religion: A Study of Transcendentalism and Religious Syncretism in *The Land of Little Rain***

*You will find [the desert] forsaken of most things but beauty and madness and death and god.*  
—Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*

What comes to mind when you think about religion in America in the late 1800s? Protestantism? Mormonism? Church in general? Well, Mary Austin, author of *The Land of Little Rain*, thought about the California desert. Her opus is a collection of short stories featuring beautifully crafted depictions of the natural landscape in California. However, hidden amongst her incredible descriptions of the land are themes of religion and spirituality. Austin seeks to depart from traditional Western notions of religion in favor of a new philosophical theology focused on spirituality in the natural world. The intertwining of these dramatically different concepts (religion and the natural world) in Austin's essays creates a compelling piece of transcendentalist propaganda. In this paper, I will explore the ways Austin rebels against traditional religion by seeking a broader definition of spirituality. I will also delve into how, by seeking a new idea of spirituality, Austin calls for a syncretic notion of spirituality similar to transcendentalism.

**Maya Grinstein**

## **The Meaninglessness of Meaning: Anxiety and the Human Condition in "The Library of Babel"**

*You who read me, are you sure you understand my language?*  
—Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel"

Given the complexity of "The Library of Babel," it is almost as if author Jorge Luis Borges foresaw his message being lost in translation, as highlighted by the rhetorical question above. Articles and journals discussing the architectural integrity and mathematical implications of Borges' work overwhelm the pool of Borgesian discourse, producing reductive readings of the text. For this reason, this essay employs literal, literary, and religious lenses to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Borges' work. Michael Billings' "Rabbinic Traditions of Interpretation and the Hermeneutic Arc" provides insight into Jewish interpretations of the Biblical narrative alluded to by Borges: The Tower of Babel. Billings highlights themes of unity (or lack thereof) crucial to understanding the parable, and it is not surprising that these same themes are present in Borges' work. Borges attributes neutrality to the setting while painting the humans inside the space in a vicious light, highlighting that the destructive force in his world is not the architecture, but the people. Bearing Billings' theory amongst others in mind, it becomes clear that Borges' work aims to elucidate how human anxieties surrounding the meaning of life have the capacity to divide and bring out the worst in people.

**Jake Palmieri**

## **Black, White, and the Gray Space in Between: Analyzing *Citizen's* New Take on the Lyric**

*I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.*  
—Zora Neale Hurston

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* was released in 2014, a time of turmoil. The Zimmerman Trial had just resulted in a ruling that dashed hopes of justice for Black Americans: "not guilty." *Citizen* tells this story and many more, focusing on blatant acts of injustice and on microaggressions, the subtle, invisible touch of racism. Some scholars argue that *Citizen* should be read as traditional poetry; however, I contend that in doing so we become

blind to the deeper meaning of the work. While *Citizen* masquerades as a lyric, in reality it is much more: a unique blend of poetry, social commentary, and art all used to highlight Black American narratives. *Citizen* is a “hybrid lyric” and deserves to be read as such. In my paper, I use Critical Race Theory and “lyric hybridity” to argue against a “traditional lyric” analysis of Rankine’s writing, emphasizing the importance of a layered reading. I believe *Citizen* transcends the boundaries of the lyric, pulling both subject and audience together into one body to experience what it is like to be Black in white America—truly making the work an “American Lyric.”

**Grace Roeshot**

**The Search for Sublime Permanence in Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse***

In *To The Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf presents time as a simultaneously malleable and abstract concept. By abruptly dragging readers from one time period to another, Woolf suggests that time passes without explanation or regard for others. The first part of the novel chronicles a seven-hour dinner party while part two jumps forward ten years. While this novel is often analyzed through a feminist lens or discussed in relation to time or sublimity, the impact of time on this novel’s sublime aspects are sometimes ignored. Sublime experience occurs when an individual has an encounter which produces paradoxical feelings of temporary overwhelm, transcendence, contentment, and terror. Scholarly dialogue has not adequately addressed characters’ concepts of permanence. However, in my essay, I assert that one’s desire for permanence stems from an admiration for nature’s infinitude. I illustrate this point by connecting previous criticism on the gothic and apocalyptic sublime with modernism. Touching on nature’s vastness and the sublime’s inaccessibility, this essay analyzes how characters strive toward transcendence and acceptance through art, academics, or social standing. As Woolf’s novel shows, the sublime can exalt and enlighten, with individual experience varying widely.

