

CONSTELLATIONS



TWENTY-NINTH ANNUAL
THEMATIC OPTION RESEARCH CONFERENCE
APRIL 22 AND 23, 2026

The universe is under no obligation to make sense to you.

—Neil deGrasse Tyson

For my part I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream.

—Vincent Van Gogh

**We look up and we hope the stars look down, we pray that there may be stars for us to follow,
stars moving across the heavens and leading us to our destiny, but it's only our vanity.**

**We look at the galaxy and fall in love, but the universe cares less about us than we do about it,
and the stars stay in their courses however much we may wish upon them to do otherwise.**

It's true that if you watch the sky-wheel turn for a while you'll see a meteor fall, flame, and die.

That's not a star worth following; it's just an unlucky rock. Our fates are here on earth. There are no guiding stars.

—Salman Rushdie

**The stars we are given. The constellations we make. That is to say, stars exist in the cosmos,
but constellations are the imaginary lines we draw between them, the readings we give the sky, the stories we tell.**

—Rebecca Solnit

**Any legend, any creature, any symbol we ever stumble on,
already exists in a vast cosmic reservoir where archetypes wait.**

—Guillermo del Toro

When we lose our myths we lose our place in the universe.

—Madeleine L'Engle

**To live on a day-to-day basis is insufficient for human beings; we need to transcend,
transport, escape; we need meaning, understanding, and explanation; we need to see over-all patterns in our lives.**

**We need hope, the sense of a future. And we need freedom (or, at least, the illusion of freedom)
to get beyond ourselves, whether with telescopes and microscopes and our ever-burgeoning technology,
or in states of mind that allow us to travel to other worlds, to rise above our immediate surroundings.**

—Oliver Sacks

We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another, unevenly.

**We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present,
and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made of layers, cells, constellations.**

—Anaïs Nin

Identity is an assemblage of constellations.

—Anna Deavere Smith

**A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe; a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself,
his thoughts, and his feelings as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of consciousness.**

—Albert Einstein

**To write is perhaps to bring this assemblage of the unconscious to the light of day, to select the whispering voices,
to gather the tribes and secret idioms from which I extract something I call my Self.**

—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

Trust that which gives you meaning and accept it as your guide.

—Carl Jung

The cosmos is within us. We're made of star-stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.

—Carl Sagan

I don't believe in astrology; I'm a Sagittarius and we're skeptical.

—Arthur C. Clarke

Constellations

29th Annual Thematic Option Research Conference

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

The Thematic Option conference provides an opportunity for undergraduate students to enrich their academic experience by publicly presenting their ideas and research. In response to a general call for papers, Thematic Option students developed topics under this year's theme, Constellations to be presented as part of a panel. Each panel is composed of up to six students, with a faculty member serving as the panel's chair and respondent. A question-and-answer session follows the presentation of papers in each panel. Topics are reflective of students' various disciplines and interests and focus on issues ranging from politics to popular culture. Possible themes include (in)significance; the cosmos; the void; the fixed and the changing; reliability and repetition; order and chaos; unity and disparity; parts and the whole; interconnection; entanglement; systems, networks, and webs; pattern-seeking, meaning-making, and storytelling; myths and legends; heroes and monsters; archetypes; symbols; synchronicity; fate; astrology and the zodiac; observation, perception, and vantage; coordinates, navigation, and mapping; distance; longing; remembrance; heritage; diaspora; signal and noise; tracing and traces; overlay; topology; metadata; satellites; the head vs. the heart; or your own unique interpretation.

keynote speaker

Professor James S. Bullock

Dean of Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences

Anna H. Bing Dean's Chair

Department of Physics & Astronomy

Professor Bullock is the 23rd dean of the Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. He holds the Anna H. Bing Dean's Chair and a faculty appointment in the Department of Physics and Astronomy. In his research, Professor Bullock employs super-computer simulations and analytic models to understand how galaxies and their constituent dark matter halos have formed and evolved over billions of years of cosmic time. By analyzing data collected using the James Webb Space Telescope, the Hubble Space Telescope, and

other ground-based and space-based telescopes, he works to understand how galaxies, including the Milky Way and its Local Group of galaxies, emerged from the primordial universe. Professor Bullock is currently Chair of the Space Telescope Institute Council, which oversees the management of STScI, the home of the James Webb Space Telescope and other missions. Passionate about science outreach, he appears regularly on the Science Channel's *How the Universe Works*. Under Professor Bullock's leadership, USC Dornsife will focus on setting the global standard for a reinvigorated Liberal Arts in the 21st century—one where students and faculty couple deep, unbiased, and foundational knowledge with practical near-term skills to improve lives, shape the future, and provide answers to the most pressing problems of our age.

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

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Caution! Men at Work

Moderated by Professor Alexandre Roberts
Department of Classics and Van Hunnick Department of History

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

Owen Kreger-Stickles

Home as a Prison:

How Glory's Simultaneous Roles of Mother and Daughter Suffocate Her in Marilynne Robinson's *Home*

Oh yes, yes! Glory will take care of that!
—Marilynne Robinson, *Home*

When does home become a prison? When the dusty walls become suffocating? When one is forced into restrictive gender roles? In *Home*, Marilynne Robinson explores Glory Boughton's position as both a daughter and a "mother" to her dying father and troubled older brother, Jack. While scholars such as Susan Petit argue that the pain that Glory feels stems from the grief she still holds for Jack's deceased daughter, I believe that this assessment of the text misunderstands the deeper nature of her suffering. Drawing on the work of Laura E. Tanner, who examines the claustrophobic narrative structure of *Home*, and Judith Pildes, who explores the roles of mothers and daughters in American society, I argue that Glory's pain is unique because it comes from being forced to play two stereotypically feminine roles at once. Glory has to be an innocent daughter, but without a father to care for her, while simultaneously a caring mother, but without children of her own to nurture. The combination of these two roles exacerbates the pain Glory feels as a woman under the patriarchal norms of the 1950s.

Farrah McQueen

"Alone with God":

Reverence, Fanaticism, and the Religious Sublime in *Sunshine*

The mind is a fickle thing, and obsession is a powerful drug—the way you handle it can be the difference between sacrificing yourself to save your crew, or killing them in cold blood. Such is the case in Danny Boyle's 2007 sci-fi film *Sunshine*, where two astronauts who are similarly obsessed with the Sun's incomprehensible power ultimately reach two very different fates by the film's end. While scholars have analyzed the film through the lens of either religion or the sublime, I instead approach the film through the combination of both. I argue that the religious sublime unearths the reason behind this divergence in the characters' paths. Additionally, the analysis of religious sublime moments in the film reveals that the two characters reflect contrasting sides to how theorists have previously understood the religious sublime, and thus offer a new perspective on the film as a critique of religious extremism. This paper approaches the polarized and politicized subject of religion from the lens of a fictional encounter with a divinized cosmic force, asking the question: How does *Sunshine's* portrayal of duality in the religious sublime reveal the point at which reverence becomes fanaticism?

Reina Mitra

The Onion or the Wife:

Masculine Glory and Redemption in Marc Forster's *The Kite Runner*

If you could choose between the validation of glory or the emotional depth of your community, which would you choose? *The Kite Runner* has remained an acclaimed film, highlighting the strength and adversity of the Afghani people. Marc Forster's adaptation of Amir, the novel's main protagonist, portrays the consequences of patriarchy and its effects on young men. As Amir grows, he slowly takes steps towards salvation and redemption by escaping the toxic masculine ideals of his environment. I argue that only through humility and vulnerability (both breaking the boundaries of standardized masculinity) can one find forgiveness. I analyze how the socioeconomic hierarchy of Afghanistan set the foundations for oppression and how this impacts gender expression. Additionally, I examine research inspired by Yang Chun and Krithika Srivastava's analysis of Amir's journey in relation to cultural values. Through my work, I am able to add to the conversation of the rising "manosphere" ideology that permeates male youth culture. As Amir slowly disconnects from the traditional vision of masculinity, Forster reminds us of the true values behind it: compassion and the strength to face one's mistakes.

Chimdinma Nwamgbie

**When She Says No:
Close Reading Agency and Identity in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian***

At many dinner tables, meat is king. Many dishes contain some animal protein, whether it be beef, chicken, or lamb. Rejecting such a powerful cultural food staple is what Han Kang explores in her 2007 novel *The Vegetarian*. Through the novel, Kang uses her protagonist Yeong-hye's rejection of meat to explore how women who make decisions regarding their agency are often met with violence at the hands of men. Violence manifests itself in various ways throughout *The Vegetarian*, including force-feeding, exploitation, and sexual assault. Yeong-hye's resistance to societal norms fails to grant her the agency and freedom she desires; on the contrary, it backfires and causes her even more harm. The violence Yeong-hye experiences at the hands of men is a direct result of her attempts to reclaim her agency and define herself in *The Vegetarian*, which clashes with the image of passivity men have of her. I wish to highlight how Kang illustrates that Yeong-hye's acts of female agency enacted against meat, a symbol of patriarchal ideology, provoke resistance from the patriarchy through abuse and domination. I argue, therefore, that *The Vegetarian* holds up a mirror to our society, showing how female agency and violence are deeply intertwined. *The Vegetarian* also exposes the ways patriarchal systems punish women who attempt to assert control over their bodies and challenge imposed norms.

Kindal Reddic

I Helped My Husband Cover Up a Murder

What would you do if the person you loved confessed to something unforgivable? Would you run, or would you stay? And more unsettlingly, how would you justify it to yourself? In *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, a seemingly romantic marriage slowly reveals itself to be something far more complex, as love, fear, and power become dangerously intertwined. Told through the perspective of a deeply insecure and reflective narrator, the novel draws readers into a version of events that feels convincing, even natural, until we begin to question what is being emphasized, and what is being deliberately overlooked? This paper examines how the narrator constructs a false center of fear, redirecting attention away from the reality of violence and toward an imagined threat. In doing so, it analyzes the narrator's deceptiveness, showing how her selective storytelling, shaped by insecurity, manipulates perception and persuades both herself and the reader to accept and even defend what would otherwise be considered unacceptable.

Grace Rose

**Audience on Trial:
Reader Complicity and Ethical Judgment in *Lolita***

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury...
—Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

From its opening lines, readers of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* are placed inside the jury box. The novel opens with narrator Humbert Humbert addressing his audience as jurors to his impending trial—yet, we're presented the case by Humbert himself. From page one, readers are handed a role that flatters their impartiality while quietly destroying it. How do we judge a man when everything we know about him comes from his own mouth? This paper contends that reader complicity in *Lolita* is not a side effect of Nabokov's craft but its central mechanism. Through Humbert's courtroom posturing, his aestheticized erasure of Dolores Haze into "Lolita," and his habit of confessing his own manipulation, the novel intentionally implicates its audience in the very fantasy it builds. I will argue that Nabokov, in this regard, weaponizes readerly pleasure itself—turning the instinct to appreciate against the responsibility to judge. By the time the verdict is due, the jury has already been compromised.

A Crash of Symbols

Moderated by Professor David Albertson
Schools of Religion and Philosophy

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

Nysa Jain

Man and Beast: Animal Instinct and Learned Humanity in Angela Carter's *Stories*

There is a beast in man that should be exercised, not exorcised.
—Anton Szandor LaVey

From feral children raised by wolves to humans transforming into tigers, Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* is a poignant collection of reimagined fairy tales. Carter questions the boundary between moral restraint and animal instinct, proposing that what we call civilization is a negotiated balance. Stories like "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon," "The Tiger's Bride," and "Wolf-Alice" explore themes of human nature, sexuality, and transformation. The concept of the transformation of animals into humans and vice versa was explored long before Carter; however, I believe she puts forth a unique perspective in her stories, in how she recharacterises the meaning of transformation from animals to humans. I analyze how she redefines transformation: not as a movement away from animality toward civilized humanity, but as a process that is ambiguous and variable. Thus, she reveals that animal instinct and sexuality is a part of human identity rather than opposed to it. Ultimately, my paper delves into the collection's suggestion that identity is fluid, emphasizing the potential for change, self-discovery, and reinvention.

Lily Nagel

"With a Gun Barrel Between Your Teeth, You Speak Only in Vowels": The Mouth as a Site of Power in *Fight Club*

David Fincher's *Fight Club* opens with the visual of a loaded gun pointing down the Narrator's throat and his voice-over stating, "With a gun barrel between your teeth, you speak only in vowels." Fincher could have put the gun to his temple. He didn't. That single directorial choice, and what it reveals about how the film locates power in the control of speech, is what twenty-five years of *Fight Club* scholarship has failed to explain. Existing scholarship on *Fight Club* reads the film's violence as a substitute for communication among emasculated men, but critics have consistently missed the most striking site of dominance in the film: the Narrator's mouth. From the opening scene to the final act, where the Narrator shoots himself through the cheek to silence Tyler Durden, *Fight Club* returns obsessively to the mouth as a central site of domination. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "authorized language" and Elaine Scarry's theory that pain destroys language, this paper argues that *Fight Club* locates domination in the control of speech, both physically and symbolically. Mouth trauma, broken teeth, and bloody lips dominate the film's cinematography, telling the story of a power struggle mediated through narrative authority. *Fight Club* depicts dominance as the ability to control speech, making the Narrator's mouth the central site where authority is seized, lost, and violently reclaimed.

Kylie Nguyen

***Tampopo*: Judging the Book by Its Cover**

In our everyday life, we use judgment as a way of navigating from the casual to the professional. In the movie *Tampopo*, director Juzo Itami has built a world of contrast between the characters and their appearances. Specifically, Itami offers viewers an image of a homeless man—dressed in rags, face covered in dirt—who happens to be an expert in fine dining. In *Tampopo*, this homeless man is introduced as a Sensei of a gourmet who is helping the film's title character develop the perfect ramen broth. Therefore, by choosing to portray a homeless man as an expert in cuisine, Itami is challenging the audience's perceptions about judgment and appearance. While one may argue that these juxtapositions between the characters and their appearances are purely an element of comedy, I argue that this contrast is Itami's commentary on how judgment should not be the only way of navigating life.

Shivali Sharma

**Write Her Self:
Erotic Form and *Écriture Féminine* in *Água Viva***

Instead of finding the beauty in every moment, what if we found the erotic? Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva* challenges conventional ideas of eroticism and narrative by replacing typical linear structure with rhythm, sensation, and repetition. This paper argues that Lispector transforms eroticism from something represented within a story into something enacted through writing itself. Rather than coming about through events or relationships, desire in *Água Viva* emerges through the "instant-now," a continuous present that is shaped by breath, pulse, and bodily intensity. Through a fragmented, stream-of-consciousness style, Lispector's language resists traditional narrative logic, instead producing meaning through tangible embodied experience. In this manner, *Água Viva* offers a different model of authorship aligned with the *écriture féminine* of Hélène Cixous, one in which writing becomes an extension of the body itself, and erotic energy becomes the structure of the text. Lispector begs the question: what if the point is not to climax, but simply to feel?

