University of Virginia
Political and Social Thought

Fourth Year Thesis Titles and Abstracts—Spring 2025

Jason Almas

"Politics at the High Court: An Examination of the U.S. and Canadian Supreme Courts on Abortion"

On June 24, 2022, the Supreme Court of the United States released its decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. Writing for the majority, Justice Alito called the earlier decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which guaranteed a right to an abortion under the Constitution's right to privacy, "egregiously wrong," and the Court overturned both the original holding in *Roe* and the subsequently modified holding in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. In minutes, women across the U.S. lost what had been considered a fundamental right for nearly 50 years.

This thesis seeks to identify "why" the U.S. saw a sharp reversal from *Roe* to *Dobbs*. In doing so, it brings in a comparative example in Canada, which experienced similar shifts in abortion legislation during the latter half of the 20th century. In 1988, the Canadian Supreme Court ruled on their own challenge to the existing national abortion law in *R v. Morgentaler*, where a majority of the Court held that the existing criminal code violated their right to the "security of the person." However, unlike the U.S., Canada has not regressed in terms of national abortion policy, and abortion in Canada is decriminalized and funded by provincial healthcare.

In trying to identify "why" there exists such a significant difference between two relatively similar countries, I examine three factors in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. In Chapter 1, I recount the history of abortion legislation in both countries and detail the specific differences between the holdings in *Roe* and *Morgentaler*.

In Chapter 2, I identify the first of the three factors, the differing "rights documents" between the two countries. I discuss the lengthy history of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights as well as the more recent phenomenon of substantive due process. In turning to Canada, I describe the process behind the creation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and its subsequent empowerment of the Canadian Supreme Court. I argue that the newer and more plural Charter, with its notwithstanding provision which provides legislatures the ability to override Supreme Court decisions, enables the Canadian Supreme Court to produce more acceptable and stable decisions. Additionally, I include a discussion of Jamal Greene's *How*

Rights Went Wrong, and how Greene's account provides additional clues to the ultimate outcome of abortion rights in both countries.

In Chapter 3, I focus on Michael Klarman's backlash theory to argue that, in prescribing a specific right to an abortion within a trimester framework, the United States Supreme Court short-circuited the legislative process, producing backlash among the states. I argue that a similar phenomenon is not present in Canada, owing to the Canadian Supreme Court's reserved decision in *Morgentaler*.

In Chapter 4, I examine extrajudicial factors like interest groups and political strategists to showcase how these entities formed new coalitions after *Roe* and propelled conservative leaders into government. I consider several responses to the backlash thesis, and I ultimately argue that *Roe* set the basis for any future acceptable "compromise" even if one does not believe it resulted in a backlash. I also recount the history of Canada's response to *Morgentaler* via Bill C-43 and discuss how abortion remains decriminalized today.

In the Conclusion, I revisit the decision in *Dobbs* and document the rise of the Federalist Society. Finally, I report on the current apathy towards future abortion criminalization in Canada.

Emma Ball

"The Word that Wouldn't Work: How Neoliberalism Lost Its Meaning in the Academy"

When in doubt, blame neoliberalism—this has become the unspoken rule of critiquing higher education. Invoking it to explain trends from vanishing tenure lines to market-driven reforms, professors, adjuncts, and graduate students alike use the term to name what feels like a shared crisis. But beneath this apparent consensus lies a deeper fracture. This thesis argues that neoliberalism, as a critique, functions less as a precise analytical category and more as a rhetorical container—one capacious enough to hold competing interests, yet too vague to produce coordinated resistance. Using a class-based framework, I show how the professoriate's internal stratification fundamentally shapes how neoliberalism is understood, deployed, and ultimately limited as a tool for collective action.

Chapter One explains how "neoliberalism" has come to stand in for a wide range of transformations in higher education. Tracing the term's evolution and deployment in scholarly literature, I argue that its capaciousness has undermined its political utility, and has turned it into a catch-all term that gestures toward crisis without clearly naming its source.

Chapter Two maps the internal class structure of the professoriate, detailing the lived realities of tenured faculty, full-time contingent instructors, adjuncts, and graduate students. I show how material conditions, such as wages, security, autonomy, structure not just experience, but identity and perceived interests. Drawing on Marx, Gramsci, and Schumpeter, I introduce the role of hegemony in sustaining consent to an increasingly precarious labor system.