**Zara Noor Shabbeer**

**Talking Pigs and Magical Girls:**

**The Perks and Drawbacks of Tropes and Clichés in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse***

Presented with the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film in 2019, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* is a unique superhero film that combines common comic book tropes with diverse characters, a heartwarming coming-of-age storyline, and brilliant comedic aspects. What makes *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* stand out, however, is its revolutionary use of animation. The mingling of various spider-people from different dimensions grants animators creative liberty in terms of unique character design and world development. Spider-Ham (John Mulaney), Spider-Noir (Nicholas Cage), and Peni Parker (Kimiko Glenn) come from universes that are drastically different from Miles’ world, and each of their animated backgrounds is designed with excruciating detail. While it is true that these three minor characters are uniquely developed, the fact remains that, aside from humor and varying animation styles, these characters serve to contribute little in terms of progressing the plot or messages of the movie. The characters’ limited backstories and confinement to their respective genres establish them as mere aesthetic ornaments to the story and contrast with the movie’s intended message of diversity and inclusion, despite serving to better allow the film to be appreciated as an independent work of art.

# Relationship Status

Moderated by Professor Paul Lerner  
Department of History

Wednesday, April 21  
6:30 p.m. - 7:45 p.m. PDT

**Veda Bansal**

## **Together Yet Apart: The Impact of Distance on Relationships in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West***

The commonality of experiences unites and distances individuals in mysterious ways. In Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia's 'common' refugee journey influences them differently because of their distinct core identities, so much so that when they are abroad, the symbolic distance between them is irreparable despite their physical proximity. My paper draws on work in the fields of literary studies and political theory to examine how the commonality of the migrant experience unites and distances Saeed and Nadia from each other, and their place of origin. By investigating the entwining concepts of space, time, distance, and change, this paper will explore Saeed's and Nadia's relationship with their own selves, each other, and the world around them. In this paper, I argue that the commonality of the past experiences that Saeed and Nadia shared back home kept them together, while the dissimilarity of their migrant experience drew them apart.

**Amelia Mackey**

## **The Fine Line Between "Pandemic" and "Dystopic": E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops"**

Reliance on technology during the COVID-19 pandemic—to communicate, make our livings, get our educations, and societally function—has peaked. The network that connects us has somewhat normalized the abnormal, but still creates indisputable consequences. E. M. Forster's novella "The Machine Stops" reflects our pandemic lives, featuring a world where mankind relies perpetually on the interconnecting "Machine" when communicating with each other. Modern pandemic society must treat Forster's work as a cautionary tale against standardizing mediated interpersonal interactions. Scholars such as Ana Zimmerman, W. J. Morgan, and Marcia Bundy Seabury have expressed concern that nuance and prioritization gets left behind when online communication dominates our lives. When technological function bleeds over into harmful indulgence, nuance and poor prioritization undercut our ability to communicate and connect effectively with each other. Vashti, loyal to Forster's mechanical society, cannot fully understand her son because her dependence on technology means she has never truly heard him. We cannot allow ourselves to permit that as an acceptable standard.

**Mila Mathias**

## **Rooted in Race: Interracial Relationship Ambivalence in Octavia Butler's *Kindred***

*One of the women from the agency told me with typical slave-market candor  
that [Kevin] and I were the 'weirdest-looking couple' she had ever seen.  
—Dana, Kindred*

When *Kindred's* Black protagonist, Dana, spontaneously hurtles through space and time, the sole constant in her life is her white husband, Kevin. During their journeys between 1970s Los Angeles and the Antebellum South, Dana and Kevin maintain a superficially healthy marriage. But my paper digs deeper into their relationship, where I uncover the tensions and communicative barriers between Dana and her caring but often oblivious husband. These barriers undermine their ability to share a meaningful connection. However, when they time-travel to the plantation together, the underlying resentment in their relationship bubbles to the surface. Suddenly, Dana must experience firsthand her ancestors' traumatic experiences which give her ambivalent feelings towards her husband. My paper argues that through Dana's confrontation with her ancestral roots, she and Kevin must face the lingering implications of past events on their present marriage. And ultimately, they emerge from the past with a unique shared perspective on the world, thereby launching their journey of healing.