Gavin Yoon

**"Forget It Jake, It's Chinatown":
Space, History, and Injustice in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown***

The places that people inhabit are not passive backdrops but active reflections of the social, political, and economic forces that shape them. The setting in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* is no exception. Although previous scholars have drawn connections between the film's narrative and the Los Angeles Owens Valley water dispute, not many scholars have actually tied the historical background of the film's title, *Chinatown*, to the narrative of the film. In this paper, I will examine Edward Soja's socio-spatial dialectic that explains how social systems are embedded in spatial structure, the historical context of injustice Chinese immigrants experienced in Los Angeles' Chinatown, and Jake's repeated failure in Chinatown within the film's narrative. By applying Edward Soja's socio-spatial dialectic to both the historical and narrative dimensions of the film, it illuminates how Chinatown functions not merely as a setting, but as a symbol where systemic injustice converges spatially, historically, and narratively, demonstrating how places can enforce injustice in a way that renders individual action powerless. Ultimately, this paper contends that Chinatown as a space encapsulates the film's central argument that systemic injustice is not simply conceptual or abstract but embedded in spaces people inhabit, leaving lasting scars on the lived experience of those trapped within.

Language Arts

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

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

Mason Bloom

The Weight of Words in “The Conspirators”

If you want to rise to power, sheathe your sword, because language is your strongest weapon. It certainly was for the “Others” in Yuri Herrera’s science-fiction short story “The Conspirators.” After arriving on the same planet as the “Ones,” the Others assert dominance by appropriating the Ones’ language, reinventing it, and teaching it back to them. This forces the Ones to the periphery of society as they struggle to find identity and self-worth without control over language as a cultural marker. While scholars cite the Others’ use of physical force when explaining their dominance, I propose their control over language as the central contributor to power. I will draw on social identity and ethnolinguistic theory to explain how language enables the Others to create an us-versus-them dynamic, raise social boundaries, and cement a social hierarchy oppressive towards the Ones. Language creates and defines the reality we live in, and the Others weaponizing it shows how language actively enables, structures, and cements power.

Alexa Grace Curley

Who Controls the Past Controls the Future: A Comparative Study of Authority and Language in *1984* and Religious Fundamentalism

Humans become less likely to question their beliefs and freedoms when they lack the language to fully articulate their thoughts. While dystopian and seemingly far-fetched, the restrictions on language and speech present in George Orwell’s *1984* reflect themselves in the strict dogma of certain fundamentalist Christian communities, specifically within the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Winston, the main protagonist of *1984*, has all of his rights controlled and his personal sovereignty stripped from him, as the Party, the main governmental force in Oceania, manages his every thought and action. While Orwell offers a broad critique of the dangers of totalitarian control, I argue that the focus on the manipulation of language and truth extends much further into modern-day religious structures. Dehumanization and isolation function as forms of psychological control that target individuals’ thoughts and belief systems, making them more vulnerable to manipulation and therefore reinforcing systems of complete obedience, while discouraging individuality. Who controls the truth when history itself is constantly changing? And what happens when individuals lack the language to challenge it?

Tram Pham

Twisted Tongues That Don’t Translate: Language, Belonging, and Diasporic Return in Maya Angelou’s *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*

There is an ache in loving a language you cannot speak. Maya Angelou arrives in 1960s Ghana, drawn to its people, its rhythms, its culture, but the moment she opens her mouth, her American accent and her inability to speak local Ghanaian languages marks her out as someone who does not quite fit. In *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Angelou is searching for belonging, but language stands in her way. So what decides whether someone truly feels at home in a diasporic return? Drawing on theories from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Frantz Fanon, I argue that Angelou uses language, especially accent and dialogue, to position herself as an outsider, while challenging George Lamming’s belief that English can become a tool of self-definition. Her speech exposes our illusions of home and redefines it as a matter that transcends origin, complicating the romantic narrative of return and asking what it really takes to belong. A twisted tongue cannot find its way home.

Litzy Saucedo

**The Effect of Minimizing Child Migrants
to Criminals Through Juan Pablo Villalobos' *The Other Side***

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.

—Warsan Shire, “Home”

Children do not risk their lives atop a train known as La Bestia in pursuit of crime. The conditions that necessitate the perilous journeys of child refugees to the U.S.-Mexico border are commonly obscured by a discourse that renders child migrants comprehensible only through legality. In *The Other Side*, Juan Pablo Villalobos sheds a revealing light on the often overlooked components of these minors' experiences as refugees. The fragmented, multi-voiced testimonial narratives of these journeys north make it difficult to classify their movement as intentional wrongdoing or disruption, opposing a widespread perspective within immigration discourse. This dynamic becomes especially visible in detention centers, where the language used against migrant youth influences their treatment and perceived humanity, echoing scholars who describe the ineffective overlap between criminal and immigration law. Over time, labels like “illegals” and “aliens” begin to change how migrants view and understand their own rights, leading them to self-exclude from opportunities and avoid seeking help. Paired with scholarship on migration and testimonial literature, Villalobos' work in *The Other Side* demonstrates that legality narrows what can be understood about migrant youth, limiting their recognition as vulnerable individuals and reinforcing narratives that justify their marginalization.

Jazmine Wilson Bigornia

**Restricted by Writing:
Exploring Language and Death in Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva***

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

The Stream of Life. *Eau vive. Água Viva*. Whatever you want to call it, in whichever language you can read it, *Água Viva* by Clarice Lispector is undoubtedly a confusing text. The book follows a narrator, seemingly Lispector herself, writing for an unnamed narratee, whom she refers to as “you.” Lispector mainly writes about her thoughts on love, time, and death. She does not include a linear narrative or action-driven plot, making *Água Viva* read much more like a diary than a published text. In my presentation, my primary concern is the varying interpretations of the narratee across different translations of *Água Viva* and Lispector's failed attempts to understand death in her writing. Through these issues, the limitations of written language, including its (in)ability to transmit understanding of complex topics from authors to readers, will become clear. Despite these limitations, the continued conversation on *Água Viva* underscores the enduring value of written language in fostering human connection, even amid confusion or language barriers.

To the Best of Their Ability

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

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

Ella Donahue

Drawn to Deceive: Redefining the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way.
—Jessica Rabbit, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*

Don't judge a book by its cover. Does this adage apply to animation? This paper reexamines the Evil Queen from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, who is often defined as a femme fatale based on her visual design. While Disney animators were inspired by Hollywood's femme fatale archetype, I argue that the Queen's narrative choices break her away from this classification. Although she fits the visual mold of a femme fatale, her actions fit more closely with the definition of a trickster. Building on the work of literary scholar Lewis Hyde, particularly his definition of a trickster in "Slipping the Trap of Appetite," I show how the Queen uses appetite to lure her victim, shape-shifts, and relies on intelligence instead of brute force. Reassessing the Evil Queen as a trickster not only challenges traditional interpretations of her character but also raises a broader question: why are female villains so quickly categorized as seductresses instead of being given credit for their intelligence and trickery?

Anchal Makkad

Sehmat's Duality: A Mere Social Stunt or a Strategic Ploy in *Raazi*

Imagine you are a college student who faints at the sight of blood, and your father calls you home to emotionally manipulate you into getting married for espionage. That is exactly what the 20-year-old protagonist of *Raazi* goes through during the height of the 1971 India-Pakistan War. Sehmat, despite lacking training, manages to handle her two identities (a wife and a spy) without letting one interfere with the other. Her duality, along with her transformation from an innocent civilian to a vicious spy, shows that espionage doesn't have to be an internal conflict. It is easy to misunderstand Sehmat's vigilant consciousness in the movie as emotional conflict between her duties, picking one side over the other. By doing so, we undermine Sehmat's capabilities and deem her incapable of differentiating between priorities. If we continue to look at the cinematic depiction of female espionage as a social attempt to promote feminism rather than being respected as a strategic ploy, we risk demeaning powerful movies to mere social stunts.

Emily Molina

"The Depths in Her Nature": The Journey to Agency in *Iola Leroy*

Marriages throughout the 19th century often represented a means of survival, especially for women. Marriage was often presented as the sole chance for a better future, economically, socially and legally, even when the cost was one's identity. *Iola Leroy* by E.W. Harper showed it was possible to have both. Iola, a young biracial, white-passing woman in the post-bellum era, is faced with that very struggle. Determined for her marriage to be more than a survival tactic, Iola focuses on understanding and finding her identity prior to accepting a union. Even when faced with the seemingly 'perfect' proposal, Iola rejects it and chooses to remain true to her identity and emotions. Through Iola's marriage plot, we observe the transformation of the marriage plot from social and financial fulfillment into marriage as an act of self-determination and agency. By analyzing Iola's marriage proposals and their outcomes, it becomes clear that Iola's marriage decisions redefine fulfillment through the preservation of identity and values. *Iola Leroy* is both a romantic marriage plot and bildungsroman, allowing for the further exploration of how racial identity in the post-bellum period shifts marriage plots beyond the choice of either love or stability.

Fatima Samim

**Consumerism and Stardom:
The Momentum Behind Humbert's Relationships in *Lolita***

You are a follower of trends; you are a white sheep. At least a fraction of your identity is constructed by some social standard, even if it is no longer prevalent in today's time. When you reach the intersection of your desires and morality, which way do you go? Or are the two—desire and morality—bilateral? Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* questions our collective appreciation of glitz and glamour by confronting it with Humbert's pedophilic tendencies. The fabrication of his crimes misleads Lolita's (and admittedly, our) attitudes toward enamoration. Lolita's inclination to Humbert is indicative of an American-specific phenomenon: consumerism and lust for opulence—anything that grants membership to a high-classed society. Lolita is branded as a commodity, proving that consumerism may be reciprocated. The spectrum of Humbert's eye for aestheticism differs, though. Instead, he invests in Lolita's contemporary nature. Modern capitalism and stardom establish a foundation for Humbert's illicit actions. Is *Lolita* a battle of aesthetics: American pop culture vs. European exclusivity? How has Humbert gained a dual status of both the perpetrator of aesthetics and the consumer of them? If the modern day reader of *Lolita* finds themselves smitten simply by Humbert's lofty language, what is there to say that such fictional enchantments are incapable of traversing into reality? What stops you from being the next victim, reader?

Ruoer “Kelly” Su

**Rescue, Redemption, and Remembrance:
Seeking Salvation by Saving the Children in *The Kite Runner***

There are a lot of children in Afghanistan, but little childhood.
—Khaled Hosseini

My paper foregrounds the role of children in relation to the theme of redemption in Marc Forster's film adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. Examining the way *The Kite Runner* utilizes child characters to expose tribal wars, totalitarian regimes, and sexual violence towards young males in Afghanistan, I turn around the analytical telescope by approaching Hassan and Sohrab's characters from a different direction instead of viewing them as only victims of traumatic events. Extrapolating upon the scholarship of Syed Sami Raza and Roshni C., I argue that children, namely Hassan and Sohrab, carry the site of redemption. Thus, I explore the possibility that victimhood is not the only attribute that characterizes Hassan and Sohrab within the film's moral framework. Through memory, revisitation, and action, I posit that *The Kite Runner* demonstrates redemption as a continuous and active process that works within the role of children in order to pursue a better future.

United We Stand, Divided We Fall

Moderated by Professor William Handley
Department of English

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

Kai Xin Tiffany Chen

Dinner, Dialogue, and the Death of the Internet: Mediated Experience and Staying “Awake” in *My Dinner with Andre*

What if the internet didn't die, but simply stopped being human? In 1981, long before the rise of digital culture, Louis Malle's *My Dinner with Andre* stages a conversation that uncannily anticipates contemporary anxieties about the internet, specifically artificial intelligence and mediated experience. Malle's film follows a dinner between two friends whose disagreement over comfort, routine, and awareness becomes a broader inquiry into how modern life shapes perception. In the film, Andre claims that everyday existence produces a state of being “asleep,” while Wally defends his relative comfort as a necessary response to an already “tough” world. In this way, Malle's film presents mediation as something that both structures and obscures lived experience. This presentation places *My Dinner with Andre* in dialogue with Dead Internet Theory, which describes an online environment that is “dead” because it is increasingly defined by automated content and the absence of human-made interaction. I argue that Malle's film complicates the assumption that mediation necessarily erases human presence, instead raising questions about how awareness, participation, and emotional engagement operate within mediated systems. If mediation is unavoidable, how do we remain “awake” when it is always what's being served up?

Emerson Cutler

Branded with the Mark of Cain: Religion and Sympathy in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

What would it take for you to sympathize with a murderer? Scholars have analyzed the ways in which director Anthony Minghella constructs audience sympathy for a murderer throughout his film, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Scholars mainly focus on the cinematic techniques that Minghella employs in order to place the audience in close proximity with the protagonist, Tom Ripley, ultimately developing connection with his character. This paper, however, explores how Minghella utilizes religious music and biblical comparisons to evoke empathy for Tom. Minghella makes crucial changes to Tom's character in the film adaptation, aligning his journey with the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. This contrasts with Tom's portrayal in the novel, as his murders equate his character to the evil of Satan. By invoking this comparison, Minghella frames Tom's fate as a tragic consequence of his psychological “mark of Cain,” shaped by his crimes and his identity as a gay man. Tom's sexual orientation is largely not accepted during this time and ostracizes him from society, further developing his comparison to Cain. This paper demonstrates how Tom's “mark of Cain” ultimately evokes empathy from the audience for his marginalized identity.

Quixote Fuerte

God Hates Art: The Divergence of Religion and Corporeal Divinity in *Blankets*

Didn't you hear, *God hates art!* What's more, the pursuit of art is a Christian danger! Staring at nude models all day can pipeline people into sin, such as porn addiction and “homosexuality!” At least, these notions are strongly held within the protagonist's community in Craig Thompson's *Blankets*. But this begs the question: does God truly hate art? I believe this confusion comes from a divorce of ideals between religion and Corporeal Divinity, the natural divine affinity that the naked body possesses. By using Plotinus' essay “On Beauty” alongside scholarship by the likes of Stewart M. Hoover, there is a compelling argument to be made about what can make art so religiously controversial. Through critical analysis, we will find what created these notions in Craig's community, what the true significance of Corporeal Divinity is within religion, and whether or not God would truly hate art.