In Chapter Three, I translate these positionalities into faction-based critiques. By analyzing how each group defines neoliberalism in its own terms, I show how the term is stretched to accommodate fundamentally incompatible perspectives. Rather than reflecting a

unified ideology, neoliberalism becomes a floating signifier—anchoring critique while concealing disunity.

Chapter Four confronts the consequences of this fragmentation. I argue that efforts to resist neoliberalism have failed not due to apathy, but because of unresolved divisions within the proletariat. Attempts to forge solidarity within the professoriate often reproduce existing hierarchies. However, I also suggest that external political threats, particularly those posed by the far-right, may paradoxically offer a more effective rallying point for collective defense of the academy than the neoliberal critique itself.

Together, these chapters reveal that the widespread critique of neoliberalism in academic discourse is not a sign of unity but a symptom of fragmentation. As long as class divisions within the professoriate remain unacknowledged, the term neoliberalism will continue to obscure more than it clarifies—offering catharsis without coordination. Ultimately, this thesis suggests that the path forward may not lie in perfecting the neoliberal critique, but in finding a new shared imperative. In this moment of escalating political hostility toward higher education, that unifying issue may have already arrived—and may allow us to do just that.

Madeline Barber

"*A House Divided: Christian Rhetoric in Defense and Denunciation of American Slavery"*

As Frederick Douglass observed in his quote, "His religion hindered him from breaking the Sabbath, but not from breaking my skin," this thesis seeks to answer the question of how Christianity was able to be used during the American antebellum period to both further oppress enslaved people and give hope for liberation. This thesis uses a historical approach and primary source analysis to examine how pro and anti-slavery authors employed Christian arguments to support their position, the difference of modern American chattel slavery from ancient Biblical slavery, and the role of violence in politicizing the arguments of slave owners. The disjunction between ancient Biblical slavery and modern American chattel slavery created a space of ambiguity where people could use the Bible to justify both legitimate religious worship and the enslavers' weaponization of Christianity for political purposes.

The first chapter analyzes two primary source accounts from both pro and anti-slavery perspectives. In the analysis of these authors, I found that the locus of the argument was different for the pro and anti-slavery writers, meaning that the Bible was selectively tailored to the opinions that the authors had already established on slavery. The second chapter uses a legal lens to examine slavery in the Bible and American chattel slavery. From the analyses of the two slavery systems, I conclude that the systems were fundamentally different based on the humanization, or dehumanization, of the enslaved people. The inherent conflict between Christianity and slavery was highlighted in the rejection of Christian justification by the people being oppressed by the system, such as David Walker and Nat Turner. The third and final chapter uses Max Weber's definition of the State as the sole arbiter of legitimate violence and the

framework of the case State v. Mann to make the argument that the utilization of Christianity to justify slavery was political because it dealt with violence, and the use of illegitimate violence, allowed only in relation to the racial slave system, created thousands of satellite states where the masters exercised absolute control over their plantations. This thesis argues that Christianity was able to be used for both pro and anti-slavery arguments because the anti-slavery perspective was making a religious argument based on Christianity, whereas the pro-slavery perspective was exploiting Christianity as a façade for a self-serving political argument. Both viewpoints were utilizing Christianity, but the underlying motivation was drastically different.

Haley Barrett

"Echoes of the Wind: An Examination of the Windrush Generation and its Descendants in the Need & Making of a Black British Identity"

The arrival of the SS Empire Windrush in 1948, carrying nearly 500 West Indian passengers to Britain, has come to symbolize the birth of its multicultural society. It is now commemorated as a landmark moment in the nation's modern history. Yet this celebratory narrative obscures the reality of how these migrants were received at the time. Far from being welcomed, they were viewed with suspicion and hostility by both the Labour and Conservative Parties and by large segments of British society. Their arrival was seen as an incursion.

This thesis investigates how West Indians and their descendants have achieved belonging in a nation that has resisted their presence. Central to the inquiry is the role of identity formation as a means of resistance and survival. The thesis traces the shifting articulations of selfhood across generations, asking to what extent these identities have opened up space within British national identity—and whether that space has proved stable or remains conditional.

Chapter 1 sets the historical foundation by examining Britain's legislative response to West Indian migration. Beginning with the 1948 British Nationality Act—a seemingly inclusive piece of legislation that granted colonial subjects British citizenship—I demonstrate how the state quickly sought to retract this openness once it became clear that West Indians would exercise their right to migrate. A series of increasingly restrictive immigration laws followed, reflecting the state's effort to curtail nonwhite migration and contain the definition of Britishness within racialized boundaries.