Caitlin Noel

**A Bland End to a Vibrant Character:  
Art and Death Propagating the Sublime in *To the Lighthouse***

A kaleidoscope of color, enlightenment, revelations, visions, and journeys—such is the path to the sublime that Virginia Woolf paints within the pages of *To the Lighthouse*. Prior critics have focused on the ebb and flow of the relationship between the two protagonists, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. However, these studies do not provide a comprehensive critique of this relationship; nor do they address the integrality of art surrounding Mrs. Ramsay's death. For such a prominent and lively character, her passing takes up a single cavalier sentence. Yet, the loss of Mrs. Ramsay as a maternal figure causes Lily to seek out and create her own color. I argue that the bland nature of Mrs. Ramsay's death—herself a very colorful character—propagates the journey of Lily's character, allowing her to experience the sublime. Through each stroke on the canvas, Lily moves closer to her enlightening vision, and the story grows closer to its end. As the connection between color and the sublime evolves in the novel, the reader is left to consider life outside its pages: how can you discover your own color?

Grace M. Wilkerson

**Creating Heaven on Earth:  
The Cult-Like and Utopian in The Oneida Community**

*This quotidian example of the utopian can be glimpsed in utopian bonds,  
affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment.*

—José Muñoz

In popular culture, cults are a source of fear, anxiety, and fascination. But for their members, cults offer community and belonging. The magnetism of cults is understandable; they draw people in with offers of a greater life purpose. In fact, many cults advertise themselves as utopia. The Oneida Community was an example of this cult-utopia intersection. The Christian group was started in 1848 by John Humphrey Noyes. In many ways, it was an attempted utopia, especially for Noyes himself. He attempted to restructure society through “complex marriage,” a practice where all group members were married to every other member. This alternative perspective on marriage was only one of many controversial practices surrounding relationships and sex. The group also instituted numerous constrictive rules for intimate partners, which drew the community further away from utopia. In scholarly conversation, the group is often dismissed as a cult. But there is room for more nuanced analysis about how utopian aspirations led to cult-like structures, as well as how the terms cult and utopia interact within the community's history. By building upon previous scholarship, I argue that the Oneida Community was a cult both because of and in spite of its initially utopian ideas.

# What Dreams Are Made Of

Wednesday, April 21  
6:30 p.m. - 7:45 p.m. PDT

Moderated by Professor Anthony Kemp  
Department of English

**Javi Casanova**

## **Fante's Fantasy: Chasing the American Dream in *Ask the Dust***

John Fante's *Ask the Dust* offers a veiled critique of the legitimacy of the American dream. Critics have largely examined why the protagonist, Arturo Bandini, experiences so much pain and turmoil throughout the course of the novel despite his dedication to his craft. Building upon previous criticism, this paper takes a deep dive into the inner mechanisms of Bandini's psyche while concurrently analyzing the mind behind him—Fante. The novel's author seems so apathetic to the possibility of achieving the American dream that his writing can sometimes come off as derogatory. However, when close reading Bandini's tortured state, *Ask the Dust* emerges as both a satire of the American dream and a broader commentary on the fated idealism of the immigrant experience. Ultimately, Bandini's presence reveals internal fears about learning to deal with failure in a space designed to produce only success.

**Ian Connolly**

## **Child of an Incomplete Apocalypse: The Post-Prophet via Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower***

The post-prophet does not predict the fate of humanity; she writes it. Prophets inherit the revelations which spell out the ultimate fate of humanity. But what happens when a prophet is born and lives amongst the apocalypse? The veil has already lifted, and the fate of humanity is apparent at the end of historical time. In Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, the protagonist Lauren Olamina fills the niche of the post-apocalyptic prophet. Because of the imminent form of humanity's end, Lauren's revelations focus on a human fate beyond the apocalypse, centered around the simultaneously entropic and constructive belief that "God is Change." Through examinations of the theology of Earthseed, Lauren's religion, and analyzes of the apocalyptic nature of Lauren's revelations, I argue that Lauren, as a post-prophet, re-examines and renews what Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, called "metanarratives," or foundational stories that broadly outline patterns in human history. Lauren's acts as a prophet do not embrace Lyotard's and the postmodernists' "incredulity toward metanarratives," and instead embrace metanarratives as she works to reform human destiny after the apocalypse. The post-prophet can help us to imagine a way out of and through the end of the world.