Anthony Jiang

The Price of Western Assimilation in *The Kite Runner*

What are the costs one is willing to pay for survival? A friendship, a protector, or one's own cultural identity? Director Marc Forster's film *The Kite Runner* follows protagonist Amir's quiet assimilation into a Western value system long before he ever leaves Afghanistan, as he trades loyalty not just for individual achievement but more importantly for his father, Baba's, recognition. The cost of this assimilation is Hassan, Amir's most loyal companion, whom Amir betrays and abandons in pursuit of a Westernized identity which ultimately proves hollow. Yet what Amir gains is not survival but emptiness, a borrowed self that collapses the moment it is tested. Drawing on close film analysis and scholarship I seek to examine how Amir's betrayal of Hassan serves as more than a personal moral failure. I argue that it reflects a broader pattern of Western assimilation in which the most loyal relationships are sacrificed for status and self-preservation, tracing this pattern to historical events such as the forced removal of Native Americans and Afghanistan's own failed pursuit of a Western republican identity. The cost of assimilation, this paper concludes, is not survival. It is the irreversible loss of everything that once made survival worth fighting for.

Jenna Paidosh

**Are You American Enough?:
The Struggle for Dual Identity in *When the Emperor Was Divine***

The United States' infamous national ideals have often acted as a double-edged sword. The patriotic fever to make our country strong and united often leads to the complete opposite, as a highly polarized society begins to question if those unlike them are "true" Americans. Julie Otsuka's novel *When the Emperor Was Divine* follows a Japanese American family that is unjustly put into an incarceration camp due to the racial discrimination following the 1941 events of Pearl Harbor. Most scholars argue that among the four nameless protagonists, the boy symbolizes the many Japanese Americans of the time whose cultural identity was erased in the pressure to Americanize. However, these scholars overlook the ways in which the boy fights to maintain his dual identity as seen by his acts of rebellion during the book. I argue that the boy is the only family member that not only fights to defend his Japanese heritage, as seen by his acts of rebellion, but also manages to maintain his dual identity. The boy's struggles with his identity makes one wonder: Do we truly decide who we are or are we forever burdened by the labels placed upon us?

Megan Tsosie

**Hungry for Power:
Detached from Reality**

"It is easier to look away than look closer." What if we find violence entertaining, not because we are distant to it, but because we've been trained to see it that way? This presentation will answer that question through *The Hunger Games*, a dystopian story, often reduced to a critique of power. But if you look closer, something far more unsettling appears: How does excessive wealth shape people's morality differently, while living in the same systems? What has been missing from these conversations, though, is how "affluenza" factors into these changes, and how it can look different from person to person. The term is most often defined by broken empathy, overconsumption, and narcissism. I argue that through a close reading of the characters Effie, Cinna, and Haymitch, this definition shows how affluenza is not a single moral collapse. It is a complex spectrum of detachment created through a close proximity to power. This matters because it shows that affluenza is not about having too much, but about how people learn to live with the horrible actions that made "having too much" possible.

Audience Participation

Moderated by Professor Béatrice Mousli
Department of French & Italian

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

Atrina Abbasi

Uncovering Madness in Crime: How Psychiatric Depth in *Psycho* Creates Anticipatory Suspense

Conventionally, our perception of events can take turns and be changed based on information we receive. These changes generate surprises, which are developed through multiple versions of one story. In Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Psycho*, the utilization of psychiatry is seen to create surprise, defined as the creation of several renditions. Based on our interaction with the scenes throughout the movie, where the audience is constantly identifying the female figure living with a character who struggles with split personality, we are unsure how the plot will lay out. This is implemented through the use of the disorder as a cinematic tool to build surprise as a theoretical framework. Previous scholars have touched on inaccuracies and gaps in this work in the transparency of psychoanalytic ideas. In my paper, I will touch on the issues regarding taking an approach toward personality analysis of the text, but rather the theatrical importance of psychiatric detail within this movie. Furthermore, I will examine how psychological tools in a thriller allow for tension and anticipatory reaction, leading to various interpretations and lingering engagement with the plot until the final revelation, which is used for entertainment purposes rather than clarifying the character's inner conflict.

Kavya Benush

You Are Fleabag: Namelessness and the "You-Protagonist" in *Fleabag*

What's in a name?
—William Shakespeare

We know her secrets, her shame, and her sorrow, but not her name. Phoebe Waller-Bridge's television series *Fleabag* follows the complex emotional reality of a nameless woman navigating grief, guilt, and self-loathing after the death of her best friend. Scholars of literature assert that character names are essential, creating an emotional connection with viewers by establishing a character's authenticity and responsibility. *Fleabag* challenges this assertion through the unnamed protagonist, creating a heightened emotional connection with viewers. Film scholar Luis Rocha Antunes argues that through direct address, *Fleabag* creates a vicarious, participatory experience, exchanging emotional information with the viewer. Similarly, English scholar Denise Wong argues that *Fleabag* assumes the role of the "you-protagonist," using the second person pronoun "you" to address both herself and the viewer. Though these scholars both recognize the participatory viewer in *Fleabag*, they fail to acknowledge the role of the unnamed protagonist. I argue that because *Fleabag* is unnamed, Waller-Bridge creates a reflection of the viewer, using direct address and the "you-protagonist" to blur the boundary between character and viewer. As a result of her namelessness, viewers forge a stronger emotional bond to *Fleabag* than that of a named protagonist, internalizing empathy for both *Fleabag*, and themselves.

Jashan Dalal

Dream Kitchens, True Comfort: The Unreal in Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*

Reading can transport us out of the real world, away from despair or even just a bad day. That's exactly why Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* was an instant global hit upon its 1993 English translation. But oddly enough, the novella doesn't avoid the heaviness of reality with sunshine and rainbows; instead, it encapsulates them head-on in a youthful, relatable, and charming story. *Kitchen* follows protagonist Mikage through the loss of both her blood- and chosen-family in a story of struggle that somehow doesn't read as heavily as you'd expect. The existing academic discourse falls short of identifying just how Yoshimoto's writing creates the comforting sentiment that holds up across international translations and has touched so many audiences. I argue that *Kitchen's* international success owes

to two scenes that suspend reality within the plot and provide readers with a diversion from our own realities. These dreamy interludes are essential to counterbalancing the novella's heaviness, and, as I will explain, comprise a style of storytelling that transcends language barriers.

Nia Desai

Fragmented Testimony and the Ethics of Witnessing in *The Other Side*

What if the real failure of migrant narratives is not that they are misunderstood, but that they are expected to be understood at all? In *The Other Side*, Juan Pablo Villalobos resists the demand that testimony should clarify, humanize, or resolve. Instead, he presents fragmented, disjointed voices that interrupt one another, refuse linear progression, and deny the reader a stable point of connection. These narratives do not invite empathy in any straightforward way; they frustrate it. Abrupt shifts, missing context, and unresolved moments force readers to sit with confusion rather than move past it. In this way, the text challenges the conventions of humanitarian storytelling, which often rely on coherence and emotional accessibility to produce an ethical response. Villalobos instead suggests that such expectations may themselves be part of the problem. By withholding clarity and disrupting narrative comfort, *The Other Side* repositions ethical engagement as something more demanding, something that emerges not from understanding, but from confronting its limits.

Aaron Figueroa

**From Experience to Spectacle:
The Consumed Sublime in *Free Solo***

In 1967 Guy Debord anticipated the current state of modern society when he wrote, "Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation". Debord's idea sits at the heart of the documentary *Free Solo*, as Alex Honnold's historic free-solo is transformed into a mediated spectacle. While scholarship has discussed the film's mediation and ethics, it fails to recognize the sublimities under tension, those being Honnold's lived Kantian sublime—conquering fear through rational mastery—and the Burkean sublime where terror is felt safely through a screen. In the end this divergence creates a new experience for the viewer: the consumed sublime, a mediated experience of awe distorted from an individual's reality and fed to a passive viewer. Ultimately, *Free Solo* reflects a broader cultural shift where awe is no longer experienced through personal encounters, rather it is packaged, uploaded, and consumed in a single click.

Crafting Selves

Moderated by Professor Chris Finley
Department of American Studies & Ethnicity

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

Nicole Sim Baik

The Analyst and the Vessel in Lee Chang-Rae's *Native Speaker*

The purpose of a vessel is to carry, never to create. In Lee Chang-rae's *Native Speaker*, protagonist Henry Park is a spy who has perfected the art of emptiness. While scholars frequently analyze the novel through a strictly immigrant lens, I argue that Henry's displacement is psychological rather than racial, deeply rooted in the Korean practice of *nunchi* (눈치), or the art of gauging moods to maintain social harmony. By perfecting this art, Henry erases himself from his own narrative, becoming a master spy but a failing husband. Throughout the novel, Henry collects a series of identities: "Parky" to coworkers, "Byung-ho" to his father, and the vacant "____ analyst" to his wife. The final label represents his success at performing *nunchi* but embodies the ultimate erasure of his self-autonomy. Through this lens of *nunchi*, I will explore how the social art causes Henry to stay in a spectator state that renders him an emotional foreigner in his own life. What good is a vessel if it cracks under the pressure of its own emptiness?

Katie Berger

Mind Over Matter: The Transgender Sublime in *The Matrix*

Who you are on the inside doesn't always match how you look on the outside. Your physical body carries expectations and limits. In *The Matrix* by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, Neo separates from these physical limits while in the computer program, claiming his autonomy and defeating the agents trying to kill him. Since the directors came out as transgender, this moment has been analyzed as the moment when someone fully accepts their transgender identity. This overwhelmingly powerful experience is reminiscent of the sublime, but there's no scholarly discussion connecting them. Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez describes the distinction between mind and body in her version of the "lesbian sublime," but the sublime moment she describes is a unification of the two. I propose that the final fight in *The Matrix* illustrates a transgender sublime, where the mind becomes fully independent from the body. Acceptance of who you truly are in your mind becomes empowerment.

Amaris Chen

***Tampopo* and Japan's Westernization: The Fear of Mortality**

What makes Japan so obsessed with imitating the West, even at the risk of abandoning its traditional cultures? This is the exact question Itami Juzo seeks to answer in his 1985 movie *Tampopo*. In the wave of Westernization, modern Japan is depicted in the movie through the transformation of a run-down ramen shop, whose owner, Tampopo, embarks on a journey to master ramen-making by imitating other ramen masters. In the end, however, her learning produces a bizarre hybrid: a French-style restaurant that serves the perfect Japanese ramen. This confusing product prompts the audience to think not only about the Japanese fascination with Western culture, but also about the deeper anxiety that drives it. Interestingly, Itami inserts various vignettes into the main storyline. Although they include unrelated characters and themes, they all address mortality through either explicit or implicit means. Therefore, I argue in my essay that *Tampopo* considers the fear of mortality as the root cause of Japan's craving for Westernization. Like food consumption, foreign culture is seen as being ingested and digested, ultimately converting into energy for rejuvenation. Still, Itami seems to prefer a more intimate approach towards death rather than evading it.

Liam Gottlieb

**Playing the Name Game:
Humbert's Self-Perception in *Lolita***

Humbert the Humble. Humbert the Wounded Spider. Humbert the Terrible, Humbert the Small, Humbert the Hoarse. These are just a handful of names that Humbert Humbert (H.H.), the pedophile protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, uses to describe himself. Written in the first person, *Lolita* describes the life journey of H.H., who is a European living in the United States with an obsession for little girls. Critics have long focused on Dolores (H.H.'s primary victim) and how she is perceived by Humbert. I want to steer that conversation in a new direction by answering: What does Humbert think of himself? Does he truly feel the emotions manifested on the page? Through tracking and analyzing the peculiar names H.H. uses to refer to himself, I want to demonstrate that they essentially reveal his inner world, offering truth and clarity to the reader about Humbert's psyche. What they cannot be used for, however, is forming conclusions about external reality in *Lolita*. Ultimately, I argue that Nabokov's murky distortion between reality and fantasies challenges readers to think carefully about how we self-evaluate and how we are influenced by masterful prose.

Aditi Kingaonkar

**The Eternal Double-Take:
Analyzing the Use of the Uncanny in DuMaurier's *Rebecca***

There is something terrible and deeply fascinating about mimics of humanity. We find them even when they are not there; we see malice in forests, ghouls in shadows, and no amount of reality can ground the fear that the mind chooses to birth. It is an incredible skill to purposefully evoke such a specific, unsettling feeling, and yet it has been perfectly achieved in the first chapter of DuMaurier's *Rebecca*, a masterpiece of Gothic literature. Its unusual retelling of the narrator's dream leaves the reader questioning the humanity of the narrator, the animacy of the forest, and the laws of the universe in which it exists. These inconsistencies evoke the Freudian uncanny, the unsettled fear of that which is almost right, but still indescribably abnormal. I argue that this introduction's success is due to the various ways its prose evokes the Freudian uncanny, leaving us with a logically baseless, persistent unsettlement. By exploring the various tools DuMaurier utilizes to evoke various facets of the uncanny, this paper examines how to both avoid and trigger the subtler fears of the human heart.

Akshay Ram Vadlamani

**Descended but Not From:
Heritage, Return, and the Limits of Belonging in Maya Angelou's *Ghana***

In 1962, Maya Angelou moved to Ghana with a community of Black American expatriates who believed they were going home. Ghana had been independent since 1957 under Kwame Nkrumah, who welcomed the African diaspora as part of his Pan-Africanist vision, and for many Black Americans, segregation made staying in the United States feel untenable. Angelou's memoir *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* documents the four years she spent in Accra, where Ghanaians consistently identified the expatriates not as returning kin but as Americans. Most criticism treats this recognition gap as the memoir's conclusion: the homecoming failed. In this paper, I argue that the memoir's real work begins after that failure, as Angelou stops seeking recognition from Ghana and starts figuring out what identity looks like when neither Africa nor America fits cleanly. Through close readings of the Dunkwa passing scene, the March on Washington flag episode, and the Keta market encounter, and drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of identity as production and Avtar Brah's concept of "homing desire," I show that the memoir reframes diasporic heritage not as something recoverable through return but as something carried forward, reshaped by the historical conditions of Black American life. On a larger scale, Angelou's refusal to narrate either homecoming or defeat challenges the assumption that identity has a destination, suggesting instead that the distance between what you inherit and what a place will recognize in you is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be lived with.

In the Margins

Moderated by Professor David Treuer
Department of English

Wednesday, April 22
7:30 p.m. – 8:45 p.m.
North

Cana Cai

Perpetual Waiting: Liminality in *When the Emperor was Divine*

Mostly, though, they waited. For the mail. For the news. For the bells. For one day to be over and the next day to begin.
—Julie Otsuka, *When the Emperor was Divine*

Imagine a punishment defined not by pain, but by uncertainty. One example is being on death row, but not knowing the day of your execution. Each morning, you wake with a pounding heart, wondering if it will be your last. Every second is filled with dread as seconds compound into days, and days drag into years. Here, the excruciating uncertainty of waiting is worse than death itself. While not faced with the death penalty, Japanese Americans in World War II internment camps faced a similar pain as they waited endlessly—to be freed, to reunite with their loved ones, to be given an explanation for their imprisonment. Past literature often focuses on identity liminality, where Japanese Americans exist between being an American and being an “alien enemy.” In this paper, I argue that the real psychological pain endured as a detainee lies beyond an identity crisis of being labeled an alien enemy, but rather a permanent temporariness imposed by spatial and temporal liminality. The consequences range from mild boredom to a distorted perception of time, ultimately leading to an erosion of purpose.