In Chapter 2, I explore the Windrush generation's evolving relationship to identity in response to this exclusion. Initially arriving with a strong sense of Britishness shaped by colonial education and imperial rhetoric, many West Indians were forced to reconfigure their self-understanding. Confronted by rejection, they embraced a hybrid West Indian identity—an acknowledgment of the multiple cultural influences that shaped them. This identity offered psychological refuge and became a tool through which to challenge the dominant society's narrow conception of itself.

Chapter 3 turns to the descendants of the Windrush generation, who continue to face exclusion despite being born and raised in Britain. I argue that these second and third-generation

individuals have crafted a distinctly Black British identity—one that is at once affirming and politically assertive. This identity has allowed for new expressions of belonging, but it remains contested by a society reluctant to fully integrate its colonial legacy.

In the Conclusion, I draw on Paul Gilroy's notion of postcolonial melancholia to argue that Britain's unresolved relationship with its imperial past hinders the full acceptance of Black Britons. Until the nation reckons with the fact that its imperial subjects were always integral—not marginal—to its history, Black British identity will remain precarious.

John Bedell

"The Holy War on Woke: Evangelical Higher Education and its Relationship to Cultural Marxism"

On April 14, 2023, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis stood in front of a packed crowd at Liberty University and declared a "war on woke." This moment captures a larger dynamic within evangelicalism today, as many evangelicals are preparing for a war on woke, and with that, a war on cultural Marxism. This thesis strives to understand this war on cultural Marxism and use evangelical higher education as a site to do so. Examining the syllabi of social theory courses, materials these schools have published regarding Marxism and cultural Marxism, and articles from popular evangelical news sites, this thesis attempts to gain a full picture of the current atmosphere before discerning its meaning for the present day.

Chapter One begins with an overview of cultural Marxism as a conspiracy theory born in the 1970s, popularized in the 1990s, and still present today. It examines the contents of this conspiracy before analyzing the violence its contents demand. This chapter then sets up the primary theoretical framework for this project, Sylvia Wynter's idea of the West's hegemonic idea of "Man" in contrast with non-human others.

Chapter Two takes a broad historical approach in understanding the lineage of evangelical higher education. Starting its analysis in the late 19th century, this story is told in three major eras. The first is that of the holistic, classical education model; the second is the era of the Bible college; and the third is the era of formalization, institutionalization, and commercialization leading to this present moment. Wynter's framework is weaved throughout this history, considering the ways each of these eras represents a particular version of the universal "Man," thus shaping their curriculum and mission.

Chapter Three contains the bulk of this project's modern content. Examining the syllabi from social theory courses, materials published from the institutions themselves, and articles from popular evangelical news sites, this chapter describes much of what is going on within these schools, around these schools, and in the evangelical world more broadly.

This project concludes with an interpretation of this data. I find that, through viewing the articles published via evangelical news outlets alongside materials published by the schools themselves, more alignment in the war against cultural Marxism/Marxism is coming. These schools will likely succumb to pressures from the evangelical cultural atmosphere, and attempt to

jockey for the most militant position in this battle against cultural Marxism in order to prove themselves to be ideal Christian schools.

The findings of this project may point us towards the future of evangelical higher education and do so in a troubling way. As more schools join this battle against cultural Marxism, real people will be forced to bear the brunt of this race to more militancy. Further, as the epilogue suggests, this will not stop with evangelical higher education, and considering the evangelical war on cultural Marxism may warn us about the future of higher education, demanding a reconsideration and reconfiguration of the entire educational structure.

Emily Carder

"Finding the Human: A Phenomenological Approach to Technological Horizons"

What is human? This thesis begins with a deceptively simple question: if we use artificial intelligence to alter our decisions, how does it alter us? Part philosophical inquiry, part cultural critique, and part thought experiment, this project examines artificial intelligence, broadly understood, and ChatGPT in particular, as mediators of our judgment, ethics, and personhood.

The continental philosophical tradition underpins the moral imagination needed in a post-AI world. To contextualize this inquiry, Part One offers a brief examination of artificial intelligence and defines key terms. I introduce the history of AI and narrow my inquiry to ChatGPT, while describing why my own inquiry into so-called "techno-moral" change differs from the broader movement towards AI alignment.

In Part Two, I provide an ontological backdrop for how technologies mediate experience by surveying the history and implications of phenomenology, specifically the foundational philosophy of Martin Heidgger and Edmund Husserl, as well as its subsequent ethical turn under Emmanuel Levinas. From this abstract foundation, I turn to post-phenomenology, and particularly the work of Don Ihde and Peter-Paul Verbeek, to provide real-world frameworks for how technological artifacts specifically shape perception, behavior, and ultimately moral decision-making.

