Senior Thesis Orals List

Sample 1

Group One: Hauntologies

Description: Borrowing a term from Derrida, I use hauntology to describe the strong presence of the phantasmal in these texts, spirits that exist in the past yet resurface in the present, constantly plaguing individuals and existing outside conventional notions of affect, space, time, and potency. Each of these texts wrestles with phantoms in a unique way, but each also shows how the past refuses to die, constantly speaks to us, and weighs heavily on our minds in ways rational and irrational.

Fiction

Everything I Never Told You (Celeste Ng)

In this novel, Ng tells the story of James and Marilyn Lee, an interracial couple in Ohio during the 1970s who have inherited significant intergenerational trauma from their parents (Marilyn’s mother wanting to cordon her off into domesticity and James’s being immigrants from China that keep him from “fitting in”). When their daughter Lydia is found dead, Ng deftly warps space and time to show the various ways in which the memory of the past continually haunts, weighs on, and plagues the present, as well as the ways in which the literal phantom of Lydia hangs over her parents once she is gone.

A Brief History of Seven Killings (Marlon James)

In this novel, multiple narrative perspectives are woven together as the story of an assassination attempt on Bob Marley’s life is told, with each section being bracketed by the narration of a deceased politician. His ghostly presence seems to predestine and foretell even the most complex of outcomes, complicating the ways in which past, present, and future can collide in the realms of the dead and the ghostly.

Cloud Atlas (David Mitchell)

In this massive text, Mitchell weaves together the stories of many individuals through time that are all incarnations of the same soul. Each of them discovers relics of their past lives in their own stories, and these relics shape the directions of their own lives in ways that call into question the contingency and interpenetration of not only past, present, and future, but also different spaces.
The Tin Drum (Günter Grass)

This panoramic, post-war German novel follows the life and development of Oskar Matzerath, a mock-messianic figure obsessed with Tin Drums who stops growing after his third birthday and thus witnesses World War II from the perspective of an outsider or third-party to history. As such, his commentary on the interrelation of events past and present, his ability to “drum up” the past, and the magical realism of the novel provide greater reflections on the inescapability and weight of the past (specifically, of Nazi Germany and partitioned Poland) while also calling into question the ways both major and minor figures and experiences from our past may crop up and recur in times of crisis or states of emergency.

Poetry

Ghost of (Diana Khoi Nguyen)

In this poetry collection, Nguyen reflects on the suicide of her brother Oliver, reflecting not only on the ways in which she is haunted by his loss (to the point where his absence becomes a physicalized presence in the text, one of negative space), but also the ways in which they have inherited trauma and history from their Vietnamese, refugee parents.

Wade in the Water (Tracy K. Smith)

In this poetry collection, former poet-laureate Tracy K. Smith relates the current historical moment of racial injustice to the experiences of Black soldiers during and after the American Civil War, relying heavily on private correspondences that these soldiers and their kin sent during their lifetimes. As such, it is a collection deeply preoccupied with the persistence of trauma over time, the haunting of the present by the past, and the resilience one must build to escape the weight of history.

Group Two: World Literature’s Appropriation of Mythology

Description: Another theme that has fascinated me over the years and throughout the course of my studies at Harvard is the way in which mythologies and cultural archetypes are appropriated by literatures from all over the world—as well as throughout time—in service of conveying a message or aesthetic claim. We often think of mythologies as fantastical and far-removed from the present, but the works below examine mythology as something urgent and ready to be explored by subjects of literary antiquity and modernity alike. Indeed, in the works below, mythology is not a historical term, but rather one highly preoccupied with the thin boundary between the fantastical and the familiar.
Fiction

_The Famished Road_ (Ben Okri)

In this work, Okri relates the experience of Azaro, an _abiku_ (spirit-child) in what in a post-colonial (seemingly Nigerian) setting. As Azaro alternates between his experiences and recollections of the real and spirit worlds, the coexistence of mythology with contemporary reality, the weight of the past, and the power of fantasy and mythology in dealing with the shortcomings of reality (e.g., economic frustration, political corruption).

_Ulysses_ (James Joyce)

This is one of the most capacious and complex works I have ever read, but I am particularly interested in the way that _Ulysses_, in relating the daily triumphs and travails of Leopold Bloom through the interpretive framework of the _Odyssey_, explores the status of myth in contemporary society and shapes the way in which we tell or interpret stories. I also find its theme of metempsychosis to be particularly interesting.

_1001 Nights_

When considered as a complete body of work including the “Ali Baba” and “Aladdin” tales, the _1001 Nights_ not only explores the status of mythology of folklore in the sense that its retellings and iterations (which sometimes does not follow conventional logic) literally keep Scheherazade alive, but also in the sense that Galland’s ostensible contributions to the corpus (i.e., it is suspected that he is the author of the two aforementioned tales) have borrowed from a perceived mythic and cultural body of Arab mythologies and stories to create a coherent body of work across time.

Poetry

_Lei Sao_ (Qu Yuan)

This work is one of the oldest extant Chinese poems, and it marks the introduction of a first-person poetic persona to Chinese poetry (following on the heels of the _Shijing_, where there is no clear historical context to accompany the speakers of many poems). In establishing the ethos of putative “I,” since there is debate as to whether Qu Yuan himself was indeed a real person, the poem relies deeply on the speaker’s undertaking of mythical journeys and reception of astrological influences. Further, since it is unclear whether Qu Yuan existed, the mythos of the poem’s world is also the mythos of the speaker and author himself, and the poem’s reception of these influences can perhaps be better interpreted as the speaker’s direction participation in and construction of these mythologies.
Drama

*Faust* (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

Again, *Faust* is a highly complex work with themes ranging from divine commentary to the pretensions of scholarship and art. However, I am particularly interested in the way that Goethe uses mythology (specifically Greco-Roman myth through the figure of Helen of Troy and the others present at the Classical Walpurgis Night) to express influence of antiquity on contemporary German (and, broadly, European) society, seeing if there is possible room for exchange or hybridization between them.

**Group Three: How Language Informs and Distorts Perceptions of Reality**

*Description:* Over the past four years, many works that I have read were deeply invested in disentangling the relationship between language and reality, particularly regarding the ways in which both language and reality are implicated as more porous, flexible, and contingent than might be expected. Whether their narrators, characters, and authors are discovering language as a means to escape reality through fantasy and elocution, or whether they find their experiences of reality limited by linguistic convention, the works and collections below illustrate not only the importance of language for human expression, affect, and connection, but also the ways in which language toys with its own importance as in a Borges story, teasing the boundary of the real and the unreal.

**Fiction**

*At Swim-two-birds* (Flann O’Brien)

This humorous work purports to be the account of a literature student, who himself is writing a story to distract himself from his boring studies and overbearing uncle. His story, of course, is about another author, named Dermot Trellis, whose literary characters become sentient and try to drug, try, and torture him. As reality itself and the consequences of language vary depending on which fictional level of the story one is in, the novel thus toys not only with the notion of a consistent reality, but also with the politics of creation and the multi-leveled implications that language possesses in different contexts.

*The Idiot* (Elif Batuman)

In its exploration of a Turkish-American’s experiences at Harvard, this novel plays with the notion of linguistic determinism, how different languages treat narrative and testimony, and whether language is sufficient or successful in delineating between individual’s internal states and their external realities. Often the narrator, Selin, remarks on how the Turkish language shapes her perception of the world, and she comments
further and extensively on how language and narrative influence her impressions of her first love, an aloof Hungarian named Ivan.

*Pale Fire* (Vladimir Nabokov)

Consisting of a deranged commentator’s monomaniacal and unreliable commentary on a fictional poem, this text explores the capacity of language to signal towards reality or multiple realities, and also raises questions of how language and literature’s depictions of reality shape an audience’s reception of that reality or depiction. As readers continue along in the text and starts to realize that our narrator—obsessed with the foreign country of Zembla—is not all he seems to be, they begin to question not only his commentary on the poem but also the text itself as a metafictional artifact.

Poetry

*feeld* (Jos Charles)

In this collection, the transgender poet Jos Charles returns to archaic Old English spellings and grammar patterns while writing about the experience of her gender identity. In doing so, she explores the capaciousness of certain forms of language and specialization of other forms of language, and the ways in which language either limits or frees us to have certain experiences.

*Loop of Jade* (Sarah Howe)

In this poetry collection, British-Hong-Konger poet Sarah Howe explores the way in which different languages localize to and are apt for exploring the realities of life in different places. At the same time, however, Howe toys with etymology, history, and anthropology to explore the fluid and porous nature of the interactions between cultures, places, and languages. The result is that Howe’s poetry not only explores the power of language to inform and shape our experiences of the world, but also how perceptions shaped by different languages interact with and confront each other.