**Darik de Jong**

## **Solving the City Problem: What EPCOT Teaches Us about Designing Utopias**

Utopia: the perfect society in which everyone is happy, healthy, and wise. No such society exists, but that has not stopped us from attempting to build one. EPCOT was an elaborate plan to build a city from scratch inside Disney World that would revolutionize how we lived, traveled, and worked. It was encompassed by a 'Green Belt' filled with trees, flowers, and animals, and got rid of the car-centric design of contemporary cities in favor of a vast network of public transport systems powered by clean energy—all in 1966. Jane Jacobs, in her book *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, condemned Walt Disney's design as borderline dystopian because it was lost in theoretical ideals, claiming his city would never work because it failed to address the needs of real people. Ultimately Jacobs is right: the needs of the average citizens are more important than the ideals of just one person, no matter how benevolent they are. However, the innovative spirit and appetite for fantastical ideas which EPCOT epitomized must be reincorporated into our current city-planning framework. If successful, we can escape the bureaucratic bickering over short-term improvements and instead make substantial strides towards better cities—towards utopias.

**Alexander Fulmer**

**Paradise Lost:  
The Impossibility of Black Spiritual Utopia in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

The hypothetical “what if?”s of history can be as compelling to analyze as the actual historical events themselves. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* unearths one of these lost, hypothetical visions of America by creating the Clearing: a Black, non-Christian spiritual utopia theologically designed to subvert racism. However, this outdoor spiritual gathering place is ultimately deemed impossible due to the dominion of the very entity it was created to oppose: White supremacy. While scholars have analyzed Morrison's discussion of utopia in *Beloved*, they have not discussed the greater value of the utopian Clearing in conversation with its distinctly anti-racist, non-Christian theology, especially in contrast to the Sweet Home plantation, the Clearing's White Christian dystopian foil. This paper argues, despite the novel's condemnation of utopianism for its exclusionary nature, that the utopian Clearing's anti-racist theology still has value to *Beloved*'s Black community after its destruction. Morrison tells the stories of these hypothetical Black futures not only to contemplate the racism that enforce their impossibility but also to galvanize her readers to create a world where these dreams can become reality.

**Princess Anita Ilo**

**The Beauty in Private Lives:  
Perspectives of California in *Yokohama*, *California* and *The Day of the Locust***

*Yokohama, California* by Toshio Mori paints a very different picture of California than that of other prominent authors of the 1930s. Through the lens of Japanese Americans, Mori shows the simple beauty of life achieved despite mass media. The characters are confronted with racism in many forms but remain strong in their communities. These characters' lives in their simple beauty conflict with visions of California proliferated by many 1930s authors. Many authors like Nathaniel West wrote stories of the horrors of life in Los Angeles, California, or Hollywood, some of which conflate the three. Many academics were too happy to follow in their footsteps, giving merits to their claims about life in California, citing mass culture as the reason for these characters' experiences and asserting that no one can escape from its grasp. Consequently, people living outside California read these texts and believe everyone in California lives a certain way. The consequence of these perspectives' proliferation is the obscurement of everyday people's experiences in California who have no interest in Hollywood's glamour. In this paper, I will use Californians' simple beauty as depicted in Mori's collection to break down the widespread but incorrect vision of life in California.

# Where Does It Hurt?

Wednesday, April 21  
6:30 p.m. - 7:45 p.m. PDT

Moderated by Professor William Deverell

Department of History, Spatial Sciences Institute, and Environmental Studies Program

**Avery Longdon**

## **Ethics and Justifications in Omelas: Why the Child's Suffering is Inexcusable**

How can one judge an act as ethical or unethical? Can justifications excuse unethical behavior? Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" explores complex ideals of sacrifice and suffering for a greater good. In Le Guin's short story, a single, powerless child suffers to provide happiness for everyone else in the city of Omelas. The people of Omelas react in one of two ways: they either attempt to explain away the child's suffering, or they desert the child and leave Omelas. The article "Self-Serving Justifications: Doing Wrong and Feeling Moral," reveals that these two responses of the citizens of Omelas are typically seen in people who engage in unethical behavior. Thus, this paper will argue that when viewing Omelas through the lens of Shalvi's article, the child's suffering leans toward unethical on the spectrum of ethics. Moreover, these weak justifications performed by the citizens of Omelas provide neither meaning nor agency to the child's plight. The concept that the child's suffering has no true purpose and that the child has no decision making power is corroborated by scholars Jerre Collins, Bruce Brandt, and Alexander Hirsch. This paper will demonstrate how these two circumstances reinforce the notion that the child's suffering is solidly unethical on the spectrum of ethics. Ultimately, this paper will prove that even if behavior provides for a greater good—or, in Le Guin's story, an entire utopia—it can still be unethical.