Parts Two and Three alternate between mapping ontological frameworks and meaning-making. In Part Three, I ask what it means to retain "our humanity"—not as an essentialist category, but as a cultivated practice of judgement. Drawing from the political theory of Hannah Arendt and personal narrative, I explore how theories of action, thinking, and imagination may be used to form a moral sense of self in a technologically mediated world.

This thesis resists both AI fatalism and techno-optimism, instead approaching the question of artificial intelligence as a philosophical invitation: not to ask what technology can do, but what we, as humans, still might.

Riley Fay

"Making America Pure Again: Sex, Citizenship, and Moral Panics"

Though the age of American teenagers taking virginity pledges and proudly wearing purity rings may be behind us, the repercussions of the Purity Movement have long outlasted the sexual abstinence of its participants. This thesis uses the Purity Movement of the 1990s and early 2000s as both a framework of understanding and an example of how conservative Christians sought to redefine what it meant to be an American citizen at the turn of the twenty-first century.

In the first chapter, I explore the theological underpinnings of the Purity Movement in the United States. Evangelical Protestantism is the focus of this review, as it is the faith the Movement arose out of and became most popular within; it was Evangelicalism's focus on personal behaviors and "family values" that became crucial to the Movement as a whole. I analyze the creation and meteoric growth of organizations like True Love Waits, Silver Ring Thing, and Focus on the Family to understand how purity itself came to be defined for both young people and the nation, establishing the standards of purity that will be used in subsequent chapters.

My second chapter shifts to surveying what a nation is in the first place, with reference to theories that view the nation and its citizens as concepts that are pure and capable of being threatened. Using Lauren Berlant's description of American citizenship as "sacred, ahistorical, and national," I explain how the nation defines itself in relation to those threats. Berlant also provides the theory of infantile citizenship, which I argue best reflects the Purity Movement's paradigmatic American citizen. This chapter introduces the importance of national myths for their ability to "purify" the past into a tool of dictating citizenship in the present and future.

Finally, in the third chapter I survey the history of moral panics and their inherent ties to fears over sexual behavior in the United States. I use the theory of resignification to argue that the Purity Movement should be studied and understood as a moral panic, as a cultural process that allowed teenagers' sexuality to come to both *replace* and *embody* larger threats the United States faced as a nation in the 1990s. Via resignification, I contend that the Purity Movement was a struggle for cultural power, an attempt to purify not just young people, but the nation as a whole.

The epilogue offers thoughts and considerations on what it is that has driven Americans towards the pursuit of purity. Obsession with purity, I contend, is the result of a longstanding national myth of perfection. I propose that, as a nation, we need to learn to embrace failure and the learning that comes from making mistakes along the way, rather than expecting perfection at every stage of life

Manvi Harde

Ancient Religion, Living Resistance: Jainism's Non-Violence in Indigenous Resurgence

What does it mean to live nonviolently in a world saturated with violence, especially when this violence is targeted at you? This thesis turns to the spirituality of Jainism as a postcolonial lens into Indigenous non-violent resistance. With the help of a religion known for its extreme adherence to non-violence, Indigenous embodied community practices can be witnessed from an intersubjective, compassionate, and spiritual angle. Through a comparative and reflective approach, I place Jainism in conversation with three Indigenous communities across the globe whose forms of resistance are daily, embodied, and grounded in ancient, land-based cosmologies. Due to the shift away from a Western and liberal assessment of non-violence, I center Jain principles as a site of reimagination that fuses with lived Indigenous practices.

Chapter One is an internal exposition on Jainism, using the life and teachings of Shrimad Rajchandraji as a spiritual anchor to explore how these principles shaped the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi's *ahimsa* (non-violence). In this chapter, I establish the Jain framework that undergirds both *ahimsa* and the rest of the thesis: *Anekantavada* (many-sidedness), *Aparigraha* (non-possession), and *Pratikraman* (ritual of repentance and forgiveness). Chapter Two reads Native American epistemologies, particularly those of the Dakota peoples. Here, the Jain framework is reinterpreted through land-based self-conception, ecological resistance, and radical bravery in the face of love and death. Chapter Three explores the Indigenous concept *Ubuntu* in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. In doing so, I take help from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Black poets and authors, and art movements in current-day South Africa to further diversify the Jain framework of *ahimsa*. Chapter Four mediates on Palestinian cultural resistance through dance, film, poetry, and protest, amongst other practices that reflect a politics of care, grief, and reclamation. This chapter provides a very current-day lens into the practicality of the Jain ethic of inner transformation and outer restraint. Across each chapter, this thesis develops a thread of nonviolence not as a political tool but as a generative way of being, grounded in community. The inward-facing Jain philosophy becomes expansive, relational, and enlivened through the contributions of each Indigenous community. By engaging with these stories, this project challenges hegemonic conceptions of violence and nonviolence, offering a transcontinental, spiritual framework built on relationality and self-transformation.