**Group Four: Historiographic Fiction in 20th Century China**

*Description:* The Chinese literary tradition is one that inherently is tied to a historical tradition, with many great historical works also being conceived of as classical texts. Moreover, throughout Chinese history, literature has been seen as a ground on which to not only test and contest history, but also to chronicle and record it, as is evidenced in the premodern tradition not only through the existence of official histories but also a series of private histories (sishi 私史, *including such genres as waishi 外史 and yeshi 野史*). The works in this cluster, then, are
modern successors to this tradition of literature as historiography, engaging with and recording history while also finding space there to offer personal meditations and reflections.

**Fiction**

*Notes of a Desolate Man (Zhu Tianwen)*

In this postmodern Taiwanese novel, the narrator Shao reflects in a nonlinear way on the death of a friend from AIDS and his own experiences growing up and as a gay adult, the whole while using references from global scholarly and popular culture to test the teleological morality and development of society, reflect on the messy relationship between Taiwan and other countries, particularly the U.S. and Japan, and recount an alternate kind of history from a marginalized perspective.

*“Diary of a Madman” (Lu Xun)*

In this short story, Lu Xun relates the experience of a villager with a persecution complex that one day comes to believe that the Chinese classics encourage locals to eat people, and that the villagers (and their dogs) in his area plan to consume him. As such, it proves to be an astute and satirical commentary on the oppressive cultural hegemony of the Chinese ancien régime that persisted into the early 20th century.

*“Shanghai Foxtrot” (Mu Shiying)*

In this short story, Mu Shiying explores the development of Jazz-Age Shanghai in a modernist (and almost futurist) way that defies narrative logic and standard temporality. Most important to Mu here is the way in which logics of accumulation and distraction come to dominate the city, and the decay of the narrative structure can be said to mirror the decay of conventional morality that Mu reads into contemporary Chinese society.

*“Sealed Off” (Eileen Chang)*

In this short story, the effects of a World War II blockade in Shanghai are explored, and through this lens, Chang probes the ways in which disaster and destitution can create new opportunities and delineate non-conventional paths of action. In telling the story of an unlikely romantic connection made during the blockade while playing with narrative temporality, Chang explores the distortive effects of disaster and offers a unique and under-considered perspective on war.

*“Classical Love” (Yu Hua)*

In this short story, Yu Hua parodies the scholar-beauty (caizi jiaren 才子佳人) genre of classical Chinese fiction, highlighting instead through the tale of a scholar (named Willow) and a maiden (named Hui) the desolation and destitution
that recur throughout history and the ability of monstrous history to undo not only
the stories of canon but also our well-made plans and preconceived notions. In
doing so, it also subtly gestures to the follies of the Great Leap Forward and the
Cultural Revolution insofar as they produced similar suffering and also operated
within a framework ostensibly inherited from traditional China.
Over the course of my four years in college, while I nominally underwent the transition from a pre-med student to a Comparative Literature major, one constant was my fascination with how we tell stories. This was not a new passion, however: in middle school, I had fallen in love with Chinese because of its intimate link to stories and legends in the form of idioms, or chengyu. Still further back, narrative was integral to my family’s personal history: at my Bar Mitzvah, for example, I told of my great-grandfather’s immigration from Ukraine and the fortune he had in New York to run into someone from his own village, who helped him assimilate. To me then, narrative has always been familiar, a kind of consolation: when I think of my childhood, it is in terms of the stories my grandmother and mother would ad lib, centering on a heroine named Lulubelle. As I’ve grown and continued to engage with stories, however, I have become fascinated not just with stories that wrap up neatly, but also with those stories that do not resolve, ones plagued by inconsistencies and echoes that take literature away from the instructional and into the realm of artistry—a mysterious and sometimes inscrutable force to reckon with.

While it is true that I have always been drawn to stories, I owe much of my mature interests to a Freshman Seminar I took with Professor Fisher, which foregrounded my fascination with many of the literary topics that undergird my thesis. The semester-long class tackled “complexity” and was dedicated solely to the study of two works—Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Joyce’s Ulysses. While initially, I took the course because Professor Fisher and I spoke at-length about our fascination with poetic language in our interview—something I had not done before in
a formal setting—upon actually reading the works, I found that they appealed to me deeply for reasons other than their supposed difficulty. In the case of *Hamlet*, I was fascinated by the figure of the King’s ghost, whose very presence accelerates, complicates, and deepens the plot of the drama unlike the ghosts of Shakespeare’s other plays; in the case of *Ulysses*, I was fascinated by Joyce’s mock-epic fusion of the Irish mundane with the narrative of Odysseus’s journey, as well as his immense formal variation and innovation.

The feeling in the first case that ghosts do something special and unconventional to the stories we tell led me to read many of the works in my first cluster, titled for a critical term from Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*. In reading Derrida’s essay and internalizing his idea that ghosts, phantoms, and shattered fragments of the past deconstruct conventional aesthetic and affective binaries in their refusal to disappear, I was particularly struck by the way he quotes Hamlet in saying that “the time is out of joint.” As I’ve already alluded to briefly, the sense of disjointedness in *Hamlet* facilitated by the presence of the ghost comes to involve much outside murder and culpability: he stands in also for the porous boundaries between reality and fantasy (or madness), reporting and re-enactment (in the case of the drama staged in Act III), and past and present. That ghosts in literature can be subversive and powerful on many levels makes them a particularly apt narrative tool for third-person omniscience, as is the case in Marlon James’s *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. However, just as powerful, I discovered, is a ghost that is not really a ghost, but rather the figurative, monstrous spirit of the past as its affairs resurface without us willing them to. In works like *The Tin Drum*—which wrestles with the legacies of Nazism in Germany and Partition in Poland—*Wade in the Water*—which meditates on the persistent and insidious legacies of the Civil War in modern life—and *Everything I Never Told You*—in which the weight of an unspeakable past is handed down generationally, and a child’s
suicide hangs over family life—we see this in full force. There are instances in which both the phantoms of the past and literal ghosts are present—as in Nguyen’s *Ghost of*, a meditation on a brother’s suicide—but there are also cases where phantoms are present but not alluded to explicitly, as in *Cloud Atlas*, where characters are drawn to relics from their past lives.

This notion of reincarnation as a kind of haunting also deepened and galvanized my interest in *Ulysses*. Through the novel’s treatment of metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls through time, I started to become interested and invested in the way that mythologies from around the world are appropriated and revitalized in literature. While mythology often seems remote or obscure, works like *Ulysses*, *The Famished Road* (which centers on a spirit child in postcolonial Nigeria), and *Faust* are invested in showing us that mythology is far from archaic. Rather, it is itself phantasmal, sourced from a remote point in the past yet requiring active performance and recapitulation in the present to be propagated. Even in works as early as Qu Yuan’s *Li Sao* 离骚, a poetic chronicle of the putative speaker’s life—perhaps telling of political rejection and suicide—there is fascination with myth, and the power that myth has in straddling both reality and fantasy is used in constructing the poet’s own narrative and ethos. Similar investment in mythologies might be seen in Antoine Galland’s addition of “Aladdin” and “Ali Baba” to the *1001 Nights*, specifically in how Galland allegedly drew on local oral histories and storytellings to put together a coherent body of work whose authorship straddles not just time, but also space.

As I continued to read more in college, then, the thin boundary between reality and fantasy—specifically as mediated by language—itself became a central concern of mine. In modern metafictional works like *Pale Fire* and *At Swim-two-birds*, I was intensely invested in the capaciousness of language and the ways in which an author’s intended meaning might be
distorted by language, audiences, and perhaps even the characters of a text itself. While I am hardly a follower of linguistic determinism, in works like *Loop of Jade* and *The Idiot*, I started to understand the necessity of a comparative approach to literature, as the languages that humans use to describe the world vary immensely, with each having its own ticks and idiosyncrasies that shape the way we understand reality, record it, and transmit it to posterity. This point of recording and transmission also fostered in me a deep appreciation for a historiographic approach to comparative literature—such as the one executed by Jos Charles in her poetry collection *feeld*, in which the poet reverts to an atavistic, more ambiguous, and gender-neutral form of English to process and convey her experiences as a transgender woman.