Eureka Gao

Dream as Autonomous Stage in *Paprika*

What can you tell from other’s dreams? Why are dreams important? In Satoshi Kon’s film *Paprika*, a revolutionary device known as the “DC-Mini” allows therapists to physically enter and record their patients’ dreams. When the devices are stolen, the boundaries between dreams and reality begin to collapse, and the collective unconscious spills over into the waking world. Scholar Chris Perkins has characterized the ambiguous relationship between dream and reality as “ontological flatness”: the notion that dreams, reality, and the cinematic medium possess equal power. While this framework effectively captures Kon’s rejection of hierarchical order, this presentation argues that it fails to fully account for the dream world’s most radical attribute: its fundamental autonomy. By fundamental autonomy, I refer to the dream world’s capacity to break free from the constraints of reality, to exercise an independent will, and to actively embrace those identities and desires that have been repressed by waking life. In this case, the dream world depicted in *Paprika* ceases to be a mere shadow of reality; instead, it emerges as an autonomous stage, a space where repressed desires find expression and ultimately discover the possibility of redemption for reality itself.

Anno Gauley

Beyond the Binary: Life, Death, and the Contradictory Sublime in Hayao Miyazaki’s *Princess Mononoke*

We admire nature’s beauty but recoil from its brutality. We fear death but overlook life as meaningless without it. We often forget that one cannot exist without the other. In reality, nature exists as an ambiguous amalgamation of these contradictions, indifferent to the categories we impose upon it. In the 1997 animated film *Princess Mononoke*, director Hayao Miyazaki presents a world where such contradictions are unavoidable both visually and philosophically. While many scholars interpret the film as an ecological critique on the conflict between industrialization and environmental preservation, this paper argues that such readings oversimplify Miyazaki’s broader philosophical message that contradiction itself serves as a fundamental condition of reality. This philosophy is best demonstrated by the figure of the Deer God, Shishigami, an entity that simultaneously embodies life and death, beauty and terror. Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa’s “borderlands” theory of the “Coatlicue state,” Shishigami can be recognized as a manifestation of an in-between space where opposites coexist without resolution. The resulting “contradictory sublime” overwhelms both characters and viewers, revealing a reality that is ambiguous and indifferent to human values. Ultimately, *Princess Mononoke* suggests harmony is not achieved by resolving contradictions, but by learning to coexist within them.

Cadence Mekdes Richey

**A Weightless Home:
Maya Angelou's Architecture of Belonging in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes***

Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* explores the complicated topic of identity and belonging for African Americans who find themselves in limbo between two homes: the United States, with its history of racial discrimination, and an ancestral home in Africa that doesn't always acknowledge them as returning sons and daughters. The memoir follows Angelou in the early 60s as she journeys to Ghana, when many African Americans hoped to contribute to Africa's movement toward unification. Upon arrival, it's evident Angelou views Africa as an abstract idea that will resolve her sense of displacement rather than a place, falling prey to Gregory D. Smithers' critique of "Pan-African Identity." Furthermore, her venture exposes how she must unite her conflicting African and American identities to formulate a secure sense of self, confirming scholar Kelly-Ann Allen's theory that belonging is a subjective experience attainable through connection. However, contrary to popular readings that the text is primarily about disappointment, I argue that Angelou's time in Ghana is a transitional rebirth involving disillusionment, synthesis, and reconciliation. This process provides Angelou clarity in her identity but complicates her idea of home, replacing it with a multidimensional belonging underscored by her newfound security in both her identities.

Ananya Vuppala

Female Remembrance and Resistance in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

In the fight against women's inequality, have we mistaken sympathy for progress? In the age of modern media, the scholarship surrounding Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* continues to portray women as victims of patriarchy rather than recognizing their resistance within every oppressive structure. As a result, no matter what role women occupy in society, the role of resistance remains constant. By failing to recognize this aspect of their identity, *Sea of Poppies* constructs women as passive victims in the eyes of the reader. Current scholarship emphasizes how women are silenced or controlled within patriarchal and caste-based systems; however, this paper argues that these frameworks risk unintentionally emphasizing women's weakness rather than their resistance. Through a close analysis of Deeti's progression from internal awareness to strategic action to ideological resistance, I demonstrate how agency can emerge within oppressive systems through deliberate and embodied acts. By engaging with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the construction of Third World women as uniformly powerless and Rosalind Gill et al.'s analysis of the dismissal of women's resistance, this paper highlights how contemporary discourse continues to reproduce narratives of passivity. If we don't recognize these forms of resistance, we allow history to define women as passive victims rather than active agents.

Chloe Yao

**Chinese or American:
The Symbolic Meaning of Language Proficiency in *Chemistry***

What does it feel like to be a non-native in all languages? The Chinese-American narrator in Weike Wang's novel *Chemistry* undergoes this struggle in language and identity. On one hand, she expertly translates a variety of Chinese proverbs and explains their cultural meaning to the reader, presenting herself as the cultural authority. However, she is almost "aphasiac" in Chinese. Her incompetence in reading, writing, and communicating in Chinese complicates the common critique in the way of reading Asian American literature. It has long been expected that Asian American authors provide exotic, ethnographic "handbooks" and present themselves as the spokesperson of their culture. By destabilizing her cultural authority through fragmented language proficiency, the narrator resists a simplified identity. This interpretation thus highlights the symbolic meaning behind her ambivalent language proficiency. I argue that it symbolizes her active navigation and negotiation of complex diasporic identity in between cultures. Reframing this interpretation, the ambivalent language proficiency becomes a strategic tool, allowing her to claim a space that is neither fully Chinese nor fully American to negotiate an in-between identity.

Places and Spaces

Moderated by Professor Lydie Moudileno

Departments of French & Italian, American Studies & Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature

Wednesday, April 22

7:30 p.m. - 8:45 p.m.

Scriptorium

Roundy Guerrero Garcia

Becoming the Bridge: The Embodiment of the Sublime in *Interstellar*

No, they didn't bring us here at all. We brought ourselves.
— Cooper, *Interstellar*

Love is often overlooked, yet is it the force that pushes an individual to rise above the self. Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* explores this idea through its narrative of a dystopian Earth where protagonist Cooper ends up in a tesseract while searching for habitable planets. Scholars like Jochen Mündlein have analyzed the tesseract as a Biblical motif to present the idea of a "transcendent Cooper." Sari Mehmet, while viewing *Interstellar* through a sublime lens, focuses on the vastness of space and how that evokes awe. Scholars have failed to combine these perspectives to interpret a "transcendent Cooper" through the lens of the sublime. I use Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideas on transcendence, like the transparent eye-ball and egotism, to define the sublime. Harry F. Dahms' perspective on social relations helps provide a logical integration of love's role in the film. I argue that Cooper's experience within the tesseract is an embodiment of the sublime, due to a self-transcendence facilitated by love. Ultimately, becoming the sublime enables Cooper to survive and save humanity from extinction. If love is a transcendent force against the unsettling aspects of life, what defines our limits?

Rasil Khotea

Shards of Patriotism: Glass, Domestic Intimacy, and the Emotional Labor of Espionage in *Raazi*

When home is expected to be a place of safety, then danger should live elsewhere. In Meghna Gulzar's *Raazi*, the opposite happens. Domestic intimacy becomes the film's battleground, and Sehmat Khan's marriage becomes the mission. Sehmat is a twenty-year-old Kashmiri Muslim college student whose father arranges her marriage into a Pakistani military family during the 1971 war so she can spy for India. Although scholars have discussed *Raazi* through gender and nationalism, they often describe Sehmat's transformation in broad terms without fully explaining how the film builds that transformation through the smallest routines of household life. I argue that *Raazi* uses domestic intimacy, including marriage, caretaking, and family ritual, as both the cover and the cost of espionage, framing patriotism as something women are asked to perform through emotional labor and sacrifice. This paper close-reads how everyday household choreography becomes surveillance, and how suspense is generated less through action than through ethics, hesitation, and guilt. I then trace a motif chain of glass, needles, and blood that begins with the early glass-shard injury scene and returns later as reversal, showing how the nation reshapes "ordinary" softness into violence and moral injury.

Katie Le

The Rooms We Cannot Leave: Home as a Structure of Oppression in *Joyland*

Contrary to popular belief, oppression does not always persist through hostility. Sometimes it lives in the most familiar place of all: inside one's home. While existing scholarship on domestic oppression has largely focused on women's experiences, much of the literature has not yet sufficiently addressed how patriarchal family structures can also constrain men. Saim Sadiq's film *Joyland* illustrates this constraint through Haider, the youngest brother in a traditional Pakistani family. By staging a spatial contrast between the home and the exterior, *Joyland* exposes how Pakistani domestic ideology functions as an affective structure that disciplines men who deviate from prescribed masculine scripts. In this discussion, I will examine how the domestic interior operates as an affective structure of oppression, a space that governs not only actions but also emotions. I will analyze how spatial arrangements within domestic spaces, such as the layout of a family home, the enclosing walls, or the positioning of bodies within a room,

establish a form of affective control that limits Haider's agency. In contrast, exterior spaces outside the home produce a temporary yet ultimately unsustainable emotional liberation for Haider, revealing how the affective structure of oppression extends beyond the domestic interior to regulate feeling even in moments of apparent escape.

Ariana G. Marchan

**Nowhere to Land:
Searching for Meaning in the Myth of California through Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays***

Year after year, thousands move to Los Angeles in search of a dream: fame, relationships, happiness. Maybe it's even why you chose USC. But what if that dream was a lie? What if California left its dream-seekers feeling empty, unresolved, adrift? You wouldn't be alone. Maria Wyeth felt it too. Critics of Joan Didion's novel *Play It As It Lays* have long examined its fragmented structure as a reflection of Maria's psychological collapse and her inability to find purpose. Many also explore the novel's engagement with broader questions about American identity and experience. But these readings miss something crucial: the significance of the Californian land itself. This presentation argues that the physical spaces Maria moves through aren't simply reflections of her deterioration; they are the cause of it. Drawing on Yi-Fu Tuan's theories of space and place, I'll show how the myth surrounding California's landscapes actively facilitates her detachment. If Maria's road leads nowhere, what does that suggest about the promise of the California dream itself?

Dieva Mulet

**"That's Our Hero Shot":
Staged Proximity as the Base of Simulation in *The Truman Show***

Tightly arranged pastel-colored buildings. Hundreds of actors dressed as civilians going through the streets. Hidden dressing rooms. Studio spotlights. And a giant sphere centering it all. No, this isn't a description of Disney's Epcot, but of the 1998 film *The Truman Show's* Seahaven, the simulation city and television set where Truman's life is internationally broadcasted, except he's unaware of this. It's true that Seahaven's construction as a simulation and its effect on Truman has been widely discussed amongst scholars, but this paper looks at it through the lens of staged physical proximity and design. How does the broadcast intentionally use proximity to maintain close control of Truman's life, social relationships, and emotional connections? Even more significant, what effects does this proximity have in the international impact of the show, including the various parasocial relationships Truman isn't even aware of such as the millions of fans who watch through the screen? While referencing Guy Debord's "Society of the Spectacle," I will present Seahaven's use of spatial proximity as a paradox: both entrapping and controlling Truman's social life, but also exposing him to the outside world.

Julius Skamarack

**Embedded Identity and Its Limits:
The Undoing of Inherited Thinking Aboard the Ibis**

How much of the self is constructed, and how much do we choose? Often, it seems our identities are built by reinforcement from relationships, community, and societal structure. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* follows a motley crew of people who eventually converge on the migrant transport ship, the Ibis, pushed there in one way or another by the opium-driven British expansion. Aboard the Ibis, old hierarchies persist in the ship's structure, routines, and unequal distribution of power, and the migrants themselves unconsciously reproduce the beliefs and social codes they inherited. Yet those embedded identities are not absolute. The Ibis is geographically severed from land and, shaped by the destabilizing force of Kala Pani, it subsequently becomes a space of weakened hierarchy and unstable authority. Through close reading of the characters' actions aboard the ship, a broader message emerges in their struggle and eventual revolt. Embedded identities are powerful, but they are not immutable when survival demands that they be ignored.

Room for Improvement

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

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

Gray Chan

Ownership of the Body: Women, Sexuality, and the Sublime in Lynd Ward's *Gods' Man*

Would complete control satisfy you? Lynd Ward's groundbreaking debut, *Gods' Man*, recounts a tumultuous journey of fame through a series of wordless woodcut prints. I intend to explore *Gods' Man* through Barbara Freeman's theory of the "feminine sublime" to explain the contradictory sexual experiences in the novel. Heightened by the social environment of the urban city that encourages the domination of money, women, and fame, the artist's first sexual experience is not positive because he does not embody the respect required to reach the feminine sublime. In contrast, when he moves to the city, being in a position of mutual respect, he can reach pleasure from sexual experiences and joy from bearing witness to Earth's beauty. By analyzing these experiences, I intend to not only remedy previous research's lack of attention to women and sexuality in the novel but also shed new light on the personal empowerment and sublimity found in respecting others' autonomy.

Sean Kassounian

Passing Up Passing: Reimagining Mixed-Race Identities in *Iola Leroy*

In America, both historically and continuing in the present, the ability to pass as white has often functioned as a provisional safeguard against racialized violence, a means to secure safety and freedom. Racial mixture has been constructed as a site of taboo that delineates a path toward social exclusion or even mortal peril, entrapping mixed-race individuals within rigid racial binaries. This paradigm defines the "tragic mulatta" trope, a type of narrative that places mixed-race women into dimensions of isolation and foreclosed futures. Yet in *Iola Leroy*, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper engages with this tension through the novel's protagonist, Iola Leroy—a mixed-race woman who passes as white—and her choice to align herself with the Black community. Her story calls for a reconceptualization of mixed-race identities as an active form of resistance to structures of racial oppression and exclusion, ultimately reframing dominant perceptions of racial mixture. By examining Iola's process of identity formation as a deliberate act of racial identification, my paper will demonstrate how passing is merely a fragile, illusory form of autonomy. Through her rejection of whiteness, her story is grounded in political activism and collective justice as a means for communal advancement.

Nazira Musabaeva

An Irrationally Happy Prisoner: Manufactured Contentment in Zamyatin's *We*

Dystopian novel, oppressive government, miserable citizens. You've seen this before. Except D-503 is not miserable. He's having a great time, and he would find your concern for his well-being completely irrational. Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We* follows D-503, a loyal citizen of the One State who lives in a glass-walled apartment, has every hour of every day scheduled, and is completely isolated from nature. And yet, he is content. I argue that our view of oppression and happiness as opposites does not address an uncomfortable possibility: that freedom and happiness might actually be in conflict, and that oppression, under the right conditions, might produce something that looks unsettlingly like contentment. This is supported by the philosophy of adaptive preferences and Barry Schwartz's work on how the elimination of choice can paradoxically increase satisfaction. The One State does not suppress happiness but manufactures it by isolating its citizens from exposure to alternatives, ensuring that they do not want something different. D-503 cannot desire something he does not know exists. In doing so, this paper suggests that the One State's totalitarianism is threatened not by freedom, but by the knowledge that freedom exists.