Alexandra Held-Villasenor

"The Power of Discourse: Analyzing the Effect of Corruption Discourse on the Construction of Political, Social, and Cultural Norms"

From contemporary global development debates to the ancient Greek government's condemnation of Socrates, corruption has long captivated the attention of society, culture, and politics. Corruption was historically understood as a degenerative decay of moral societal character, but the recent resurgence in corruption discourse has offered a more narrow and

legalistic view of corruption as a violation of public office. This thesis re-emphasizes the connection between morality and corruption in order to provide as holistic a view of current corruption discourse as possible.

While there has been a surge in political and economic literature regarding corruption and anti-corruption efforts' effect on power and the state, little has been done to assess the way in which corruption discourse impacts the role and power of the state. In an ever changing age of mass and social media that blends the boundaries between public and private, the state's monopoly on symbolic violence is called into question. My central question asks: How and to what extent does the evolution of corruption discourse in the age of mass and social media shape its potency as a form of symbolic power? This question is essential as the global media landscape continues to evolve, allowing for unprecedented access to information, political discussion and platforms, and cultural exchange. As corruption remains a global issue and focus, it is important to assess how its diverse and shifting discourse affects power and the state.

Chapter 1 outlines the basic terms and framework of this thesis, beginning with an introduction to the concepts of corruption and discourse. I discuss Max Weber's definition of the state as outlined in the lecture "Politics as a Vocation", supplemented by Pierre Bourdieu's addition of symbolic violence and symbolic power from his transcribed lectures in On the State. This chapter positions corruption discourse as a form of symbolic power wielded not only by the state, but also by individual actors.

Chapter 2 expands on corruption discourse as a form of symbolic power using Ari Adut's theory of scandal. We identify the main force of scandal as publicity and explore how the evolution of media has reshaped publicity and its possibilities.

Chapter 3 presents a case study of 1990s Peru under President Alberto Fujimori and intelligence chief Vladimiro Montesinos, analyzing how the two successfully seized control of independent television media to manipulate corruption discourse and legitimize the erosion of democratic norms. By wielding corruption discourse as a form of symbolic power, Fujimori and Montesinos consolidated authoritative power, revealing how individual actors within the state apparatus can appropriate the tools of legitimacy for personal and political gain. The ultimate downfall of Fujimori and Montesinos in the scandal of the 'vladivideos' is analyzed in terms of Adut's framework.

Concluding this paper, Chapter 4 offers a case study of contemporary United States, beginning in 2015 during Donald Trump's first presidential election campaign. Having observed the effect of corruption discourse on democratic norms in Peru, I analyze how Trump has effectively wielded corruption discourse as a form of symbolic power to erode democratic norms.

Laura Howard

"'Invisible people': Market Citizenship and Female Migrant Domestic Workers in Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Lebanon"

Neoliberal markets purport to increase autonomy, promote liberty, and support individualism. However, these effects are not produced or felt equally across populations. Some thrive, others struggle to catch up, and still others are deeply marginalized and deprived of moral and social recognition. This thesis studies how a group of "invisible people", female migrant domestic workers, have experienced the rise of market fundamentalism in three contexts: their countries of origin, their destination countries, and their resistance efforts. In spite of their "invisibility", state-enforced discipline, and the intensive restrictions on their behavior, they have challenged their treatment in neoliberal citizenship regimes and called into question the ideas underlying these institutions.

I utilize a combination of theory and empirics, relying primarily upon the work of Michel Foucault, Francesco Laruffa, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, Margaret Somers, and Dean Spade and a variety of primary sources. These theorists shed new light on the manifestation of neoliberal principles in government programs, legislation, and the reflections of female migrant domestic workers. My claims are based on the premise that states' desires to have a reserve force of laborers, who are not guaranteed rights, can be hired and fired at will, and have the primary purpose of boosting the economy, are rooted in market fundamentalist ideas.