While they seem at first to be quite disparate interests, these concerns of mythology, hauntology, and metaphysics found what seemed to me a perfect meeting point in modern Chinese literature. As I allude to in my Orals List, the Chinese literary tradition is one that constantly contends with the notion of consistent historical truth. Moreover, the boundaries between historiography and literature have been porous in Chinese literature since antiquity, from the historical texts in the Confucian classics to Sima Qian’s *Shiji* 史记 from the 1st century BCE, and this notion found later embodiment in the Chinese middle period most notably in Du Fu, the great Tang poet whose poetry on contemporary events such as the An Lushan rebellion earned him the moniker of “poet-historian” (shishi 诗史). More importantly for my thesis, however, this grand tradition of historiographic literature—a literature that calls back to pasts both personal and national, both canonical and heterodox—continued into the twentieth century, a century of Chinese history that was marked by several distinct and deep traumas, schisms, and disasters.
In a class with Professor Wang—the first class I took in which I was exposed to a wide variety of modern Chinese literature outside of a language-instruction setting—I became inspired by many of the figures in my last cluster—figures like Eileen Chang, Mu Shiying, Yu Hua, and Zhu Tianwen. To me, these authors—though many were eventually canonized—each had a unique approach to language that allowed them to treat history as a phantom to be reckoned with, a respite from the chaotic happenings of the present, and also a possible hiding place from the uncertainties of the future. My thesis then became centrally preoccupied with dissecting the mechanisms by which such authors do this. Looking specifically at Lu Xun’s *Old Tales Retold*, Luo Fu’s poetic work from the Seventies and Eighties, and Zhu Tianxin’s novella *The Old Capital*, I sought to reckon with each as a work produced against a backdrop of personal cataclysm. Then, once I had taken note of the ways in which each author engaged historiography, mythology, and canonically accepted realities by playing with anachronism and allusion in their texts, I sought to categorize such techniques as part of a modern Chinese approach to writing literatures of crisis. Finally, with inspiration from Professor Wang, my thesis sought to align these techniques with a revolutionary and individualistic sensibility that Lu Xun himself introduced into a Chinese context in the early twentieth century—the ideal of the so-called “Mara” Poet. Thus, though the pathway to my thesis topic was unconventional, drawn-out, and perhaps a little circuitous, I take great pride in knowing that I produced a work that truly lies at the intersections of my various interests and benefits greatly from the approaches of Comparative Literature as a discipline, one I am incredibly thankful to be a part of.
1. In search of “the real” (or to understand the everyday)

One of the aspects that drew me to study literature was its treatment of the everyday. In literature a character is not reduced to a statistic but regardless of perceived villainy or innocence, heroism or frailty, they are given a space both in art and analysis to breathe their truths. In literature care is allowed to be given to all. The works in this section demonstrate this celebration of the little people. They describe a life or lives, in a moment or in their entirety and give space to the unique reality, power, and worth that each of us contains just through existing.

*Ève de ses Décombres* - Ananda Devi

This novel began my love for Devi’s writing. Its unflinching depiction of the reality of life for young people growing up in a ghetto in Mauritius resonated with youth around the world because of its focus on a universal need to escape the pain of the everyday.

*Ceux du Large* - Ananda Devi

Devi’s recent collection of poems about the refugee crisis in Europe demonstrates how the horrific has become the mundane from both the side of the refugees and the perspective of complacent Europeans.

*Divine Intervention* - Elia Suleiman

This surrealist dark comedy’s focus on how the ubiquity of checkpoints in Palestine structure everyday life provides insight into a not often seen narrative of normal Palestinian life.

*A Raisin in the Sun* - Lorraine Hansberry

Hansberry’s realist play’s presentation of the “black everyday” shows a black family trying to live the American dream and generational conflict around finding empowerment.

*Passing Strange* – Stew

This musical intertwines humor and sadness in a way that creates a nostalgia for a youthful search for “the real.”
The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker - Katherine J. Cramer

This study is what first allowed me to put into words my desire to care about the humans behind the statistic. Kramer assumes what no other author in my Government tutorial did: people have a rationale for their decisions and we should work to understand how they see the world.

2. For the love of art (or aesthetics)

The works in this section have never left my mind not just because of the story they tell but because of the extraordinary aesthetic choices they make. Their form creates beauty and meaning. When I think of them, I think of genre, the avant-garde, repetition, and structure. The avant-garde pushes the way we think about what something can be, pushing us to see the invisible categories that shape our understanding of art. Their glorious embrace of artistic freedom left me unable to think about other works or the world the same way.

Texts:

The City and the City - China Miéville

This was the first book I read in a comparative literature class. It drops the reader into a new world with different language, and unclear potentially supernatural elements. It is only as you read that you begin to understand how unconscious assumptions about genre and societies are shaping how you interpret the novel.

If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler - Italo Calvino

I found this book joyous in its quest to change my conception of narration, shattering assumptions about literature I did not even know I was making.

Not I - Samuel Beckett

This haunting play’s use of semantics and staging gave me a new understanding of performance.

Sozaboy: A novel in rotten English - Ken Saro-Wiwa

This short novel pushed my understanding of language as I was forced to recon with the profound ways language is used to manipulate the protagonist.
Music:

“Cumbia and Jazz Fusion” - Charles Mingus

This half hour long song puts on display Mingus’ approach to the avant-garde and his incredible grasp of composition. As it shifts unexpectedly between genre’s, the piece highlights the diversity of jazz and one a approach to creating a new genre beyond “jazz.”

Theory:

“The Law of Genre” - Jacques Derrida

I read this text in conjunction with The City and the City. It was the first piece of theory that changed my mind about something in literature: the importance of genre.

3. To understand disability

This section brings together the texts that have been salient in my journey through disability studies from the theories that changed my way of looking at the world to the texts that have both made those theories tangible and questioned their efficacy.

Texts:

Call Me Ahab: A Short Story Collection - Anne Finger

This short story collection was the basis for my junior paper. It is explicitly in conversation with Narrative Prosthesis and unlike other texts I have analyzed, I lauded it as boundary breaking and ethically sound.

Theory:

Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse - David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder

This was the first piece of disability studies theory I read in my junior tutorial (or ever). It is one of the foundational works in literary disabilities studies, referenced throughout the field and it shaped the foundations of my explorations.

Against Empathy – Paul Bloom

This book is not explicitly about disability. However, it was the theoretical basis for my junior paper and explained the type of challenge to the reader that Call me Ahab presented in its depiction of disability.
Aesthetic Nervousness - Ato Quayson

This work builds off Mitchell and Snyder’s concept of *Narrative Prosthesis* to explore the effect it has on texts. This became a key theoretical text for my thesis, where I used it to understand why my primary sources had such confused and muddled messages.

Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation - Sunaura Taylor

Taylor’s work not only combined my interest in animal studies and disability studies, but also showed me more recent and boundary pushing theorizations of disability.

4. Towards justice

In some ways it is hard to create a subsection about justice. I would argue that almost every work on this list is in some way explicit or otherwise concerned with justice. Perhaps it is indicative of my larger project in Comparative Literature that the works I feel have marked me are all “towards justice” in their own way. Here lie the works that I read with the intention of thinking about justice. These theoretic texts shook the very core of my understandings of the world and opening my mind to new pathways of learning, analyzing, and being.

Music:

“Lemonade” – Beyoncé

This visual album is a touchstone of a type of mainstream black female empowerment, that was inspirational to me both artistically and through its message by embracing not just womanhood or blackness but both as an intersectional experience.

Theory:

“Conclusion,” *Literary Theory: An Introduction* - Terry Eagleton

This piece convinced me to switch from Government to Comparative Literature. Its argument that literature, politics, and justice are irrevocably and inherently intertwined showed me that justice could be learned and created through the study of literature. It made me wonder whether, perhaps, it was only through the study of literature that I could understand the world.

Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature - Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

This work’s focus on how to undo the colonial project through language emphasized how the task of “decolonizing the mind” must be expanded beyond the superficial. It broadened my understand of the pervasiveness of colonial influence.
“I Ain’t Sorry: Beyoncé, Serena, and Hegemonic Hierarchies in Lemonade” - Sarah Olutola

This Marxist analysis of “Lemonade” changed my perception of the piece. It convinced me of Beyoncé’s promotion of a capitalist form of empowerment that was by its definition not accessible to all.

“Toward a feminist postcolonial milk studies” - Greta Gaard

This article showed me how to expand my conception of justice beyond the species barrier by revealing the connections between colonialism, feminism, and milk.

“Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities” - Eve Tuck

Having read this near the end of my career here, this piece led me to challenge my previous assumptions about the ethics of my academic study.

“Black Study, Black Struggle” - Robin D. G. Kelley

Looking at the larger context of our role as members “of the University,” this piece gave me a new perspective on what it means to look for justice as an undergraduate.
Towards everyday justice

I entered college confident that I would become a Government concentrator. It was not until the final weeks of sophomore year that I realized I wanted to pursue a concentration in Comparative Literature. My intellectual journey through Comp Lit was shaped by what I could not access in political science: an understanding of the human. I am compelled by questions not of “how do people behave?”, but “why do they behave in these ways?” I begin with what drew me to Comp Lit: my interest in understanding people. To me, political science seemed uncaring in its casual dismissal of “the average person’s” way of thinking. Voters were assumed to be idiots because they did not act as a political scientist would act. I think that every life deserves respect. It seemed to me that literature looked for the beauty in the everyday. Characters were not forgotten just because they were not perfect. In fact, their imperfections were studied and deciphered. Once in Comp Lit, I found works that drew me in through their extraordinary aesthetic choices. As I narrowed what I wanted to understand about the everyday, I was drawn to disability studies, which was the focus on both my junior paper and my senior thesis. Finally, throughout my time in college I have sought works that are emancipatory. I look for works that seek solutions to the marginalization of certain peoples, like those with disabilities. These works are not content to describe problems, they present paths towards liberation for the everyday people with whom my intellectual journey began.