Adam Phan

**Tree of Trauma, Injected with Tubes:
Cultural Defiance and Arboreal Aesthetic in *The Vegetarian***

Deep wrist cuts, force feeding, rape, and forced restraint. Yeong-hye traumatically experiences these incredibly violent acts in Han Kang's 2007 novel *The Vegetarian* against her will, as the reactions to her refusal of meat are incredibly hostile and tense. Yeong-hye longs for sunlight throughout the course of the book; she figuratively transforms into a tree, while in a literal sense is increasingly emaciated. Yet, when we look at these vicious experiences and meanings, there's a deep attachment to patriarchy within the culture itself. Meat is no longer just meat, and her vegetal state and desire for sunlight are not simply tied to her mental disposition. Do not mistake her passivity for conformity. I hope to answer these questions: What could meat really mean? And just how embedded is patriarchy in culture? Yeong-hye's agency as a woman is tested and forced to waver by men within *The Vegetarian*, and the answers of these relevant questions become the forefront of Yeong-hye's reason to defy male-dominated culture.

Alexia Shafran

**The Art of Performing Truth:
The Persuasive Exchange in *My Dinner with Andre***

When a film gives two characters equal time to argue opposing philosophies, is it really presenting both fairly? Louis Malle's *My Dinner with Andre* records a dinner conversation between two men: Andre Gregory, who has abandoned his career for radical spiritual experiments, and Wally Shawn, who defends the quiet pleasures of ordinary life. By the end of the film, Malle invites audiences to choose the philosophy they agree with. I argue, however, that they never had the choice and are forced to favor Wally. Because the film's central question concerns human fulfillment, I apply Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization to show that both characters pursue identical psychological goals, which means audience preference cannot be explained by the argument's content alone. Erving Goffman's theory of social performance identifies the mechanism: the film rewards one man's restraint and penalizes the other's expressiveness, turning philosophy into a performance contest whose outcome is predetermined. Ultimately, *My Dinner with Andre* does not argue for a philosophy, but makes you feel you chose one yourself.

Coding 101

Moderated by Professor Ann Marie Yasin
Departments of Art History and Classics

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

Sarah Batt

“You’re Doing Amazing, Sweetie!”:

Domestic Space and Gender Performance in Season One of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*

Few figures in modern pop culture feel as inescapable as the Kardashians. Whether you love them or love to hate them, you have likely encountered their cultural presence on some level. The family’s empire as we know it today is often traced back to the family’s hit reality TV show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, particularly its first season. Season one of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* conditions the audience to be more tolerant of many of the show’s exploitative qualities as well as gender roles, because of the show’s domestic setting inside the family home. By placing emotionally charged and revealing moments inside the household, the show encourages viewers to consume behavior that might otherwise seem invasive or uncomfortable, turning private life into a compelling spectacle precisely because it is staged within the home. In this sense, the show reflects Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, where images reshape social reality and private life before it is consumed by the audience. The transformation of a domestic space into a setting of “stage” and “performance” reveals the show’s broader gender roles and power dynamics, and ultimately whatever it is about the Kardashians that makes us completely unable to LOOK AWAY!

Audrey Chung

The Power of Innocence:

Female Agency and True Womanhood in Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence*

Would you ever baby trap your husband to prevent him from travelling abroad for an affair? With your cousin? You’ll probably never be in that scenario (hopefully). However, for May Welland, pregnancy becomes a calculated means of binding her husband, Newland Archer. In *The Age of Innocence*, directed by Martin Scorsese and adapted from Edith Wharton, what appears as passivity in May reveals a quiet but decisive force shaping her husband’s fate. I argue that May’s apparent innocence functions not as a lack of agency, but as a socially sanctioned strategy of control within Gilded Age domestic ideology. Drawing on Barbara Welter’s “Cult of True Womanhood” and critical frameworks from Deborah Knight, Beatrice Festa, and Alena Allen, I reframe May’s behavior as a legible form of power produced by the system that confines her. Rather than casting her as a manipulator, I situate her actions within a social order where etiquette, maternal authority, and emotional restraint become tools of influence. Through close readings, I show how May mobilizes purity to secure her marriage and shape the narrative’s outcome. Ultimately, her presumed innocence is not powerlessness, but a position enabling subtle, decisive control.

Camille Culbertson

Race and Radical Romance:

How *Passing*’s Clare Kendry Relates to Black Queerness

Who determines how we love? Imagine this: on the surface, two black women are joined by their shared ability to pass as straight, white women. Behind closed doors, they share a racial and sexual intimacy. Despite their mind-absorbing attachment, the degree to which each woman expresses their affinity for the other is differently governed. Why is it that in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, Clare Kendry can speak openly about her affection, while Irene Redfield’s love is only shared through whispers into the reader’s ear? The factor that primarily distinguishes Clare and Irene lies in how society perceives their race. While both women are light-skinned and Black, Irene identifies as Black socially, while Clare encourages others to view her as a white woman, also known as “passing.” My paper pays special attention to the intersectionality of race and sexuality for the characters, challenging previous scholars’ readings of Clare as simply a symbol for Irene’s repressed queerness. Instead, I argue that Clare is a unique representation of how whiteness and lesbianism interact. Love does not come as easily as Clare writing letters or complimenting hair, but instead, she and Irene must love through the confines of societal expectations.

Lily Djavaheerian

**Chihiro Against the World:
Miyazaki's Redefined Fairy Tale Heroine**

What did Belle do when sent into a strange new world? Almost nothing. In this paper, I argue that through Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, the passive princess is no more. Using feminist theory from Gilbert and Gubar and fairy tale analysis from Jack Zipes, I establish how Western heroines are often confined to passive, externally controlled roles. I then contrast this with Chihiro's character and emphasize her growth, labor, and agency throughout the film. *Spirited Away* presents its heroine, Chihiro, as much more than a female in a fairy tale. Previous scholars such as Susan Napier, Francesca Arnavas, and Mattia Bellini have focused on either the Western or Eastern aspects of fairy tales. However, I argue that Miyazaki blends Western fairy tale tropes with the Eastern narrative structure of *kishōtenketsu* (a film structure driven by contrast and development) to redefine the role of the fairy tale heroine. By presenting Chihiro as an active figure, her agency challenges the passivity associated with Western fairy tale characters. Through this structural blend, Miyazaki creates a heroine who is adaptable and not defined by beauty or passivity. Ultimately, I demonstrate how *Spirited Away* has offered a new model of a fairy tale heroine.

Ryan Garcia

**How Hair Is Used in Weike Wang's *Chemistry*
to Demonstrate a Tightrope Between Expectations and Self**

A woman who cuts her hair drastically is set to make some decisions.
—Weike Wang

Spiky hair, buzz cuts, dreads, name any hairstyle, and they all symbolize some form of self-expression or even memories. We can look at hair colors that describe emotions, and the number of ways we can describe hair can allow us to look at ourselves and reflect. How hair is used is important to the unnamed Chinese-American narrator in the 2017 novel *Chemistry* by Weike Wang. In the novel, we see the debilitating effects of the supposed truth that everything is figured out in adulthood, particularly through her failing research career and relationships with her family, partner, and, most importantly, her own self. Through these struggles, hair is a prominent feature, so much so that she cuts eight inches off her hair before dropping beakers in a lab, which sets off the rest of the events in the novel. According to various ecologists and foreign language critics, the narrator represents irritations that plague the Chinese-American minority, such as a thwarted female PhD candidate and an unhappy daughter. I argue that through the use of hair we can demonstrate that hair is a cultural device, highlighting and explaining the narrator's struggle between creating her own character and internalizing what others believe about her.

Jack Naliboff

**Understanding Genre Symbolism in *Tampopo*:
A Western Without Horses**

On the 19th century American frontier, the cowboy hat is a piece of rugged clothing worn by the ranchers and men who survived in the rough-and-tumble West. In Juzo Itami's *Tampopo*, a cowboy hat is donned by a ramen master and becomes symbolic of his stoic heroism sans ranch or saddle. It is not uncommon for the symbolic meanings of objects to change across time and contexts, but how does Itami wield such meaning in *Tampopo*? This paper contends that *Tampopo* uses the symbols of the Western as a means of characterization and narrative development in Itami's film. I bridge Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's analysis of *Tampopo* as a film depicting Japan's superficial adoption of foreign cultures with an exploration into the historic evolution of Western film symbols that allowed for their meaning to be re-shaped. Ultimately, I will argue for the significance and use of the iconography of the Western in *Tampopo* in ways that explore how cultural symbols absorb new meaning in foreign environments.

Managing Expectations

Moderated by Professor Beatrice Sanford Russell
Department of English

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

Drew Auster

Nostalgia... Helpful or Harmful?: Psychological Fragmentation in Hitchcock's *Psycho*

Nostalgia... We all experience it, but is it helpful or harmful? In Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Psycho*, Norman Bates experiences nostalgia, but why are its effects so detrimental to his mental health? Some argue he acts the way he does because of sexual repression, others argue that it is maternal domination, but no one's talked about why Norman can't let go of his past. In my paper, I use studies on nostalgia and an analysis of the parlor scene, Norman's childhood home, and Hitchcock's visual choices to argue that nostalgia becomes destructive when it operates without a present-day identity. When a person's nostalgia doesn't have a present-day identity to anchor to, like in Norman's case, it ends up consuming them. There's no present self to return to after a nostalgic episode. So how can embodying the past, rather than embracing it, harm our well-being?

Jasmine Liu

***Infernal Affairs*: Hell Is Other People...or Myself?**

When every attempt to make things right is undone by someone else's choices, whose hell are you really living in, others', or your own? In the crime thriller film *Infernal Affairs*, Lau Kin-ming, a triad member undercover as a police officer, falls into this dilemma. Social expectations pull him in opposite directions, fracturing his sense of self in the cinematic motif of the constant ringing cell phone, and the departure of his wife, Mary. As the anchors in his life fall away, Lau's identity slips out of his control. Wanting to become a "good person," he finds that every step toward redemption only entangles him more deeply in the system he hopes to escape. The film imagines hell as a closed circuit of identity and choice, in which Lau becomes both the prisoner and the warden of his own suffering. Although others construct the conditions of Lau's entrapment, he ultimately sustains his own hell through the identities he adopts to escape it. Hell is others; hell is oneself.

Daniela Morgan

Reflections of Ourselves Through Others in *The Talented Mr Ripley*

An eye is not an eye because you see it, but because it sees you.
—Antonio Machado

I am sure you have sought to feel accepted by others more than once in your life, and perhaps acted in a certain way in order to obtain that acceptance; this is not uncommon among human beings. Scholars have argued that the protagonist of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is constantly performing identity to gain social acceptance within a hierarchy of class, masculinity, and status. But what exactly motivates this behavior? To answer this question, my paper focuses on the three crime scenes in the film in which Tom murders three different people who all share something in common. I argue that these three characters act as intolerable mirrors for Tom, seeing through his performed identity—something he cannot stand—and, in response, he attempts to eliminate the mirror instead of confronting it. Ultimately, this analysis delves into how others' gaze reflects a reality that is not always what we want to see, thereby offering insight into the way we recognize ourselves and define identity.

Aedan Ramos

***Sparagamos Ōmophagia (Torn Apart and Devoured):
The Archetypal Sublime and the Failure to Embody in David Lowery's *The Green Knight****

The Lady: *But green is the color of earth, of living things, of life*

Gawain: *And of rot.*

—David Lowery, *The Green Knight*

The universe must fundamentally operate in systems of balance. Each action has its equal reaction. Risk is in proportion to reward. It is only reasonable, then, that a window into the immeasurable and transcendent sublime dwelling as close to the self as Jung's archetypes would have great consequence. Gawain, in David Lowery's *The Green Knight*, places immense importance on the idea of the knight, but utterly fails to embody that archetype. Unlike any prior discourse on the film, I propose that, through alignment with the archetypes, a sublime state can be reached, and that Gawain's failure to align with the archetype of the knight after investing so much desire in it results in his consumption by the archetypal sublime held within it. For if a man enters the starving lion's den without food, he should only expect to be torn apart and devoured.

Daisy Shu

***Haunted Motherhood:
Self-Discovery Beyond Ryōsai Kenbo in *Manazuru****

Haunted motherhood: where love is obstructed by grief and memory. In Hiromi Kawakami's *Manazuru*, a mother, Kei, drifts between the physical and spiritual worlds, leaving her relationship with her teenage daughter in shambles. At first glance, Kei appears to violate the Japanese ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother), as her emotional detachment and inattentiveness characterize her as an inadequate maternal figure. However, this paper argues that Kei's ignorance is not a matter of negligence but the manifestation of trauma from the disappearance of her husband over a decade ago. Kei makes repeated trips to a city, Manazuru, where she hopes to find her husband through the spiritual world. Through her repeated trips, Kei comes to understand how her fixation on the past has prevented her engagement with her daughter in the present. This confrontation helps Kei rediscover her love for Momo. Ultimately, *Manazuru* reimagines motherhood as an evolving process of self-recognition, rather than a fixed model like *ryōsai kenbo*.

Theo Thompson

***A Lie for Love:
Cultural Conflict and Identity in *The Farewell****

Paradoxes abound in Lulu Wang's semi-autobiographical film, *The Farewell*. Its protagonist, Billi, is "poor but sexy," Chinese yet American, and caught between telling her grandmother, Nai Nai, about her terminal cancer diagnosis or adhering to her family's decision to withhold the truth. When Billi returns to China under the guise of a family wedding, she becomes strung between two competing moral systems, rooted in her exposure to both the values of Chinese collectivism and Western individualism. While the film is commonly interpreted as a story of cultural hybridity or the blending and traversal of two distinct identities, I assert that *The Farewell* is better understood as a narrative of failed hybridization, in which Billi is not able to reconcile her conflicting cultures and emotions. Drawing on Geer Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory, somatechnics, and the concept of illness itself, I will explore how synthesis is never achieved, suggesting that hybridization most often results in a state of indefinite suspension.