The first chapter discusses Laruffa, Somers, and other key theorists, in addition to methods and methodology. It establishes the concepts of market fundamentalism, market citizenship, and the "contractualization" of citizenship. The second chapter explores the Sri Lankan government's behavior as a sending state, arguing that it seeks to bolster its competitive advantage on the international market by disciplining its female migrants into docile bodies and stereotypical "Third World Women". Since it competes with the Filipino government, whose women are seen as more desirable, it demands fewer rights for its migrant women and trains them to align with the stereotypes held by those in the Global North, in order to raise their appeal. The third chapter, a case study of Singapore, argues that the government adopts a "cost-benefit analysis" to the body politic. It claims that the government surveils female migrant domestic workers' sexual and romantic activity to mitigate the emergence of "undesirable" citizens. The government, as a receiving state, expects a temporary, disposable population of workers, and enforces this standard through marriage restrictions and regular check-ups. The fourth chapter then shifts this focus on sending and receiving states to female migrant domestic workers themselves, describing how their mutual aid projects in Lebanon radically challenge the roots of the kafala system. They contest the isolation, moral ostracization, and time limitations that their oppression relies upon, and seek to undermine institutions from below.

This thesis argues that the logics of market fundamentalism do not result in the wholesale expansion of autonomy, especially not for marginalized, highly vulnerable populations. Female migrant domestic workers become disposable commodities, who are excluded both from moral

recognition and formal legislation. When they resist, they undercut the very foundations of these institutions: their exclusion from society, treatment as moral inferiors, and the desire for them to have a temporary presence in the receiving country. Thus, the actions by sending states, receiving states, and female migrant domestic workers are interconnected and self-reinforcing. They inform one another's policies and responses, with governments producing double-sided disciplinary projects and female migrant domestic workers challenging their core tenets.

Zoë Jenkins

"What Holds Us Together: The Collapse of Civic Trust and the Path Forward"

Americans today are less connected to one another, less civically engaged, and less trusting in institutions than generations before them. Since the 1960s, there has been a significant decline in the frequency of every form of community involvement from attending town halls and voting to joining clubs and having people over for dinner. Across the board, we are witnessing a citizenry that is distrustful—feeling less obligated to engage with their community or buy into community norms. Alongside increased polarization, the bonds with one another necessary for a flourishing democracy seem more strained than ever. Pundits, politicians, and everyday people alike are asking whether democracy can—or should—survive.

This thesis seeks to answer the question of how we got here and how we move forward through an examination of civic trust: the belief in the good intentions and potential of fellow citizens that imbues confidence in our ability as citizens to self-organize towards a greater society. Chapter I sets the stage for the collapse of civic community, defines civic trust, and posits an initial framework to describe how our belief in one another seems to be waning—a necessary component to hold the civic together. Chapter II and Chapter III examine how civic trust has collapsed from affective and structural lenses respectively. Chapter II explores how civic trust is threatened interpersonally through increased social distance and polarization by first analyzing shifts in our citizenship framework in the Civil Rights Movement and then in the modern day. Chapter III tackles market fundamentalism, a regime seeking to advance the market at the expense of the civic. Through its structural reframings, market fundamentalism renders civic trust unviable. The interlude maps how the affective and structural feed off one another to further degrade civic trust, disempowering the civic. Chapter IV and Chapter V paint a path forward. Chapter IV discusses the potential of dialogue as a way to build attachment and cultivate trust in the Public. Chapter V builds on the former chapter to propose a concrete agenda, structural and interpersonal, for revitalizing civic trust.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to articulate an antidote of hope in otherwise unhopeful times for democracy. Through civic trust, this thesis aims to provide an explanation of why our politics feel so dysfunctional, our neighbors seem so distant, and democracy feels so lost—and also reasserts that we, as citizens, still have the power to collectively imagine the democracy we wish to share.

Harper Jones

"'The Consciousness of Freedom': Defining and Discovering an American Ideal"

This thesis examines the intellectual and political evolution of the American conception of freedom from the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt to that of Ronald Reagan. Spanning a transformative fifty-six-year period in American history, this work considers how freedom has been defined, contested, reclaimed, and monopolized by politicians, political theorists, economists, special interest groups, and movements alike. This thesis contends that freedom is a malleable concept, mobilized by competing political actors to advance divergent visions of the relationship between the citizen and the American State. Using discourses on and around liberalism as a touchpoint, this thesis argues that understandings of liberty have evolved in response to real conditions: economic crises, conflicts abroad, demographic transformation, protests, and global ideological struggle.