Viola Davis put my feelings into words in her Oscars’ acceptance speech for Best Supporting Actress in *Fences*: “[Exhume] the stories of the people who dreamed big and never
saw those dreams to fruition. People who fell in love and lost. I became an artist—and thank God I did—because we are the only profession that celebrates what it means to live a life.”\footnote{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbo9GVmv87Y} The works in this category look at what it means to exist, putting to the forefront the emotions and entanglements of life. Each work in Group 1 carves out a small story in a large context, content with focusing on the humanity of the everyday. *The Politics of Resentment* first awoke me to the idea that we should focus on listening to individuals’ stories. Her ethnography asks why rural Wisconsin voters make the political choices they do. What is their political consciousness? Similarly to *Ève de ses Décombres*, *Resentment* seeks to understand the choices people make when they are trapped both financially and geographically. *Divine Intervention* and *Ceux du Large* both describe what it means to simply exist and survive inside of a large crisis: the Israeli/Palestinian war and the European refugee crisis respectively. The repetitive surreal vignettes of *Divine Intervention* generate a picture of life in Palestine that is centered on both the pain and banality of the occupation. *Ceux du Large*’s poems also use vignettes to capture a new normal for both Europeans and refugees searching for answers while feeling too small to make a difference. The final two works of this first group present versions of the everyday for black people in the U.S. *A Raisin in the Sun*’s realism focuses on interpersonal interactions and a family trying to find itself while existing in a racist environment. *Passing Strange*’s lost young protagonist explicitly searches for “the real” as he tries to find himself in Europe. As a wise pretzel man tells the Narrator in *Passing Strange*, “The real is artificial. The kid in your play is looking for something in life…that can only be found…in art” (66). Much like the Youth in *Passing Strange*, in my search for understanding the everyday through art I came to the realization that the aesthetics of art were alluring.
In taking Comp Lit classes I began to see a new beauty in literature. Group 2’s avant-garde styles forced me to shed my preconceived ideas of art, pushing me to see the invisible categories that shaped my understanding of art. Miéville, Calvino, and Mingus all rely on their audience’s preconceptions about genre to challenge it. For Miéville, the murkiness of the genre is a part of what makes the mystery of *The City and the City* difficult to solve. In reading “The Law of Genre” I understood how my genre expectations were blinding me to the reality of the novel. Calvino uses genre conventions to ground the reader in the beginning of each new novel the protagonist (you) picks up. But it is Calvino’s play on narration that creates the magic of this novel. Written in the second person, it made me forever sensitive to how novels use narration. I would say the same for Mingus’ “Cumbia and Jazz Fusion” which in some ways forces me to contradict the epiphany from Derrida. Mingus demonstrates the folly of trying to define the edges of a genre as the song rapidly transitions between genres.

All of this is not to say that these works do not consider the everyday. *Sozaboy* is an explicit look into the mind of an everyman, the way a person could be manipulated and tricked into going to war with no understanding of what they were fighting for. But this look at the everyday is stylized in an unusual way that forced me to consider the boundaries of language, my own understanding of English. In reading the novel as a speaker of American English, I felt as Mene felt when trying to understand what the government officials were saying to him: catching every other word and confused by the grammar. *Sozaboy*’s aesthetics changed how I perceived Mene and the type of English he spoke. It showed me how powerful the empathy created from reading can be.

In college I have sought to understand the particular place disability holds within each of our everydays. In making this a separate category I do not wish to imply that living with
disability cannot be of the everyday. I think of this as a subcategory of the everyday, one that is of a personal interest to me much like the scattering of black studies works in this list. *Call Me Ahab* explicitly created a new aesthetic around disability, one that did not put forward characters with disabilities as the narrative prostheses Mitchell and Snyder decry. Finger represents an example of how to write characters without eliciting empathy as Bloom suggests in *Against Empathy*. Her work also moves away from the “damage centered narratives” of Eve Tuck’s letter to communities. Finger (like Mitchell and Snyder, Quayson, and Taylor), speaks to the ubiquity of characters with disabilities and marginalization of those characters throughout history.

Through these works I saw that it was not that disability had been erased from the everyday, but that it had been systematically created as a category of “other.” Taylor’s work moves beyond the identification of disability as a tool in literature to think about disability as a construct operating in conjunction with other to create our understand of the world today. These works are pointing out the flaws of representation, and point towards a solution, one that will hopefully bring about a more just world.

The search for liberation and justice is the field in which I hope to spend my life. It was difficult to create Group 4 because, in their own way, all the works in my intellectual autobiography are concerned with justice. I would not say that *A Raisin in the Sun* is less focused on justice than “Lemonade.” They are both deeply concerned with black liberation, especially black female empowerment under a white supremist capitalist state. *Raisin* projects a vision of the American dream that is content to live in the suburbs. On the other hand, Olutola points out that “Lemonade” sells a version of empowerment through conspicuous consumption. “Lemonade” and “Cumbia” both find empowerment through a transgressive conservatism. Mingus wanted his art respected like white art was respected so he pushed to have it conform to
the trappings of white art (classical music). Beyoncé participates in a different trapping of conformity: empowerment through conforming to the mythos that if you work hard you will succeed and defines that success through monetary gain thus playing into a capitalist narrative of what gives life value: “Always stay gracious/the best revenge is your paper.” This is quite unlike Raisin, where empowerment and the fight against racism are shown as deeply internal and intellectual. But I did not experience “Cumbia” or A Raisin in the Sun with the intention of working towards justice. However, that is what I expected from “Lemonade” and the other works in Group 4.

The pieces in Group 4 share the idea that working towards liberation is a continuous and difficult process that involves changing the very way one conceives of the world. They, much like the avant-garde works in Group 2, have shown me biases I did not even realize I had. Gaard, like Taylor, looks to create connections between disciplines to expand our conception of liberation beyond the human. Eagleton, Ngũgĩ, Tuck, and Kelley all underline the entanglements of the academy and justice. In these works, they are inextricably linked, and cannot and should not be taken separately. Ngũgĩ points to the insidiousness of colonial structures, explaining how, like in Sozaboy, language is used as a tool to manipulate and destroy colonized peoples. Tuck concerns herself with how to study marginalized communities: can we do so without inflicting more damage? She writes to social scientists, leading me to question the ways in which her letter applies to literary study. Kelley’s article looks to shape how one thinks of the University as a whole: how does someone concerned with justice operate in the academy? From studying the everyday to working towards justice I see a continuum of seeking to break down what divides us to move towards a better world.
GROUP 1 – Disembodiment: Songs of non/sense

Poetry
Jean Tardieu, “Monsieur Monsieur aux bains de mer”
W.B. Yeats, “To an Isle in the Water”

Theater
Samuel Beckett, *Not I*

Theory
Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (*The Logic of Sense*)
Julia Kristeva, “L’Impudence d’énoncer: la langue maternelle” (“The Impudence of Uttering: Mother Tongue”)

GROUP 2 – Sensation: Songs of longing

Poetry
Rainer Maria Rilke, “Da neigt sich die Stunde und rührt mich an” from *Das Stunden-Buch* (*The Book of Hours*)
Anna Akhamatova, “Requiem”

Short stories
Franz Kafka, “Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse” (“Josephine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk”)

Theory
Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”
Brian Massumi, “The Supernormal Animal” in *The Nonhuman Turn*

GROUP 3 – War: Songs of love

Poetry
W.B. Yeats, “When You Are Old”
Rainer Maria Rilke, “Wir dürfen dich nicht eigenmächtig malen” from *Das Stunden-Buch* (*The Book of Hours*)

Short stories
E.T.A. Hoffmann, “Rat Krespel” (“Councillor Krespel”)


Theory
Roland Barthes, “La mort de l’auteur” (“The Death of the Author”)
Theodor W. Adorno, “Late Style in Beethoven” in Essays on Music and “Schubert”

GROUP 4 – Silence: Songs of what could have been . . .