Political Theater

Moderated by Professor Panivong Norindr
Department of French & Italian

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

Angela Alvarado

Rethinking the American Dream Through Young Migrant Testimonies in *The Other Side*

The American Dream promises freedom and opportunity, but for many young Central American teens crossing the U.S./Mexico border, it emerges instead as something unstable, delayed, and difficult to grasp. In *The Other Side: Stories of Central American Teen Refugees Who Dream of Crossing the Border*, Juan Pablo Villalobos questions this national myth by emphasizing the lived realities that shape migrant aspiration. Drawing on firsthand testimonies of minors who travel alone in these harrowing journeys, this paper examines how the text redefines the American Dream, not as a clear pathway to success, but as a fragile ideal continually reshaped by violence, displacement, and institutional constraint. These narratives do not simply depict hardship but reveal how even the most basic desires of safety and belonging become uncertain within the structures migrants must navigate. The United States therefore becomes less of a clear destination and more of a place where hope exists but is hard to reach.

Olivia Cha

The Fairest Lie: Political Ideology in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” So opens Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. In this world, a woman’s value is determined by a man. Fairy tales are rarely perceived as political texts. They appear magical, marketed toward children, and presumed innocent. This paper suggests otherwise. Focusing on Disney’s film and its origins from the Brothers Grimm collections, I argue that *Snow White* is not just a love story. Rather, it stands infused with conservative ideology, one that Disney’s adaptation perpetuates and expands from the Grimms’ nationalist works. The medium of this animation was not incidental. The visual aesthetic of the film makes this ideology harder to notice, allowing *Snow White* to naturalize patriarchal order for audiences under the guise of entertainment. *Snow White*’s passivity is made beautiful; the Evil Queen’s ambition is punished as monstrosity. What Disney gives children may not be solely a pure, innocent fairy tale. Rather, it is an animation with implanted beliefs on how society should be organized and how women ought to behave.

Siena Coburn

The Enemy Within: Propaganda, War, and Political Power in Orwell’s *1984*

For those of us who passed our high school history courses, it seems obvious that external threats unite a nation, increasing support for the government. Some of the highest approval ratings of U.S. presidents have followed major attacks like September 11 and Pearl Harbor, moments that are often accompanied by political rhetoric and wartime propaganda that mobilize public support. Yet in *1984*, in a society engulfed in constant war, the emotional structure of political propaganda looks vastly different. Rather than serving as the emotional centerpiece of propaganda, war remains a suspiciously quiet background condition of society. Instead, the primary focus of propaganda is internal enemies like Emmanuel Goldstein and “thought criminals”. Scholars such as John Stone have argued that perpetual war in *1984* serves to increase political control. Yet they have failed to address the significance of the emotionally-distanced nature of this war in combination with the party’s deliberate focus on internal threats. This paper argues that propaganda in *1984* departs from traditional wartime rhetoric by emphasizing fear of domestic enemies rather than external ones, revealing Orwell’s argument that regimes consolidate political power most effectively not through war but by directing fear toward internal enemies.

Carly Sharmat

**The Monster of Politics:
Uncovering the Real Monster in *Jaws***

“Da-dum... da-dum...” These two beats, when heard, strike fear in people’s hearts. This score from Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* has become a motif for fear, representing the presence of a deadly creature beneath the water. Through his directorial choices in the film, Spielberg transforms an animal acting on instinct into what seems like a monster. However, this portrayal of the shark hides the main source of responsibility for the unfolding tragedy in the town of Amity. This analysis argues that the true monster in *Jaws* is not the shark but Mayor Vaughn, whose political decisions and negligence enable the violence. By examining the film and scholarship, such as “*Jaws*, From the Shark’s Point of View,” which challenges the demonization of sharks by emphasizing human responsibility, and “The Mayor of Shark City: Political Power in *Jaws*,” which examines Mayor Vaughn’s faults and failures as a leader that allows the violence in the film to occur. By comparing the shark’s instinctive behavior with Mayor Vaughn’s choices, the analysis highlights how the mayor’s need for money and his oversight of the shark make him the real monster in *Jaws*.

Otto Zhou

**A Martyr of Art:
Mise-En-Scène in *Farewell My Concubine***

Beauty is the form of purposiveness...without the representation of a purpose.
—Immanuel Kant

Art often presents itself as a form of aesthetic ecstasy, in which the artist appears entirely devoted to the work as an end in itself, disinterested in the rest of the world. Yet Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* stages the collapse of this aesthetic ideal through the life of Cheng Dieyi, a Jingju (Peking Opera) performer whose unwavering devotion unfolds across shifting political regimes in twentieth-century China. While existing scholarship has largely interpreted Dieyi’s tragic suicide through thematic lenses of gender and sexuality, my paper argues that his decadence is more fundamentally rooted in the incompatibility between his aesthetic ideal and the changing political functions imposed upon Jingju. Through cinematic analysis of mise-en-scène—particularly the repeated staging of the same theatrical space across different regimes—I demonstrate how the film constructs the instability of artistic purpose as Jingju shifts from revered art to disrespected entertainment to an ideological symbol. Through Chen’s depiction of Dieyi’s rise and decadence, the film ultimately suggests that when art can no longer remain self-contained but is continually disrupted by the historical moment that contains it, the devoted artist is left to either compromise the work to history or, tragically, become a martyr to it.

Stabilizing Forces

Moderated by Professor Paul Lerner
Van Hunnick Department of History

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

Jack Essig

I Like Steak!: Forced Assimilation and the American Dream in *Big Night*

Immigration has become a central issue in the United States recently, but it hasn't always been like this. The U.S. has been a country founded and built on the backs of immigrants, but somewhere along the line we seem to have forgotten that. In Stanley Tucci and Campbell Scott's 1996 film *Big Night*, the immigrant struggle in the United States is illustrated by following two Italian brothers, Primo and Secondo, as they work to keep their restaurant from foreclosing. Pascal, a rival restaurant owner and fellow immigrant, runs a successful Italian-American eatery across the street. Although scholarship on *Big Night* is limited, most scholars focus on the struggles of Secondo to conform to American expectations. In my presentation, however, I will argue that Pascal is a representation of the American Dream, one that puts pressure upon Primo and Secondo to conform to American standards of Italian food. As a result, *Big Night* offers a critique of the American Dream and forced assimilation that demands immigrants to abandon their culture in order to achieve success in the so-called "land of opportunity."

Valentina Hernandez Ortiz

Freedom, Exploitation, and Repression: An Analysis of How Class Informs Sexuality in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

How does class inform the ability to live openly in one's sexuality? This question lies at the center of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, a novel that follows David, an American man in Paris who enters a passionate but ultimately destructive relationship with a poor Italian bartender, Giovanni. While the novel is often read through the lens of queerness and race, this paper argues that class is central to how sexuality is experienced. By using Sandfort's and Abur-Rahman's theories, I propose that Baldwin structures sexuality through a U-shaped class scale. At one end, wealthy men within Parisian queer spaces are able to exist openly as gay because their wealth and power protect them from social consequences. At the other end, Giovanni, though poor and vulnerable, is also able to be openly gay, but only because he has little left to lose and because his poverty renders him an object of desire for wealthier men. David, however, occupies the middle of this scale, where sexuality becomes restricted. As a middle-class American man, he has the most to lose: his reputation, his masculinity, and his access to a socially acceptable life. Ultimately, class determines whether desire becomes freedom, exploitation, or repression.

Sean Kwok

Subtle Sublimity in Cinema: Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland*'s Use of "Nowness" Through Film

There is a critical difference between the choice to seek the sublime and the need to survive outside of comfort. Traditional depictions of the sublime, particularly by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay "Nature," display a glorification of the transcendent and transformative experience of the sublime. Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* is a film that centers around protagonist Fern who lives out of her van as a modern nomad, as she navigates new life on the road amidst the 2008 financial crisis as she is forced to grow despite hardship. *Nomadland*, being very much immersed in the natural world in an Emersonian sense, depicts sublimity in a pragmatic fashion still accessible to everyday people, but stripped of choice. When this happens, what is the result? As a piece of cinema, scholar Nathaniel Dorsky argues that the use of "nowness" in a film like *Nomadland* displays human visual experience in a powerful, pure way, and *Nomadland*, as both a story about migration and the medium of film, displays the Emersonian sublime in a new light.

Ashley Lemons

**The Things We Carry:
Identity and Ordinary Objects in *When the Emperor Was Divine***

Ordinary objects often go unnoticed. But in Julia Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* these objects are shown to be sculptors and markers of identity during wartime incarceration. While critics have largely focused on displacement and environment in the novel, few studies examine how physical objects themselves influence the characters' sense of self. I will explore this gap by analyzing how material belongings function as active forces in identity formation and loss. Through close readings of key scenes (such as the packing of household items or the absence of culturally specific objects) analyzed under the lens of Jane Bennet's theories on materialism, Kwame Anthony Appiah's social identity theory, and the scholarly article "Reconceptualizing Materialism as Identity Goal Pursuits: Functions, Processes, and Consequences," I will trace how objects mediate both personal and social identity. I argue that Otsuka uses material objects to reveal identity as fragile, externally imposed, and constantly reconstructed under oppressive conditions. What can ordinary objects reveal about our true selves?

Nehir Topaloglu

**Authority Without Certainty:
Lily Briscoe's Final Vision in *To the Lighthouse***

How do you keep going when you're not sure you're right? How do you finish something that never quite comes together? At the close of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe draws a single line on her canvas and declares, "I have had my vision," a moment often read as artistic triumph and resolution. This paper challenges that reading. Against Ruby Cohn's model of art as closure and completion, I argue that Virginia Woolf redefines artistic authority as fundamentally provisional. Drawing on Natasha Moore's revaluation of Coventry Patmore's 1854 Victorian poem "The Angel in the House" and Thais Rutledge's analysis of gendered space, I show that Lily's doubt is not merely psychological but structurally produced within a culture that renders female authority legible only through domestic form. In contrast to Mrs. Ramsay's stable, socially sanctioned authority, Lily must construct meaning without validation or precedent. Randi Koppen's account of embodied artistic labor further reveals that her painting emerges through risk, repetition, and physical discipline rather than revelation or insight. In the final scene, vision is fleeting, the work remains uncertain, and authority is never secured. Woolf does not resolve instability: she composes it. Authority becomes not mastery, but the disciplined capacity to impose form on what refuses to cohere, even when that form remains fragile. By shifting the focus from resolution to containment, this reading reframes both modernist aesthetics and feminist accounts of artistic autonomy, suggesting that meaningful creation can occur without certainty or recognition.

The Stories We Tell

Moderated by Professor Stephanie Payne
The Writing Program

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

Rehaan Anjaria

Deeti's Sober Hallucinations In Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

What are the forces that drive us, that get us to change our behavior? In Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, the main character Deeti is forced to reconcile with the changing of external forces in her life. Being a religious woman, she follows the rules of her Hindu religion carefully. But as life slowly begins to get taken over by the poppy plant she is forced to harvest for the British Empire to turn into opium, the forces that guide her life begin to change. She experiences visions that replicate opium-induced hallucinations, while being completely sober. She feels compelled to help, and even fall in love with, people whom she would otherwise be forbidden to even look at. As Deeti is forced to flee her village and life she is used to, she slowly realizes that the little plant she is forced to grow on her fields controls her life more than "Saturn, or the sun and the stars." This paper will argue that what drives Deeti changes from her religion to the opium she is forced to grow. Deeti's experience forces us to question what drives us, what external forces are the reason we act the way we do, and how sometimes, they might be working against.

Yimo Chen

Beyond the Spell of Romance: The Chihiro-Haku Bond and the Heroine's Journey in Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*

Now go, and don't look back.
—Haku, *Spirited Away*

No lovers united, no heartbreaking farewell. Haku and Chihiro part ways at the end, but why does it not feel like a tragedy? Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* traces heroine Chihiro's journey through a spirit realm where she must survive a bathhouse to save her parents alongside a mysterious boy named Haku. Existing scholarship has celebrated Chihiro as an autonomous heroine yet consistently sidestepped her relationship with Haku. His presence—as a boy, a guide, a figure of authority—risks reducing her to a girl in love, a follower, a damsel, which would undermine the feminist reading. However, this paper contends the opposite: the Chihiro-Haku bond is not a weakness in the feminist reading but its strongest evidence. Through close textual and visual analysis of three key scenes, I demonstrate that Miyazaki systematically strips their bond of a heterosexual romance archetype to protect the autonomy of Chihiro as heroine. Drawing on Maureen Murdock's Heroine's Journey framework, I reframe the Chihiro-Haku bond not as romance but as mutual restoration, the act of caring for another person so deeply that both are returned to themselves. Their bond resists what I term "heteronormative gravity," redefining love not as romantic possession but as mutual restoration under the heroine's narrative. In the Hero's Journey, romantic union symbolizes completion; in the Heroine's, what symbolizes completion is each individual's wholeness. Through exchanging care, Chihiro and Haku each recover a full name and a restored identity. Their separation may read as an incomplete tragedy under the hero's narrative, but under the heroine's, it is a solid ending: two people who have grown into themselves and walk forward on their own journeys.

Claire Li

Entering the Archive: How Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* Narrates the Unrepresented

How do you tell a story that is not recognized as possible? Carmen Maria Machado confronts this question in her memoir *In the Dream House*, which recounts her experience of same-gender domestic abuse—an issue long excluded from cultural and narrative frameworks. I argue that Machado adopts a metafictional form through self-conscious storytelling to provide context for an otherwise unintelligible experience. Drawing on Yaël Schlick's work, *Metafiction*, which defines the form's self-reflexive capacity to destabilize the boundaries between reality and fiction, I analyze how Machado's fragmentation of traditional stories and use of liminal structure challenge the conventional memoir. And by applying Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, I examine her memoir's polyphony, suggesting

Machado's fragmented style enacts multiplicity and exposes the limits of language shaped by heterosexual frameworks of domestic violence. Through this experimental structure, *In the Dream House* not only documents personal experience but also constructs a narrative space where previously unacknowledged stories can become legible, ultimately raising questions about the limits of language and representation.

Samar Rahimi

**The Good Wife:
Inverted Feminism in *Rebecca***

When does independence become villainy, and submission become virtue? Despite the female-focused aspect of Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel *Rebecca*, the conflict all revolves around a man: Maxim de Winter, whose first wife was the late Rebecca, and current wife the unnamed protagonist. Initially framed as the inferior to the seemingly perfect Rebecca, the narrator gradually redefines herself, as Rebecca was revealed to be a manipulative woman to her husband. In contrast, the protagonist becomes the "good wife" as she embraces submission and devotion to Maxim. Rebecca's independence, expressed through her sexual autonomy, control over the home, and refusal to submit, should paint her in a modern feminist light. However, the narrator instead frames her as threatening to Maxim, the man of the house. By shaping the narrative to elicit sympathy for Maxim and herself, the narrator minimizes Rebecca's victimhood. This leads the narrative to enforce the patriarchy, ultimately emphasizing that female submission will be rewarded while feminist resistance will be punished.