Chapter One examines the emergence of a distinctly modern liberalism under Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. Roosevelt reimagined freedom as the guarantee of security and opportunity through State action, though his inclusive rhetoric coexisted with exclusionary policies and constitutional constraints.

Chapter Two considers the emergence of Cold War liberalism as freedom was redefined in opposition to totalitarianism. Drawing on thinkers like Isaiah Berlin and Friedrich Hayek, this chapter traces how liberals prioritized a kind of defensive liberalism that privileged individual autonomy, procedural democracy, and free-market capitalism. The Red Scare and McCarthyism narrowed the boundaries of dissent, reinforcing liberty as antistatism—while paradoxically expanding the state's surveillance powers.

Chapter Three explores the late 1950s and 1960s, tracing the Great Society, the New Left, and the civil rights and antiwar movements. Demands for racial justice, participatory democracy, and economic equity reanimated a holistic conception of freedom. Yet, this chapter also argues that liberalism's failure to reconcile its ideals with Vietnam, selective welfare, and slow civil rights progress revealed deep fractures—marking a crisis in liberalism itself.

Chapter Four charts the conservative reclamation of liberty through the New Right. Figures like Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan fused free-market orthodoxy, moral traditionalism, and antigovernment populism into a dominant ideology that recast freedom as individual choice and resistance to federal power. This conservatism dismantled the legacy of a more comprehensive freedom to claim the mantle of liberty in perpetuity.

By situating freedom within its shifting political contexts, this work offers not a singular definition but a layered genealogy—one that reveals how Americans have used, stretched, and sometimes betrayed the ideal in pursuit of both power and justice. To study the history of American freedom, then, is not only to understand how citizens have imagined their place in the world but also to confront the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities that animate the American political tradition itself.

Francisco Lizama

"Diaspora and Democracy: How Salvadoran and Guatemalan Migrants Influence Politics in Their Homelands"

Civil war, poverty, and organized crime have led to significant waves of migration from El Salvador and Guatemala to the United States for the past forty years. Although both immigrant rights advocates and anti-immigrant policymakers are concerned about reducing irregular migration to the United States, efforts to address the root causes of migration in the Northern Triangle have largely been ineffective. A notable exception is remittances: money sent by migrants to their families back home has eased the economic pressure to migrate. While there has been extensive research demonstrating how Central American migrants improve economic development in their homelands, there is less research examining their effects on homeland political development. This thesis explores the understudied relationship between Salvadoran and Guatemalan migrants in the United States and politics in their countries of origin through economic remittances, social remittances, and direct engagement.

Chapter One provides an overview of the literature that informs my analysis and the methodology for the subsequent research. It reviews studies on economic remittances, transnational discourse, social remittances, political party interactions with diaspora, and return migration. The chapter clarifies how this research relates to the political contexts of El Salvador and Guatemala as well as my methods for investigating these issues.

Chapter Two explores the impact of Salvadoran migrants in the United States on Salvadoran politics after 2019. This chapter investigates the political impacts of the diaspora on homeland politics in the context of populism and democratic backsliding under Nayib Bukele. While this chapter didn't find evidence that the diaspora encourages populism, some evidence showed they may play a minor role in reducing executive accountability.

Chapter Three analyzes the influence of Guatemalan migrants in the United States on Guatemalan politics after 2019. It investigates the connection between the diaspora and anticorruption policy after a president under investigation allowed CICIG, the nonpartisan anti-corruption institution that successfully prosecuted over 300 cases, to expire. This chapter finds some evidence that migrants reduced the effectiveness of the clientelist parties tied to corruption in Guatemala, but may also decrease executive accountability in other ways.

Chapter Four compares the results from El Salvador and Guatemala to determine how different political contexts affect the diaspora's influence on homeland politics. The chapter examines consistent findings across the countries, such as the correlation between remittances and decreased voter turnout, and identifies likely causes for these trends. It also investigates how variations in political and historical contexts alter diaspora impacts, such as how reduced rural migration in Guatemala led to a stronger relationship between remittances and school enrollment. The following chapter explains how these findings can help us understand how the diaspora encourages and discourages democratic development in their homelands.