Poetry
Elizabeth Bishop, “The Fish”
Stéphane Mallarmé, “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard”

Film
Safaa Fathy, D’ailleurs, Derrida (Derrida Elsewhere)

Theory
Jean-Luc Nancy, Listening

Intellectual Autobiography

Sample 3

In a turn of sudden curiosity, I looked up the etymology of “thesis”. Imagine my surprise, when the Online Etymology Dictionary told me that thesis was defined as “unaccented syllable or note”, from the Latin thesis “unaccented syllable in poetry”, as well as from the Greek thesis “a proposition; downbeat [in music]”, originally “a setting down, a placing, an arranging”. It was only in the 1570s that thesis as a “formulation in advance of a proposition to be proved”, and in the 1650s that it became to denote a “dissertation presented by a candidate for a university degree”. Further digging led me to A Poet’s Glossary by Edward Hirsch, in which thesis is tied with arsis. These terms originally “referred to the raising and lowering of the foot in ancient Greek dance”, where arsis referred “to the lighter or shorter part of the poetic foot and thesis to the heavier or longer part”.1 Part of the shock at discovering the etymology of “thesis” was how its seeming contradiction—the unaccented syllable and the setting down (that is, accent) aspect of thesis—speaks so directly to my thesis’s central philosophy of becoming. In addition, the process of writing my thesis also involved the unaccented academic part of my life becoming the accented musical part of my life (and vice versa, as writing and thinking about the thesis seemed to take over my life in a way that I did not expect).

My thesis, in the scope of only my college career, certainly presents itself as an accent in that journey—in that way, I could argue that it aligns itself more with the musical than the poetic. In spite of my rather facetious attempt to ‘identify’ my work as musical, I have learned

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April’s-fish, therefore, is one figure that attempts to manifest a less unsatisfying option. I imagine that this becoming-fish can be an alternative avenue to explore not only individual identities but the concept of identity itself, interrogations into what it means to identify and to want to identify with someone or something. This is certainly also true for me, as someone who always seemed to exist in between two or more identity markers: for example, I am Korean-born, but I lived in Japan and Singapore before the age of seven, and grew up in six different neighborhoods in New York City before leaving home for college. It was not just external circumstances that challenged where I belonged, however; after one semester in college, I made the decision by myself to move to Germany alone and pursue my career. There, I learned even more what it meant to identify as Korean-American in Germany (which it turns out was different than identifying as Korean-American in America or in Korea); I felt what it was like to be neither Korean nor American enough, or too Korean or too American; I even experienced being too much of a musician or too much of an “intellectual” or too little of both. In other words, I was constantly reminded of how inadvertently, my own identity and the environment around me were constantly becoming messier and more complicated.

Looking back, I see that this intellectual contention with identification was in the works long before I even thought of my senior thesis. For my junior paper (in 2018), I explored music’s influence on character identity in Franz Kafka’s “Josefine, die Sängerin oder das Volk der Mäuse”, E.T.A Hoffmann’s “Rat Krespel”, and Anton Chekhov’s “Skripka Rotshil’d da”. Entitled “The Well-Tempered Identity”, I wrote a set of a ‘prelude’ and ‘fugue’ that attempted to contrapuntally analyze how each author used the concept of music to form and trans-form their character’s identities, as well as how the characters themselves used music to identify or understand their selves. The questions underlying that paper were philosophical ones, even though I did not quite realize it then: interrogations such as “how powerful is music, and in what way?”, “how does music change us?”, and “why does music affect us all so much?”

So perhaps it is not altogether so surprising that these questions were also hidden at the heart of my senior thesis; the main difference between my two works are the type of literature I used. The journey from epic novels to short stories to poetry has been funny and surprising: when I decided officially to attend Harvard, I set out to study Comparative Literature because I had fallen in love with Dostoyevsky novels (The Idiot was and remains a particular favorite). What I loved about his epic novels were the complexity of his characters, and their often frustrating and ambiguous developments. And while I also appreciated short stories and plays and almost every other type of literature at that time, I would never have read poetry unless it was required reading from class. If anyone had told me then (in 2013!) that I would write an honor’s thesis on poetry, I would have laughed in their faces. Fast-forward to now, and I don’t know what my life would be like without poetry. While I still love getting lost in long novels, I’ve learned to get lost for long periods of time in short poems. Through reflection on this change and on how I had arrived at my thesis’s particular intersection of music, poetry, and philosophy, I realized that my love for song (the ‘physical’ or ‘official’ meeting of music and poetry) was at the heart of my questions. But what kind of songs? And my four groups were born:

Disembodiment: Songs of non/sense
Sensation: Songs of longing

I wonder if I am simply a product of my time; there are important social and political questions today that gravitate toward issues of identity, and identity politics seem to have taken over a large part of the cultural consciousness (at least in the United States, if not in most developed countries in the world).
War: Songs of love
Silence: Songs of what could have been . . .

“Disembodiment” looks at the works that guided my notion of sense and nonsense. Beckett’s _Not I_ was the central work of the final project in my sophomore tutorial, where my class created a new interdisciplinary theatre work called _Not 1_. This was the first time I thought about the creation of meanings, and their relations to material bodies. In particular, I wondered how the voice could function separate from the body, what kind of sense and nonsense a disembodying of the voice made. This led me to reflect on how I had already experienced this disembodiment: through the identification with my violin’s sounds as my voice, sounds which are disembodied from my body and resonate from a different body (my violin’s).

This idea of disembodiment, I realized, had within it many sensations, but particularly that of longing, of striving towards that which seemed impossible. My violin’s voice, after all, could not replace my own voice, nor could my own physical voice replace my violin’s (or rather, my violin voice). “Songs of longing” therefore look at works which are heavily influenced by the movement from one point to another, both emotional and physical, as well as the myriad of sensations that are evoked in this movement.

Longing, in a sense (no pun intended), can be understood as instability and conflict. This led me to think of war, and of the oft-cited link between war and love. One common element of the two is power—the ability to control or call things as one wills. All of these works respond in some way to power struggles in life and in death, and taught me to reflect on how these works have informed my understanding of power struggles in music, writing, thinking, and feeling. In fact, it would not be disingenuous to say that my thesis process often felt like a war situation, where I was wrestling with my ‘logical’ side and my ‘emotional’ side, my ‘musician’ side and my ‘academic’ side. This journey, a longing, towards bringing these ‘sides’ together were both aided and made further frustrating as I learned that they were not all that different; indeed, they were often two ‘sides’ of a Möbius strip.

After war, there is often silence. And paradoxically, in that silence, many questions arise: what if I had analyzed this poem instead? What about other philosophies? What other questions could I have asked (and attempted to answer)? This group is therefore comprised of works that I had previously considered including in my thesis, but which did not make it in the ‘final cut’. I think of these as poems and works that can continue my work of the past year and half, which continues to inspire more questions, more thinking, and more feeling.
Comics and Graphic Novels

I have always been a casual fan of comics, but it wasn’t until I took Stephanie Burt’s freshman seminar, Comics and Graphic Novels, that I learned about the burgeoning and often overlooked field of comics scholarship. I chose to explore this topic further in my oral exam because I have been meditating a lot on how the comics medium allows for narrative experimentation in ways that other media cannot.

Building Stories is housed in a heavy box as pamphlets, newspaper articles, and dollhouse-like cross sections of one building in Chicago, each piece exploring the various perspectives of the generations of tenants who live there. Ware is known for his exquisitely detailed and architectural works, but nothing he has created is so material and dependent on active readerly engagement as Building Stories. It comes without instructions, so it is up to readers to envision and constantly re-construct the narrative how they see fit, allowing for an experience of cyclicality rather than linear progression. Shortcomings and Skim are specifically about different states of Asian American otherness — Adrian Tomine’s protagonist, the insecure and misunderstood Ben Tanaka, struggles to assert his masculinity, and the Tamaki’s protagonist, the half-Asian, Wiccan goth Skim comes to terms with her queerness. I have returned to Understanding Comics every year after first reading it in Professor Burt’s seminar. It is about the fundamental, formal characteristics of comics, in the form of a comic book. My favorite concept from the book is that of the “gutter,” or the space between panels, which engages a reader to practice “closure,” “observing the parts, but perceiving the whole,” or understanding a scene through the comics medium’s unique transitions.

1. Building Stories — Chris Ware
2. Shortcomings — Adrian Tomine
3. Skim — written by Mariko Tamaki and illustrated by Jillian Tamaki
4. Understanding Comics — Scott McCloud

Modern and Contemporary Latin American Fiction

I have been interested in Latin American literature since I took a course on it my senior year of high school. I have included a collection of short stories by Gabriel García Márquez, having become interested in his work when looking into the 1960’s Latin American literary boom. I learned that the success of magical realism literature was somewhat of a political statement against colonialism and proof of the legitimacy of Latin American literature on the world’s stage. I ventured into Gothic literature in the later years of college, and have been trying to clarify the distinctions between various fantastical genres ever since. Adjacent to magical realism, the Gothic genre was long dismissed by literary critics as repetitive, perhaps for its all-too-common tropes of vampires, monsters, ghosts, witches, and zombies. Magical realism trades in subtlety and relies on the matter of fact acceptance of the surreal in ordinary life, whereas the Gothic is overtly dark and ghoulish, reliably eliciting anxiety, paranoia, and physical terror. Latin American writers have translated cultural figures into Gothic characters, creating pointedly metaphorical shadows of reality. The Gothic in Latin America is inextricable from local histories and geo-political contexts, and touches upon the complications of modernization, like colonization by Europe or the United States, nation-building after independence wars, and social inequality. Gothic literature has also been called a “writing of Otherness” for its demons, orphans, vampires, ghosts, and racial minorities.