Terry Ye

**The Theater of You:
Shame in *Fleabag* Through The Lens of Interactive Theater**

"Shameful!" "Shameless!" "You should be ashamed!" Shame is a heavy and treacherous emotion that's evocation seems to herald dissatisfaction. The word "fleabag" carries the air of filth and shame, so it's no surprise that Phoebe Waller-Bridge's dark comedy television series, *Fleabag*, speaks to the condition of shame. *Fleabag* follows the daily life of an unnamed narrator who is trying to cope with the death of her best friend, while also facing shame in her business, in her family, and from herself. The cinematic structure of *Fleabag* is, in part, a second-person narrative, specifically one with a "doubly deictic you," where the "you" is simultaneously referring to the narrator and the viewer beyond the fourth wall. Through this, I will draw a connection to interactive theater, another second-person media, which is a form of theater where the audience actively participates in the performance that is often used as an educational tool to combat shame and cultural stigma. I will argue that *Fleabag* is a pedagogical tool that guides the reader to introspect and confront their own shame, by allowing the viewer to "participate" through the overlapping of the narrator and the viewer created by the cinematography and the "doubly deictic you."

Bella Zhao

**The Identity Sublime:
Solving the Absurdity Crisis with Acceptance and Mediocrity in *Everything Everywhere All at Once***

"多情自古空余恨，好梦由来最易醒。" (Translation: He who loves regrets the most; sweet dreams are the easiest to wake up from). This Chinese poem, referenced in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, encapsulates the eternity of our regrets and the bittersweet nature of human existence. In the 2022 award-winning film directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, the Wang family confronts this very human condition through the chaos of the multiverse. While previous scholars have framed the film's central concerns around either the nihilist crisis or the metamorphic power of love, this paper argues that the film neither collapses nor transforms. Through a three-part analysis, this paper examines how the Wangs face Albert Camus's absurdity crisis, the process of resolution through what I term the "identity sublime," and the resolution itself. The identity sublime—a term to describe one's confrontation with infinite possible selfhoods—ultimately enables the Wang family to resolve the absurdity crisis through acceptance of their own mediocrity. At the film's ending, nothing has changed, yet everything feels different: transcendence, it turns out, requires nothing but the understanding to "just be a rock."

Form and Function

Moderated by Professor Christopher Muniz
The Writing Program

Thursday, April 23
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
Carnegie

Molly He

Transformation and Undoing: Linguistic Temporality in Safiya Sinclair's *Cannibal*

Even prior to reading, the title *Cannibal* evokes a particular feeling: a visceral sense of raw, exposed hunger. An image so historically tied to monstrosity with a strange demeanor and an even stranger mind, something inhumane, something too human. A word so burdened that it became the first to be undone by Safiya Sinclair. If language constructs the boundaries of the human, then to undo language is to enact a radical form of liberation. Sinclair's poetry collection, *Cannibal*, centres around the reclamation of the black female body, post-colonial identity, and the history of the Caribbean people. However, the mechanisms used to push this narrative is indeed part of the narrative itself. In this essay, I will argue that Sinclair develops a poetics of "undoing" through her deconstruction of words, such as utilisation of the "un" prefix, and her manipulation of poetic structure to create a temporal space that refuses imposed orders.

Arianna Sharifi

The Art of Listening, Starring *My Dinner with Andre*

In an era that is increasingly shaped by digital and fragmented communication, sustained, meaningful conversation has become rare and often culturally romanticized. The rise of long-form podcasts signals a counter-movement, reflecting a renewed cultural desire for extended and authentic dialogue that is often an antagonist to the generally polished nature of media. Yet this form of communication was anticipated decades earlier in Louis Malle's 1981 film *My Dinner with Andre*, which consists almost entirely of a single dinner conversation between two longtime friends and playwrights, Wallace Shawn and Andre Gregory. In the absence of visual spectacle, the film draws viewers into the act of listening itself. In this way, the two friends from somewhat different walks of life make an effort to reconnect and understand each other's views on topics ranging from the comfort of electric blankets to Andre's affinity for existentialism, doing so civilly over what becomes a 3-hour dinner. This paper argues that *My Dinner with Andre* functions as a prophetic model of long-form conversational engagement. Using Martin Buber's "I-Thou" framework, a philosophical concept regarding deep connection and mutuality, this presentation demonstrates how the film discusses authenticity and mutual presence as the foundation of meaningful dialogue and sets the stage for the rise of contemporary podcast culture.

Ezra Thiel

"Just a Trick of the Woods": Stage Adaptations of Fairy Tales

How does the musical as a genre function to uphold the traditions of oral fairy tales? Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's *Into the Woods* asks and answers this question through content and format. *Into the Woods* is a prime example of how the musical format replicates key features of oral fairy tales, such as the fact that you never see the same show twice, whether an actor messes up a line or an understudy takes the stage. This idea of live theatre mirrors how oral tales change with each teller and audience. Using fairy tale scholar Tiffin's argument on fairy tale structural codes and Jack Zipe's argument on fairytales changing through historical contexts, I argue that musicals as a genre are the most accurate adaptation of traditional fairy tale tellings. By focusing on the community aspect of musical theatre, I aim to show how in this space, fairy tales remain collectively owned and reimagined.

Cristiano Tricoci

From Private Shame to Public Redemption in *The Kite Runner*

Marc Forster's *The Kite Runner* is often seen as a weaker version of the novel because it can't place the audience inside Amir's mind as effectively. But that comparison misses what the film is doing on its own terms. Rather than

relying on inner monologue, the film turns guilt into something visible and public. Amir's shame becomes something the audience watches unfold instead of something we simply hear described. By tracing Amir through his life in Afghanistan, his years in America, and his eventual return to Kabul, the film shows how guilt continues to shape him even when he tries to leave it behind. Through silence, facial expression, setting, and bodily suffering, the film turns private shame into public acts. Scholars on the novel and film help clarify this shift, but the larger point is that the adaptation does not weaken Amir's story. It reshapes guilt into something more public and immediate, changing redemption from a private realization into a visible struggle that has to be earned through action.

Maxwell Wong

**The Ramen Western:
Genre Subversion and Modern Japanese Identity in *Tampopo***

High-stakes ramen duels, wandering truckers, and the quest for a perfect bowl—at first glance, *Tampopo*, directed by Juzo Itami, appears to be a quirky film about Japanese food. With its disjointed nature, critics label it as a mix of various genres, but such labels overlook the self-proclaimed “ramen Western” label. This essay will argue, through the wandering trucker Goro, the narrative arc of *Tampopo*, the widowed ramen shop owner mastering her craft, and the episodic vignettes, Itami constructs an homage to the spaghetti Western while inflecting it with a contemporary Japanese identity. Specifically, Michael Ashkenazi's analysis of “Japanese-ness” in *Tampopo* reveals that rather than the typical anti-hero, Goro's benevolence and Confucian reciprocity favor collective improvement over individualistic triumph, which shapes *Tampopo's* arc into a distinctly Japanese model of self-cultivation and discipline. The film's vignettes, such as a scene where homeless people demonstrate immense knowledge of both Western and Japanese food, further illustrate Itami's idea that Japan's identity has become cosmopolitan and hybrid while focusing on ordinary people. *Tampopo's* genre thus acts as infrastructure to produce cultural organization under a modern cultural framework, using fragmentation to indicate the ways Japanese identity has been redefined in relation to the West.

On the Horizon

Moderated by Professor Claire Bubb
Department of Classics

Thursday, April 23
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
Gutenberg

Amy He

Building the Perfect Spy: Cyborgs, Espionage, and the Illusion of Individual Autonomy in Jennifer Egan's "Black Box"

Does control operate through engulfing or exploiting personal identity? Jennifer Egan's short story "Black Box" follows the mission of a female spy, one of hundreds of "beauties" sent to seduce enemy subjects. The protagonist's body is technologically transformed so that even if she is unable to return alive, her body can act as a record of information. "Black Box" occurs at the intersection of two deeply repressive structures: the cyborg, where the line between individual consciousness and controlled machinery becomes blurred, and the political spy, who is expected to replace personal desires with national agenda. In many readings of "Black Box," the protagonist's cyborg body and spy mission are interpreted to contribute towards the loss of her selfhood. However, I argue that existing discussions of "Black Box" through a "posthuman" lens overlook the importance of the protagonist's personal motivations. I aim to reveal that the cyborg modifications and spy responsibilities placed upon the protagonist do not operate through erasing her sense of self, but instead through harnessing human desires, insecurities, and emotions to operate most effectively. Thus, "Black Box" warns its readers that their greatest fear may not be replacement by technology or governmental ideology, but rather manipulation by it.

Veronica De Osma

Imperfect Machines, Perfect Humans

Would you rather live a painful truth or a happy lie? *We*, the dystopian novel written by Yevgeny Zamyatin in 1924, favors the latter. In its futuristic society, the state uses technology to eliminate suffering at the cost of transparency, freedom, and independent thought. This raises a central question: does such a trade-off constitute progress? Most scholars argue that the technological control in *We* enforces uniformity, discouraging individuals from questioning authority. As a result, citizens become passive and lose their capacity for critical thinking, which ultimately diminishes human intellectual growth. However, I propose that, from a utilitarian perspective, technology enhances human development. If progress is measured by the overall well-being of a population, the society in *We* is successful. Technology has eradicated poverty, hunger, and many forms of human suffering. Emotional distress is minimized, and citizens live without dissatisfaction. To us, this world is horrifying, but ironically enough, our people experience more agony than them. We all like to think we'd pick the painful truth. Yet the novel forces a more uncomfortable question: is that choice superior, or simply aligned with our own cultural and philosophical biases? What does it mean to advance as humans? Does progress lie in maximizing happiness, preserving autonomy, or is it possible to balance both?

Kenia Peña

Unsettling Borders: Environmental Precarity and the Climate Refugee in *Tropic of Orange*

The best place to view Los Angeles of the next millennium is from the ruins of its alternative future.

—Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*

Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* depicts a surreal Los Angeles where geography begins to collapse; it foregrounds the instability of borders in an era of environmental crisis. This paper argues that the novel redefines migration as a climate-driven process to show that environmental change challenges traditional explanations for why people move. While existing scholarship emphasizes globalization, urban networks, and economic systems, it often overlooks how environmental change reshapes migration patterns. Using ecocritical and migration frameworks, this analysis argues that the shifting Tropic of Cancer line and the moving orange, a magically moving fruit, symbolize climate instability, which is used to show destabilization of both environmental and political borders. As infrastructure fails and characters migrate alongside these transformations, the novel imagines geography as fluid

rather than fixed. By foregrounding environmental precarity, this paper extends current interpretations and highlights the emergence of climate migration as a key concern. Ultimately, the novel highlights a growing real-world crisis in which climate refugees are displaced by environmental change but remain unrecognized and unsupported by existing legal systems.

Ace Tsang

**“A Strange Melancholy”:
Mesmerism and Medical Science in Le Fanu’s *Carmilla***

In the 19th century, the rise of mesmerism and medical study surrounding the unconscious mind sparked fierce debates among Victorian doctors, religious leaders, and the public. Vampire literature absorbed these controversies, forming common tropes such as the hypnotic vampire to reflect real anxieties. Yet while scholars have thoroughly analyzed mesmerism in other core vampire literature, Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* has received only passing mention in these conversations. This paper fills that gap by arguing that Le Fanu used *Carmilla* to dramatize Victorian debates over the legitimacy of mesmerism, the shifting authority from religion to science, and the growing legitimacy of medicine. Drawing on Alison Winter’s work and Mary Hallab’s work on vampires and medical science, this paper positions *Carmilla* as a crucial text for understanding how Victorian conversations surrounding medicine shaped the modern vampire.

Andriy Yarmolovych

***The Tree of Life* and the “Technological Sublime”:
An Ignored Theoretical Approach**

In Terrence Malick’s 2011 film, *The Tree of Life*, carnality and spirituality are dichotomized through the moral framework of “nature” versus “grace,” embodied respectively by Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien. Mr. O’Brien’s anger, ambition, and desire for domination contrast with Mrs. O’Brien’s gentleness, subordination, and humility. This paper examines how Malick further develops this dichotomy through visual juxtapositions of the “technological” and “cosmological sublimines”. While the “technological sublime” embodies ambition and domination through overwhelmingly large factories, skyscrapers, and instruments, the “cosmological sublime” evokes humility before the vastness of creation. Despite discussion of the film’s spiritual and natural imagery, little scholarship has addressed the “technological sublime” within its narrative. This paper addresses that gap by conducting a close analysis of the technologically inundating scenes in the film using David Nye’s theory of the “technological sublime,” arguing that Malick uses such imagery to complement the nature versus grace dichotomy.

Power and Control

Moderated by Professor Hector Reyes
Department of Art History

Thursday, April 23
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
North

Emma Cacciatore

Not Fragile Like Flour, Fragile Like a Bomb: A Feminist Take on *Like Water for Chocolate*

I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it.
—Maya Angelou

The kitchen: what once was a prison is now the source of women's strength. Laura Esquivel's 1989 novel *Like Water for Chocolate* offers a new perspective on overcoming generational oppression through one's previous shackles. The novel follows Tita, the de la Garza family's youngest daughter, who combats her mother's abusive matriarchal regime and her inability to marry through the real magical dishes she makes. Tita's perseverance speaks to how women are able to harness their resources during times of strife in order to fulfill their desires amidst suppression. Tita's constant placement in the domestic sphere has long been negatively viewed by the scholarship, specifically Maite Zubiaurre's analysis of Tita's character as one consistent with generational misogynistic characterizations of women in literature. Contrarily, I will argue that Tita's magical influence over her family is the pillar of a new fantastical movement towards a woman's place in the kitchen being redefined. *Like Water for Chocolate* is able to showcase women's power in the face of man's hunger.

Orion Davis

Firing My Master's God: Emancipating the Power of My Spirit

The people that built their heaven on your land are trying to tell you yours is in the sky
—Nina Simone

To pray to the same God your kidnapper uses to justify your dehumanization and captivity is spiritual and psychological warfare. The theological conversation present in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, examines when religion is used for social control rather than moral guidance. A central character, Robert Johnson, begins questioning the truthfulness of the Christian institution because it seems illogical for a religion that justifies his enslavement, promotes hierarchy, and rationalizes violence to be a guiding source for his freedom. His distinct separation from the institution and not the faith itself broadens freedom from a legal sense to preserving a spiritual identity where one's faith is not defined by someone else's oppressive idea of God. My paper does not debate if religious entities are real because it's inconsequential and a binary outlook of life. Opening the conversation scholars leave unexamined with regard to this novel, I explore how one can seek emancipation and reclaim self-identity through their individualized, liberating spiritual journey.