**Kate McQuarrie**

## **Internalized Homophobia: A Product of Violent Masculinity in Justin Torres's *We the Animals***

Accepting identity is more than just acknowledging cultural heritage or sexual orientation: a person must allow themselves to truly be a person, despite departure from perceived social norms. Someone can understand who they are from a distanced, outside perspective without being capable of accepting themselves as a valid human being. In Justin Torres's debut novel *We the Animals*, the unnamed narrator struggles to accept his identity as queer and Latinx. I will argue that his inability to embrace his identity stems from the toxic masculine presence of his father which perpetuates the use of violence in response to any differential from the expected. For the narrator, this internalized violence prevents him from understanding his Latinx identity and eventually from accepting his queer one. I will explore the idea of how a queer identity relates to an ethnic one, and how the two work in tandem to make acceptance even more difficult for the narrator. The masculinity that the narrator's father instills in him causes his violent reaction to being confronted by his identity and leaves him unable to find self-acceptance.

**John C. Pace**

## **The Metaphysicality of Pain and Suffering in E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops": A Bridge to Healthcare Disparity?**

Where do we draw the line between biological pain (a response to stimuli and a diagnostic tool) and metaphysical pain? Pain and suffering extend far beyond their biological and literal denotations. As a metaphysical concept—that which extends beyond its sensible meaning—pain and suffering are used to define the human condition in E.M. Forster's 1909 novella, "The Machine Stops." The human race is forced to retreat from the now toxic air to deep within the earth. They become completely dependent on the machine. When this machine fails, the occupants are ejected into reality: pain and suffering. In this light, and in the opinions of Silvana Caporaletti and Rob Worrall, perceived (metaphysical) pain is distinctive of the human condition. Putting the "human" at stake, do varying levels of pain suggest different levels of humanity? They do. Founded fundamentally on the basis of pain mitigation, the modern health care system is riddled with racial stereotypes about pain, suggesting a potential bridge between health care disparity and metaphysical pain. Labeled as the next global health crisis by cautionary research, racial disparities in health care need to be addressed in an increasingly polarized climate.

Daisy Qiu

**It's Time For Jeanie Bueller's Day Off:  
The Not-So-Secret Sexism in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off***

Everyone knows the legendary story of Ferris Bueller from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*: he manages to skip school, head into the city with best friends, pretends to be famous, and drives an expensive car, all in a day's time. Often overlooked, however, is his sister Jeanie. Portrayed as the prototypical "angry big sister," she steams with fury as Ferris not only executes all his plans seamlessly, but also becomes a god to his peers and community members. Nevertheless, in trying to catch her brother, Jeanie is not trying to put him to shame; instead, she is chasing equality and is the only one who sees past his privilege. As such, I will argue that although Ferris is the main character of the movie, Jeanie is the most complex character. I will also reveal how both the film and critical conversation dismiss her as a simple character while blindly praising Ferris, which sheds light on the sexism and white male privilege underlying these portrayals. Lastly, I will expand upon Ien Ang's theories of familiarity in film to explain exactly why Jeanie's complexity is so easily overlooked. Because ultimately, Jeanie's character deserves justice.

Ella Grace Rodriguez

**Do You Believe in Ghosts?:  
Unveiling the Disguise of Love as Memory and Trauma in *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid**

Do you believe in ghosts? *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid is not traditionally labeled as a novel with ghosts. Rather, it is usually categorized as a love story. Yet, in a lot of peculiar ways, the novel is a tale about ghosts, both physical and emotional manifestations of past events that cause protagonists Saeed and Nadia to question their everyday lives and behaviors with one another. This paper argues that the love the pair shares is a compilation of the ghosts that both individually and collectively haunt Saeed and Nadia in *Exit West* rather than love itself. To further understand the claim that Saeed and Nadia never were in love, the lens of hauntology is used; a critical lens that explores concepts of space and time less so from an ontological perspective and more so in a lucid, non-chronological order. Through this lens, we can begin to discover that the very foundation of Saeed and Nadia's relationship is less about what they have in common, but what they experienced in common; this, above all things, is the largest contributor toward understanding trauma-induced intimate relationships in *Exit West* and beyond.





**USC**Dornsife

Dana and David Dornsife  
College of Letters, Arts and Sciences