For my junior paper, I wrote about how the troubled children and women in Mariana Enríquez’s story collection, Things We Lost in the Fire and in Fever Dream, a novella by Samanta Schweblin, are able to sense that the ghostly presences around them demand recognition. I explored how Enríquez and
Schweblin unearth the open secret of Argentina’s past, how their Gothic fiction clues us into Argentina’s halting process of national memory formation after political violence. While I have read many other Borges short stories and would be happy to put them in conversation, I have included my favorite one, “The Library of Babel,” for the way Borges couples architectural precision (conceptually and syntactically) and elusive concepts like infinity.

1. Las cosas que perdimos en el fuego — Mariana Enríquez
2. Fever Dream — Samanta Schweblin
3. La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada (y otros cuentos) — Gabriel García Márquez
4. “La biblioteca de Babel” — Jorge Luis Borges

Pedro Almodóvar

I fell in love with Almodóvar’s films in one of my favorite courses at Harvard, Spanish Cinema. I am interested in the various ways in which the formal elements of his films, like his use of geometrical patterns and saturated colors complement the themes he is so fond of exploring — women overcoming trauma, women exploring new social bonds and family structures, and sexual liberation in the Post-Franco era, to name a few. I have enjoyed learning about La Movida Madrileña and the specific historical context that has influenced Almodóvar’s work, but one of my main academic interests is international cinema, and so I have also been intrigued by the way his films pay homage to his artistic influences like masters of melodrama Alfred Hitchcock and Douglas Sirk, as well as his Hong Kong contemporary, Wong Kar-wai.

1. Volver
2. Todo sobre mi madre
3. Hable con ella
4. Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios

Literary History, Literary Journalism and Criticism

Alice in Time, “Herman Melville at Home,” and “Wonder Woman’s Secret Past” all inspired my formalist and historicist approach to my senior thesis because they tell the story of their subjects — Lewis Carroll’s Alice, Herman Melville, and Wonder Woman, respectively — in a richly detailed way, through interdisciplinary research and an intense and specific concatenation of facts. Lepore, for example, in “Herman Melville at Home,” discusses the private Herman Melville, who, despite his fame, was incredibly elusive and supposedly mad. She interweaves details of his personal life with quotations from his works, at one point drawing an illuminating parallel between Melville and the infamous, monomaniacal Captain Ahab in Moby Dick. How Fiction Works gave me the vocabulary to do better close readings, especially on narrative perspective. I curated the works in this category because they developed the tools that I needed to balance my interest in and tendency to overdo formal close readings with my interest in cultural research and history.

1. Alice in Time — Gillian Beer
2. “Herman Melville at Home” — Jill Lepore
3. “The Last Amazon: Wonder Woman’s Secret Past” — Jill Lepore
4. How Fiction Works — James Wood
While I took a long time to settle on a thesis topic, I knew that I wanted it to utilize the entire academic toolkit I have been developing and expanding since high school and throughout college. I was introduced to Latin American and Hispanic literature by my wonderful high school Spanish teacher and fell in love with the works of Gabriel García Márquez, Federico García Lorca, and Carlos Fuentes, among many others. For my junior paper, I wrote about how the troubled children and women in Mariana Enríquez’s story collection, *Las cosas que perdimos en el fuego* (*Things We Lost in the Fire*, 2017), and in *Distancia de rescate* (*Fever Dream*, 2014), a novella by Samanta Schweblin, are able to sense that the ghostly presences around them demand recognition. I explored how Enríquez and Schweblin unearth the open secret of Argentina’s past, how their Gothic fiction clues us into Argentina’s halting process of national memory formation after political violence. Pondering the unexpectedly global scope of the popularity of the Argentine comic strip *Mafalda*, I wanted to understand how it has invited so many divergent political appropriations. I supposed that I could venture my own explanation as to *Mafalda’s* accessibility, one based on its formal design as well as its political content. Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*, a guide to graphic literacy, trained me to always look beyond the surface of a work at what is unsaid. To meld the formalist and historicist approaches in my thesis, I wanted to tell the story of *Mafalda* and its cultural importance by curating facts and doing close readings.

I’ve chosen “Comics and Graphic Novels” as my first grouping because learning about the visual medium at a micro level has prompted me to reflect on fundamental differences between media. The comics medium allows for narrative experimentation in ways that prose fiction, for example, does not. It is not that images serve to complement or accompany the words — they can suggest what characters do or cannot, and depending on the narrative perspective of the work, can contradict a character’s self-presented narrative. In my thesis, I was interested in how cartoonishness, and the apparent simplicity
or accessibility of iconography, belies emotional complexity. I have always been drawn to artists who play with the balance between opacity and transparency. Chris Ware uses his restrained and muted visual style to convey deep emotion, through what he calls “crystalline structures of feeling.” He creates an aesthetics of loneliness, in the sense that his subdued color palette and distinctly delineated buildings and interior spaces convey the emotional repression of his characters. Building Stories comes in a single, large box as pamphlets, fictional newspaper articles, and dollhouse-like cross sections of one building in Chicago, with each piece exploring the various perspectives of the generations of tenants who live there. Ware is known for his exquisitely detailed and architectural works, but nothing he has created is so dependent on active readerly engagement as Building Stories. It comes without instructions, so it is up to readers to envision and constantly re-construct the narrative how they see fit, allowing for an experience of cyclical rather than linear narrative progression.

In Catherine Nguyen’s course, Asian/American Graphic Novels, I learned that the inaccessibility of comics visuals could be used as a political tool. In Jillian and Mariko Tamaki’s graphic novel Skim and in Adrian Tomine’s Shortcomings, there is an insoluble tension between what the characters express verbally and what the accompanying images convey. Both graphic novels are about different states of otherness — Tomine’s Ben Tanaka grapples with his insecure masculinity and denies his identity as Asian American, and the Tamaki’s Skim is a Wiccan-practicing, half-Asian high schooler who comes to terms with her queerness. For example, Skim, which serves as Kim’s diary, displays a measure of curation, as the Tamaki’s reveal her deeper feelings through the disparity between the soberly narrated text and the nuanced imagery. This subversion of expectations underscores what Jared Gardner calls “graphic alterity,” the notion that if “we are all different, we are also the same for being different...and the inscrutable Asian becomes no longer the model minority but the universal model of the painful and beautiful alterity of other people” (Gardner 146-47). This emphasis on unknowability is especially salient with regards to Asian Americans. One of the prevailing strategies in Asian American comics in
dismantling the timeworn stereotype of being “inscrutable, mysterious, and unreadable by mainstream America,” is to extrapolate such a judgment and to “point out the universality of this inscrutability, the impossibility of ever comprehending, truly, another person” (Gardner 143). This emphasis on unknowability is especially important because it makes the characters’ experiences, despite moments in which the reader is drawn into the characters’ singular experiences, resistant to outside ownership.

In keeping with my interest in double readings and deceptive surfaces, my second grouping expands upon my interest in fantastical literature. I have included a collection of short stories by Gabriel García Márquez, having become interested in his work when looking into the 1960’s Latin American literary boom. While my junior paper made political allegories of Gothic tropes, I took an interest in García Márquez’s brand of magical realism for the way his transporting prose conveys the surreal intensity of deeply emotional experiences. While I am conscious of the danger in making reductive allegorical readings, I have learned that magical realism creates spaces of hybridity and unfettered possibility that are well-suited to not only political critiques but also productive re-imaginings of history. Such space are, like the fictional Macondo in *Cien años de soledad*, as Dorota Wojda discusses in “Bruno Chulz and the Magical Realism of Gabriel García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*,” “of great significance for postcolonial revisions because [they allow] readers to perceive...the culture of the colonized area as a palimpsest in which layers of different civilizations show through each other” (Wojda 182).

I ventured into Gothic literature in the later years of college, and have been trying to reckon with and clarify the distinctions between various fantastical genres ever since. The Gothic genre was long dismissed by literary critics as repetitive, perhaps for its all-too-common tropes of vampires, monsters, ghosts, witches, and zombies. Magical realism trades in subtlety and relies on the matter of fact acceptance of the surreal in ordinary life, whereas the Gothic is overtly dark and ghoulish, reliably eliciting anxiety, paranoia, and physical terror. Latin American writers have translated cultural figures
into Gothic characters, creating pointedly metaphorical shadows of reality. The Gothic in Latin America is inextricable from local histories and geo-political contexts, and touches upon the complications of modernization, like colonization by Europe or the United States, nation-building after independence wars, and social inequality. Gothic literature has also been called a “writing of Otherness” for its demons, orphans, vampires, ghosts, and racial minorities. Julio Cortázar explained the subtle machinations of the Gothic genre when he described how “the fantastic does not appear in a harsh or direct way...but rather that it presents itself in a way which we would call interstitial, slipping between two moments...in order to allow us to catch a glimpse, in the binary mechanism of human reason, of the latent possibility of a third frontier, of a third eye” (Cortázar 526). The Gothic genre clues us into a subliminal, hidden truth beneath the surface of empirical reality. It is fitting, then, that Enríquez and Schweblin reliably excite the characteristically Gothic responses of fear, anxiety, and helplessness in the face of ineffable evil, through women and children, characters who are marginalized in different ways in a popular culture of disbelief and denial, and who are especially sensitive to the ghostly traces of the past in their environments. I argue that the women and children in their novels take on a rehabilitative role toward the country’s violent past, which had been papered over by the media.