Lara Pimentel

Sanctity or Suffocation?: *Blankets'* Portrayal of Intellectual Disability in Fundamentalist Christian Communities

At what point does compassion become condescending? When operating within a framework of moral superiority, the line between empathy and control often becomes blurred. Craig Thompson's *Blankets* follows a young man whose first love forces him to confront the boundaries of his fundamentalist Christian upbringing. The graphic novel briefly engages with disability through Craig's love interest, Raina, whose two adopted siblings, Ben and Laura, have Down Syndrome. While scholars have examined how Craig's rigid community has impacted his personal growth, no scholar has yet looked at *Blankets'* portrayal of intellectual disability in relation to the novel's fundamentalist Christian background. Modern theologians, including Sharon Betcher, argue that fundamentalist Christian communities often adopt a paternalistic view of disabled people and perceive it to be their moral responsibility to "protect" or "save" them. However, disability is a wide spectrum, and not all disabled people need or want to be saved.

By examining the novel through Vertoot's framework of disability representation analysis, I argue that although *Blankets* begins to gesture toward a critique of this misplaced pity, it never seems to fully escape the attitudes it exposes. Through this tension, the novel raises a broader question of whether religiously motivated compassion can coexist with genuine respect for disabled autonomy.

Alexandra Siy

**Reporting Live from Ground Zero:
The Role of Journalism in Ishirō Honda's *Godzilla***

For those watching at home, this is no play or movie. This is real, the story of the century!
—Unnamed TV Announcer, *Godzilla*

Throughout Japanese filmmaker Ishirō Honda's *Godzilla*, the media seems almost omnipresent: radio broadcasts and newspaper clippings signal transitions between events, while reporters scribble away in the background of countless scenes. On a surface level, one could argue that journalism here functions merely as a convenient expositional device—a way of cluing the viewer into what is going on. However, I contend that it acts as more. By positioning reporters as mediators between civilians, scientists, and officials, Honda uses them as bridges between the powerless and the powerful, those distant from and those at the heart of tragedy, the absurd and the real. The media additionally structures the narrative for the viewer, molding how information is interpreted in the world of the film. And, perhaps most significantly, it plays an essential part in portraying—even constructing—Japan's postwar socio-political state. Therefore, to pay attention to journalism in *Godzilla* is not only to understand one of the ways in which Honda chooses to present the story, but what the story itself is ultimately for.

Bryce Walther

**The Stinking City on a Hill:
A Colonialist Hailsham in *Never Let Me Go***

What would you do if your school, the only community you'd ever known, raised you to willingly give away your physical body until you died? What if you were told that you were lucky to be their student? This is the inner turmoil of a Hailsham "student": a clone developed as a vessel of organs to be taken by "real people." *Never Let Me Go* is the story of three of these students through Hailsham and their unnaturally short lives afterwards. Drawing on scholars who examine Hailsham and the negative effect it has on its students, I make parallels between Hailsham and historical schools in British Colonial Africa. As I argue, Hailsham takes on a role a lot like them: it creates infighting within the clones, some of whom are jealous of Hailsham students, while also being a "moral" way of continuing the cloning system, resolving the concerns of the regular people who benefit from it. With these two techniques, Hailsham strengthens the institution of the cloning system and prevents the clones from rebelling and seeking lives of their own. While it claims to be a humane option, Hailsham really colonizes the clones and creates lasting oppression.

Tell Me Where It Hurts

Moderated by John Alexander
Artist in Residence

Thursday, April 23
7:15 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.
Scriptorium

Ramanujan Krishnamachari

Dream or Weapon: The Portrayal of Madness and Possession in *The Vegetarian*

*...she was standing there so unnaturally still it was almost as if there was someone I couldn't see—
some kind of ghost standing near the fridge.
—Han Kang, *The Vegetarian**

In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist Yeong-hye undergoes a mysterious metamorphosis of personality. A sudden inciting incident near the start of the novel plunges us, as the audience, into the deep end, leaving more questions than answers. Yeong-hye's minimal elaboration of her sudden choice to become a vegetarian reveals a judgmental and oppressive society, uncomfortable and forced to rationalize her behavior as seemingly mad. Han Kang uses Yeong-hye as a metaphor for how oppressive and patriarchal Korean culture can be towards women, stripping them of their agency. The patriarchal nature, however, is seemingly baked in, with even ancient folklore supporting depictions of vengeful female spirits, which shares a connection to Han Kang's writing and use of supernatural imagery. While Yeong-hye's actions are clearly undermined and purposefully obscured through the perspectives of society, which attempt to discredit her, she uses her one-liner "I had a dream" to fight back against this, a dagger for a hill Yeong-hye is more than willing to die on if it means to get back at her oppressors.

Cayden Pasion

Escapism Isn't Real: Fairy Tales as Survival in *Pan's Labyrinth*

What role do fairy tales play in the human experience? Many people perceive them as methods of escape, ways to temporarily suspend oneself from reality; meanwhile, Guillermo del Toro in his origination of the film *Pan's Labyrinth* introduces audiences to a different interpretation. Specifically, del Toro invents protagonist Ofelia as a symbol of societal resistance and embracing the absurd in order to navigate the circumstances of cruel reality. And through her, I have found that del Toro contrasts cruel realism with fantasy to prove that fairy tales are not an escape from reality, but rather a method of surviving it. Previous scholarship on *Pan's Labyrinth* highlights its unconventional representation of fantasy but seems to ignore del Toro's commentary on the interdependence between fantasy and reality as a relationship dynamic. This paper aims to bridge that gap by interacting with not only secondary opinion, but also with excerpts directly spoken from del Toro himself. As a result, we gain a more developed understanding of del Toro's purpose in the making of *Pan's Labyrinth*, and how it concretely asserts the role of fairy tales in the human experience as a method of survival.

Omairah Rayya Rahman

Individuality as a Woman: The Needed Yet Useless Wartime Gender Roles in *No-No Boy*

The whole world is always complaining about gender roles and stereotypes, but could they actually be good? Should they exist at all? Ichiro Yamada, the main character of John Okada's *No-No Boy*, is sure that every decision he makes that he doesn't like is because of his mother, ultimately villainizing her. Ms. Yamada, his mother, is much more masculine and "pushy" than his father ever was. But is this Ms. Yamada's true goal? I argue that because of the World War II setting *No-No Boy* takes place in, Ms. Yamada's patriotism for Japan and her husband's inability to fulfill his role as a masculine father figure ultimately pushes her away from maintaining the typical, sweet, motherly role and forces her to have a "maternalistic American masculinity," a term coined by Daniel Kim. This unnatural hypermasculinity forces her to be stressed and unhappy, pushing that energy onto Ichiro as gender roles are broken down and ultimately destroys the family and, more importantly, Ms. Yamada's individuality. Ms. Yamada's character proves that gender roles "congeal" into certain stereotypes, as Judith Butler would say, but that these stereotypes prove meaningless in the context of war and an individual's pain.

Chloe Um

**Normalizing the Abnormal:
Personal and Collective Trauma in Chen's *Farewell My Concubine***

Does trauma really define us, or is it something we can leave in the past? Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* explores this question through the life of Cheng Dieyi, whose journey as an opera performer unfolds across decades of political upheaval in twentieth-century China. Some view Dieyi as a metaphor for collective historical trauma, but I will argue that Dieyi's experience is fundamentally individual. Shaped by early abandonment and abuse, his sense of self is unstable as he blurs the line between the performance of his character, Concubine Yu, and his reality. Dieyi never fully participates in a shared group identity, so he cannot be understood through a collective trauma framework. Using a psychoanalytic lens alongside film analysis, this paper examines how Dieyi experiences and handles his trauma, often through dissociation and unhealthy attachments. By highlighting tensions between individuals and collective trauma, the film demonstrates how trauma can isolate people and remain forever unresolved.

Cecilia Zeng

**Everything but the Feeling:
Displaced Emotion and Formal Collapse in *When the Emperor Was Divine***

No crying. No screaming. She buys tape, kills the family dog with a shovel, empties all drawers, and packs their bags. In Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine*, despite being confined to a concentration camp and having their property fearfully removed, Japanese Americans' emotion is never given a space. This paper argues that the novel's central formal logic is the tension between expression and suppression, operating through what I call "inventory logic:" the consistent replacement of feeling with things. Caruth's trauma theory helps explain why: if trauma registers through gaps and repetitions rather than direct statement, then Otsuka's object catalogues are doing exactly that: containing what cannot be said within what can be packed, buried, or lost. Hirsch's postmemory framework further anchors: the first four chapters operate in the aesthetic of inherited, fragmentary silence, but the father's eruptive confession in the final chapter is where that silence breaks. Eventually, the objects run out. The dog is buried. The house is ruined. And when there is nothing left to carry the weight of what can't be said, the confession is what remains.

True Lies

Moderated by Professor Julie Van Dam
Department of French & Italian

Thursday, April 23
7:15 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.
South

Cristian Cardona-Serrano

Confessions of a Graphic Memoir: *Ordo Amoris* and the Evangelical Struggle in *Blankets*

The mind commands the body and is instantly obeyed. The mind commands itself and meets resistance.
—Augustine

What happens when love is not just felt, but viewed as sin? Craig Thompson's *Blankets* explores the tension between Craig's devotion to God and his relationship with Raina. This connection goes beyond romance, encapsulating guilt, identity, and spiritual conflict. Though Augustine's framework of *ordo amoris*—where love is properly ordered towards God—addresses the concept of disordered love, this essay argues that, instead of disordered love in play, evangelical purity culture makes it difficult for Craig to fully direct his love towards God. Christine Gardner examines how purity is constructed as an identity of moral perfection, which brings along anxiety and shame. Throughout *Blankets*, Thompson invites readers to consider not only the nature of love itself, but the systems that control how love is to be understood. If love is meant to be ordered towards God, what happens when religion changes what love means?

Emma Hyland

Indifference or Intention: The Fickle Nature and Obscure Purpose of God in Arthur C. Clarke's "The Star"

Pain dominates the natural world, suggesting that our universe requires suffering in order to advance. However, this idea stands in direct opposition to the concept of an omnipresent and compassionate God. The Jesuit protagonist of Arthur C. Clarke's "The Star" explores this spiritual crisis after discovering remains of an extinct alien civilization in the aftermath of a supernova. By examining how the Jesuit's inner struggle arises as a direct result of the conflict between religious truth and scientific fact, the audience is led to the conclusion that the fundamental nature of God is truly unknowable. While Christopher Southgate suggests theories as to why God would allow for pain, Holmes Rolston III proposes multiple theories that characterize God, such as "process theism" and "trans-scientific theism." But neither of them can be reconciled with the Jesuit's newfound understanding of God's role in the universe and radical religious doubt. This paper argues that Clarke's story isn't about how God allows tragedies to occur, but rather chooses to focus on the uncertainty that surrounds God and how that is reflected in the universe. Furthermore, this paper contends that the Jesuit's crisis of faith reveals how deeply embedded unpredictability and doubt are within the larger framework of Christianity.

David Y. Kim

A Glitch in the Matrix: How *The Matrix* Explores the Limitations of Computer Simulations

Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real?
—Morpheus, *The Matrix*

Currently, scientists theorize that it is statistically likely we are not living in the real world. Lana and Lilly Wachowski's *The Matrix* brings this debate to the screen, but existing scholarship from Chalmers, Merrin, and Žižek tends to treat the film's simulation, or the Matrix, as a stable philosophical premise rather than examining the moments where the film intentionally exposes the simulation's imperfections. This paper fills that gap through close analyses of three scenes: the kung fu upload and Neo's astonishment at knowledge being treated like information, his physical collapse after being unplugged from the simulation, and the "glitch in the Matrix" in the déjà vu scene. Through examining each scene, I argue that *The Matrix* simultaneously depends on and destabilizes the idea that a simulation could ever be indistinguishable from reality as we actually perceive it. As simulation technology continues to advance in our own world, the film raises a central question that it never fully resolves: will we always be able to tell the difference between a simulation and the 'true' human experience?

Hannah Miller

**Privation of Good:
An Augustinian Reading of Evil in Nabokov's *Lolita***

*It struck me...there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—
dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me.*
—Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

The forbidden is entirely beyond corruption. Evil strains toward it, and, in straining, cowers, for it is goodness, not evil, that menaces. In Book XII of *The City of God*, Saint Augustine theorizes that evil has no independent existence. It is nothing more than the privation of good. What becomes of a man who mistakes that deficiency for creation itself? In Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert believes he has fashioned Dolores Haze, a twelve-year-old girl, entirely out of his own desire. He named her: Lolita. Trapped within Humbert's perspective, some scholars, such as Colin McGinn, maintain that he is beyond morality. Yet building on Augustine's conviction that evil must ultimately yield to the enduring presence of good, I argue that only while Dolores remains prepubescent does Humbert appear godlike. As she matures, he falls from grace, confronting the belated yet unmistakable recognition of Dolores Haze qua person. Therefore, this paper ultimately maintains that Dolores's goodness holds a fundamental priority over Humbert's corruption of her: it must exist before anything can be hollowed out.

Gopika Nair

**Re-Writing Fairytale Femininity
in Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties***

From Disney to the Brothers Grimm, traditional fairytales hold women to unattainable moral and beauty expectations, making them one-dimensional tools to propagate a patriarchal system. This is where revisionist feminist authors like Carmen Maria Machado come in. Machado's narratives reimagine traditional fairytales and folklore by combining horror, fantasy, and realism, revealing the physical and psychological violence inflicted upon women. I argue that Machado's short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties* subverts traditional fairytale femininity by reclaiming the female desire (sexual and emotional) that is used by patriarchal institutions to punish and alienate women. Drawing on Folklorist Jeanna Jorgenson's research on the roles of beauty and moral polarization in fairytale femininity and existing scholarship on Machado's narratives, I conduct close readings of three stories from the collection. I reveal how Machado's tales criticize the hypocritical ideal fairytale woman, one who is written by men and etched into societal norms for generations. Ultimately, this paper contends that centering female desire destabilizes narrative frameworks that have trapped women within rigid fairytale archetypes.

Max Redden

**The Cost of Salvation:
How Visions of Improvement Can Produce Exclusion and Control**

Salvation is a gift—something that rescues, restores, and makes a person whole. But what if being saved is not as benevolent as it seems? In "The Book of Martha," Octavia Butler places the fate of humanity in the hands of a Black woman tasked with redesigning human suffering, exposing the unsettling authority embedded in acts of saving. I argue that universal visions of salvation are not neutral or fair: they depend on constructing standards of normalcy that inevitably position certain lives, bodies, and experiences as deficient. By tracing parallels between Biblical frameworks of salvation and historical attempts to improve humanity, I aim to show how salvation can legitimize coercion under the guise of benevolence. Octavia Butler's dialogue between God and Martha—a poor, formerly illiterate Black woman—reveals that to fix humanity is to impose a singular vision of the good, one that risks erasing difference in the name of harmony. Salvation, then, emerges not as pure deliverance, but as a form of power that defines and controls.

SECOND FLOOR: SCRIPTORIUM

NORTH

RESTROOMS

LOUNGE

SOUTH

PATIO

DINING AREA

BAR

DINING AREA

CARNEGIE

GUTENBERG



ENTRANCE