One of my main academic interests throughout college has been international cinema. I fell in love with Almodóvar’s films in one of my favorite courses at Harvard, Spanish Cinema (Spanish 70D). I am interested in the various ways in which the formal elements of his films, such as his use of geometrical patterns and saturated colors complement the themes he is so fond of exploring: women overcoming trauma, women exploring new social bonds and family structures, sexual liberation in the Post-Franco era, to name a few. I have enjoyed learning about La Movida Madrileña and the specific historical context that has influenced Almodóvar’s work, but I have also been intrigued by the way his films pay homage to his artistic influences like masters of melodrama Alfred Hitchcock and Douglas Sirk, and his Hong Kong contemporary Wong Kar-wai. In several of the films on my list, unrelated women who are reeling from
various unresolved traumas forge new family structures with each other, and his use of vibrant, hyper-saturated color and geometric prints serve as the backdrops for these scenes of reconciliation and reparation. His signature formal elements amount to a kind of politics. In “World Without Strangers: The Poetics of Coincidence in Pedro Almodóvar’s Talk to Her,” Despina Kakoudaki refers to the web of characters, often strangers, that Almodóvar deftly manages to pull together. Kakoudaki posits that randomness and coincidence are signature elements of his work, and reflect his “utopian desires, while respecting the fact that social unifications can only succeed when we recognize the otherness of people” (Kakoudaki 35). His plots and aesthetic have indeed been termed “zany,” but defenders of Almodóvar rightly touch upon his sensitivity for what Jared Gardner understands as “alterity”: “the use of terms such as zany or kitsch diminishes the import of Almodóvar’s thematic and visual choices and enacts a widespread, if implicit, disrespect for cultural productions coded as ‘feminine’ or queer” (Kakoudaki 6).

Alice in Time, “Herman Melville at Home,” and “Wonder Woman’s Secret Past” all inspired my formalist and historicist approach to my senior thesis because they tell the story of their subjects — Lewis Carroll’s Alice, Herman Melville, and Wonder Woman, respectively — in a richly detailed way, through interdisciplinary research and an intense and specific concatenation of factual details. In formulating the central arguments of my thesis, which posit Mafalda’s indeterminacy in terms of generational identity, I turned to Gillian Beer’s Alice in Space. Lewis Carroll’s background as a mathematician and logician influenced his propensity for linguistic acrobatics, and Beer is poetic when she adopts his playful tone when discussing Carroll’s puns and pesky double meanings: “So both pun and parody speak particularly to a child who has only recently learned to read and has several possibilities in mind as she gazes at the unfamiliar letters on the page” (Beer 77). Alice’s state of being in childhood and adulthood at once has a sense of volatile potentiality rather than a kind of resistance as it is for Mafalda: growing “may involve a series of transformations so profound that you may swerve off into being anything at all: a bread-and-butter-fly, a queen, a pig, an elongated neck estranged from feet” (Beer 210). I was deeply
inspired by the way Beer so seamlessly melds her observations on form with her knowledge of the historical provenance of Carroll’s literary tactics, understanding the formal and socio-political aspects through each other. For example, Alice’s vulnerability to fantastical transmogrification had political implications: “The dissolving boundaries between species in both books call on the then-current controversies surrounding Darwin’s insistence on the common ancestry of animal and human” (Beer 210). In “Herman Melville at Home,” Lepore discusses the private Melville, who, despite his fame, was elusive, and supposedly mad. She interweaves details of his personal life with quotations from his works, at one point drawing an illuminating parallel between Melville and the infamous, monomaniacal Captain Ahab in Moby Dick. My last addition, James Wood’s How Fiction Works, gave me the vocabulary to do better close readings, especially about narrative perspective. I curated the works in this category because they developed the tools that I needed to balance my interest in and tendency to overdo formal close readings with my interest in cultural research and history.
Works Cited:


Comparative Literature Oral Exam Topics

Sample 5

Group 1: Experimenting — The Pursuit of Knowledge

Experimentation is the act of acquiring knowledge, the content, in the first place. Understanding the norms that have governed the experimental process is a crucial aspect of analyzing the interpretation of the acquired knowledge. These norms do not exist in isolation from their environment; in fact (as evidenced especially by the texts here), contemporaneous social and political concerns are continually in dialogue with scientific practices. The texts assembled in this group represent writers and scholars who have influenced my understanding of experimentation practices in recent history. This takes the form of direct accounts from practitioners, such as Francis Bacon and Max Weber, the former of whom also offers an early example of how these declarations can also be embedded in a fictional endeavor. I have also drawn on the work of Alexandre Koyré and Susannah Gibson for a broader understanding of the intellectual, political, and social contexts of scientific practice.

Texts

Throughout the Age of Exploration, thinkers sought to outline norms of acquiring knowledge and their use in defining “civilized” society, imagined by Francis Bacon in this unfinished utopian novel.


Relatively early on in the formation of the social sciences as a discipline, Weber espouses the claims that the new discipline can and ought to make on society.

Thought

*The Spirit of Inquiry* tells the story of the Cambridge Philosophical Society’s methodological shift in the mid-nineteenth century as a representative example of broader shifts in English and continental sciences of the century.


Koyré analyzes the experiments and writings of Galileo Galilei to demonstrate the early modern divergence from earlier classical models of scientific inquiry.
Group 2: Collecting — The Order of Knowledge

The two middle groups of this list, Collecting and Mapping, are approaches to organizing acquired knowledge. The practice of collecting was perhaps best expresses the values of the early modern era but can continue to be read into the nineteenth century in more specific contexts. Collecting differs from experimenting by not necessarily attempting to demonstrate a premise or concept through knowledge generated by controlled circumstances, but rather by interpreting a body of knowledge that claims to be assembled more or less without discrimination. Brueghel and Ruben’s series of paintings, The Five Senses, and the Encyclopédie embody the ways in which the act of collecting was and can be a demonstration of knowledge and taste. The ubiquity of knowledge demonstrated in these texts suggests a self-evident order to nature that belies the hand of collector. These texts, and the scholarship of Farber and Kohlstedt, have served as models for understanding the ways in which values are encoded in bodies of assembled knowledge.

Texts
Brueghel, Jan and Peter Paul Rubens. The Five Senses (1617–1618).

Working within a classical tradition, this series of paintings depicts and enacts early modern sensibilities about knowledge and its presentation.

Diderot, Denis, Jean le Rond d’Alembert. “Cabinet d’histoire naturelle,” Encyclopédie (1751–1766).

The entry on cabinets d’histoire naturelle in Diderot’s Encyclopédie declares the eighteenth-century ethos of collecting, embedded within an artifact that itself is a feat of collection.

Thought

The naturalist tradition originated in the context of imperialism and colonization; the early iterations of modern science were political endeavors as much as they were intellectual ones.


Discovery and presentation of the natural world became canvases onto which anxieties and expressions of masculinity were projected.
Group 3: Mapping — The Shape of Knowledge

Mapping takes the specific technique of spatializing — often accompanied by visualizing — to organize an assembled body of knowledge. Learning to recognize and to decode the use of space as an interpretive device has been a formative part of my course of study, in texts including maps, art, and prose. This group includes models of this “spatial” theoretical approach and primary texts that exemplify, deliberately or not, the significance of space in fiction and the actual world. I first gained historical and theoretical context to this approach through texts like Pomponius Mela and the work of Harley, though I had earlier experimented with reading genre and form through space with the Wandering Rocks chapter of Ulysses. Kant offers a metaphysical justification for prioritizing an attention to space, supported by Professor Shell’s geographical logic that reshaped my understanding and approach to canonical texts like Hamlet.

Texts

Joyce’s ambitious novel experiments with the powers and limits of language, such as the “Wandering Rocks” chapter which functionally maps out Dublin through Leopold Bloom’s linear wanderings.


Pomponius Mela’s Description of the World, which found renewed interest in the Age of Exploration, is an atlas without maps, instead using textual descriptions that traverse the globe and reveal his Roman frame of reference.

Shakespeare, William. The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (c. 1599–1601).

The political and social tensions of inheritance and governance in Hamlet models the significance of geography in imagined and real worlds.

Thought

The visual artifact of the map is also an intellectual one, wrought by its particular political, ethical, and religious contexts.

Kant’s philosophy of epistemology considers comprehension of space and time as a significantly imaginative — or at least, constructive — phenomenon.


Interpretations of space, land, and geography are not merely trivial coincidences with human action and character but in fact often precede them.

**Group 4: Representing — The Exposition of Knowledge**

Representing knowledge is distinct from pursuing or organizing knowledge by having additional or alternative ends, such as social or humanistic commentary. This approaches the question of why one might cross or mingle genres and form, and how to interpret judiciously across those boundaries. The texts of this group are largely drawn from the nineteenth century because it initially struck me as a moment when thinkers were grappling with tradition and revolution in a way that continues to be relevant in contemporary life, but also because in my course of study they have inspired and synthesized my many threads of the interest. Mitchell’s article early on in my studies — paired, in fact, with Ulysses from the previous group — challenged my interpretive framework for literature in particular. The *Origin of Species* represents my broader revelation to take the genre of “scientific” writing as seriously as, for example, a Victorian novel like *Middlemarch*, aided by the scholarship of Gillian Beer.

**Texts**


As a foundational text of modern life sciences, part of the *Origin of Species*’ influence lay in its aesthetic merits that made it accessible to a wide swath of readers. (See Gillian Beer.)


Eliot’s distinct narrative technique invites comparisons of philosophical and scientific concerns — heredity, epistemology, biology — and Victorian society.


Zola explicitly draws on scientific knowledge to explore its consequences in modern society.

**Thought**

Beer explicates the literary merits and strategies of Darwin’s writings, especially *On the Origin of Species*.


Mitchell reconstructs and interprets Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Laocoon* to advocate for renewed attention to space and time in both literature and the arts.
My thesis examined one particular way in which texts, especially in the nineteenth century, pose or answer profound questions about knowledge and its discovery. In bringing together nineteenth-century physical sciences, *Return of the Native*, and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, my thesis was the latest iteration of my abiding interest in the interchange between knowledge — specifically articulated by modern science — and its representation. The texts assembled in these groups are by no means a comprehensive set for thinking through literature and knowledge but rather represent the routes by which I have arrived at my current understanding of this comparison. The groups are ordered in a flexible timeline of the ways in which written texts have approached knowledge, though the approximate historical period of each group varies with the nature of the approach. The title of each group encapsulates ways that I have noticed thinkers in my curriculum — philosophers, artists, writers, scientists — approaching and evaluating knowledge and literature’s role in interpreting knowledge. Each group is divided into “text” and “thought,” which is intended to suggest texts that might be considered for literary analysis, and thinkers (scholars, theoreticians, philosophers), both contemporary and historical, who have articulated frameworks through which one might analyze the texts. Though the texts assembled here are representative of my classwork in the past four years, the boundaries of my learning have been porous. I experienced these texts while also immersed in “extra”-curricular communities that have influenced my relationships with these texts: my curiosity and understanding of systems of knowledge and belief have been deepened by my experience as a nonreligious participant in daily worship (Memorial Church’s
Morning Prayers); my art interpretation and attention to institutionalized knowledge have been formed by my experience as a tour guide and intern at the Harvard Art Museums and elsewhere.

The first group, “Experimenting,” brings together texts I have encountered in my course of study that consider how one even goes about accumulating knowledge in the first place. In *The New Atlantis*, the seventeenth-century English natural philosopher and politician Francis Bacon (1561–1626) imagines a utopian land governed by empirical principles. In doing so, he espouses early modern ideals of science and society — one of the first thinkers I encountered who did so through the form of the novel, albeit a novel that was an addendum to a longer philosophical treatise. *The New Atlantis*, as an early example of a deliberately imaginative, world-building text, provided me with a historical point of reference for later literary texts that valorize or interrogate knowledge in the same way (see the final group of texts, “Representing.”) In his article, “Galileo and Plato,” the intellectual historian Alexandre Koyré rounds out the historical context of the early modern experimental framework. Koyré — who represents a very mid-twentieth century conception of history of science as distinct epochs and paradigms — views Galileo’s work as an epitome of the early modern divergence from Aristotelian classical thought in his priority of the experiment over (“common sense”) experience that adds layers of intent and interpretation. “Experimentation is the methodical interrogation of nature,” he writes, “an interrogation which presupposes and implies a *language* to formulate the questions, and a dictionary which enables us to read and interpret the answers.”¹ Koyré provides a productive, if somewhat broad-stroked, model of history of

¹ Koyré, “Galileo and Plato,” 403, original emphasis.
modern scientific knowledge, with some attention to the form and genre of its expression. Whereas Bacon’s utopian vision and Koyré’s characterization of Galileo describe early modern enthusiasm for empiricism, the twentieth-century social scientist Max Weber articulates the modern anxieties and limits to the ideology in his essay “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy.” Though Weber is writing on social science, the discipline was still young enough that Weber’s delineation of its boundaries is a translation directly from “pure” scientific practice, offering a qualified view of the rapid advance of science in the nineteenth century.

The second and third groups, “Collecting” and “Mapping,” respectively, are modes of organizing knowledge that have intrigued me both as a student and in my extracurricular pursuits. Though both modes have been employed throughout history, the texts I have assembled here represent specific moments when the ethos and conventions of these modes were formalized and became ends unto themselves. Perhaps the ultimate embodiment of collecting as an end unto itself was the Encyclopédie assembled by Denis Diderot and Jean le d’Alembert throughout the mid-eighteenth century. The vast scope of the Encyclopédie and its claim to being “raisonné” aspires to evenhanded, scientific treatment of the world of knowledge in its entirety, but intentionally or not also embodies the foci of their body of knowledge. The ideals of “Cabinets d’histoire naturelle,” for example, espoused in that specific entry prioritize the judgment of the organizer of the cabinet, which is not necessarily benign: often objects were chosen as curiosities from afar to demonstrate empire as a measure of “scientific” prowess. Brueghel and Rubens’ series of paintings, The Five Senses (1617), further embody the ways in which ideals governed collecting knowledge. The title alone suggests the classical influence on the overarching scheme (sorting according to the five Aristotelian senses),
and the evidence of ordering — in frames, curtains, pillars, shelves — calls attention to the curator’s touch despite an initial “natural” feel. The history of science scholarship of Sally Kohlstedt and Paul Farber illuminate the ways in which these ideals ordering scientific knowledge intersected with other social concerns in the nineteenth century: scientific discovery held “religious significance, economic importance, and aesthetic value”\(^2\) to developing nations, as opportunities to articulate the “masculine authority” in the “physical prowess and intellectual expertise required to discover and acquire the specimens.”\(^3\)

Organizing knowledge through collecting is governed by an ethos of quantity that holds a degree of expressive power; mapping knowledge specifically homes in on the expressive power of space and visualization to order accumulated knowledge. In this group, the thought informs a great deal of the approach to the texts, formulating the ways in which space is conceptualized philosophically as well as how language can (or can try to) achieve the same effect. Underpinning Kant’s metaphysical philosophy are claims that space and time structure human intellect, which suggest that these dimensions precede any world-building endeavor, as might be undertaken in fiction, for example. This can be viewed as a corollary to Shell’s Islandology, which connects place and the delineation thereof to national and cultural identity, both in history and in creative endeavors. For me, this is applied most radically to Hamlet, whose “shorthand national history of Denmark” whose “physical geography,” Shell argues, “matches up to its philosophical aspect and informs its spiritual and corporeal motivation,” “similitudes [that] all verge […] on identity.”\(^4\) Taking space and geography to be the antecedent

\(^2\) Farber, 55.
\(^3\) Kohlstedt, 110.
\(^4\) Shell, 126; 154.
of human intellect and generative to national and personal identity, the radical modernist experiment of the “Wandering Rocks” chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses* becomes clearer. This chapter, aided by the reading approach of Japanese art Professor Melissa McCormick in my freshman year, first brought the questions of space and the “limits” of language together that has inspired much of the rest of my course of study.

The final group of texts, “Representing,” are texts that I found to synthesize the previously discussed approaches to knowledge. Many of them are novels from the nineteenth century, which all at once need to accumulate or conjure, order, and (in the most ambitious) spatialize knowledge to an artistic end. Émile Zola’s novels of the Rougon-Macquart family make legible the contemporary scientific impetus of his artistic project, but the work of George Eliot has also been noted for being inflected by the scientific sphere that she occupied by association, though its applications are to less explicit ends. But scientists themselves also offer provocative interpretations of scientific knowledge; *The Origin of Species* is perhaps most widely recognized in the current cultural memory. Though often cited as a work of science, as Gillian Beer’s approach in *Darwin’s Plots* argues, *Origin* enacts many of the same techniques that are asked of literary texts: unfolding dramatic stories of life through carefully selected imagery and prose.