Maggie Mooney

"Reading is Fundamental: Queer Book Bans and Social Reproduction Against Queer Futurity"

My investigation specifically responds to the following questions: what do the bodies of discourse surrounding contemporary book bans reveal about the superordinate moral panic that informs them, and what does that moral panic reveal about the expectations placed on children to build a certain kind of normative future? In Chapter 1, I survey the relationship between the development of federal state capacity and the development of queerness as a social identity defined by an assemblage of different orientations against normativity. I frame this analysis around a working understanding of queerness as a dynamic, nebulous positionality defined more by what it is understood to be at odds with than by any particular essence. I then discuss the evolution of queer movement politics over the course of the past 60 years, tracing a broad trend toward more institutionalized neoliberal forms of queer political advocacy.

In Chapter 2, I contextualize the events and rhetorics surrounding the "groomer narrative" within conservative discourses. Drawing on frameworks proposed by Stanley Cohen, Erich Goode, and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, I argue that a moral panic has developed around the phantasmic issue of transgender adults recruiting unassuming children into their "lifestyle" by exposing them to transgender literature, media, and culture for the purposes of sexually exploiting them. I move through the constitutive elements of Goode and Ben-Yehuda's moral panic framework, analyzing them in the context of recent rhetoric and legislation surrounding transgender rights and public school curricula. This chapter contributes to ongoing discussions within the queer community and within left-wing political spheres while extending maximal charity to the arguments made across the aisle.

In Chapter 3, I explore the contributions of queer theory to the question of children's place in queer politics. I read of José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* against Lee Edelman's classic polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* in order to ultimately argue that any queer politic that is comfortable parting ways with futurity cannot serve the interests of the queer child (a figure, I argue, that Edelman's analysis operates almost entirely in ignorance of). Integrated into this analysis is the question of who children are allowed to, and encouraged to, become. I draw on Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick's *Tendencies* in order to illustrate the ways in which the identities of children are not organically derived by way of being normative.

In Chapter 4, I analyze the value of queer modes of relationality and self-understanding to social life. In doing so, I note the way in which the label of indoctrination is deployed selectively to describe the processes and schools of thought that expose people to non-normative cultures and identities. I problematize the mainstream Democratic response to the problem of book bans insofar as they advocate for tolerance of queerness rather than appreciating the ways in which queerness enriches the cultural landscape of society.

Kellen Narke

"Gnosticism, Representation, and the United States"

Eric Voegelin was a German-American philosopher who, after escaping from Nazi Germany, spent his academic career at Louisiana State University, the University of Munich, and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Throughout his career, Voegelin offered a valuable and unique theory on the origins of totalitarianism by tracing modern ideological movements' intellectual origins back to the ancient Christian heresy of Gnosticism. These movements, Voegelin argued, ultimately hope to achieve the goal of world-immanent salvation on Earth through human action. In opposition to this, Voegelin promoted an understanding of politics as a search for order in tension with the transcendent. My position is that Voegelin's perspective is underappreciated and irreplaceably useful, especially in the American context.

In the first chapter, I give a biographical introduction to Eric Voegelin and perform a close reading of passages in his best-known work, *The New Science of Politics*. This illustrates how Voegelin's approach to understanding politics differs from positivistic social science. Furthermore, I discuss the unrequited interest the American conservative movement had in Voegelin's philosophy.

In the second chapter, I detail Voegelin's historical narrative of the rise of gnosticism, which for Voegelin is synonymous with the onset of modernity. I also provide Voegelin's model for gnostic movements as well as discuss the political symbols these ideological movements rely on. Finally, I compare Voegelin's model with Michael Walzer's model for radical movements, as both use the English Puritans as case studies. This serves to legitimize Voegelin's diagnosis of modern ideological movements as gnostic attempts to transform the world-immanent order of being through human political action.

In the third chapter, I discuss Voegelin's concepts of elemental and existential representation. I detail how Voegelin's articulation of existential representation undermines the feasibility of liberal internationalism as it has been attempted in American foreign policy. Furthermore, Voegelin's conception of representation surpasses Carl Schmitt's concept of sovereignty; though both serve as criticisms of legal constitutionalism, Schmitt embraces the destruction of legal order in favor of autocratic decision-making, while Voegelin guards against such violent developments and their accompanying gnostic political programs. Finally, in this chapter, I express how Voegelin's critique of Lockean political theory reveals how liberalism is vulnerable to gnostic mass movements.

In the fourth chapter, I relate how Voegelin conceives of American institutions of government as having originated during the English Revolution of the 17th Century. However, following the previous chapter's emphasis against overconfidence in legal constitutionalism, I then describe how the American political community has maintained a world-transcendent self-understanding by way of comparison with totalitarian gnostic symbolism.

My conclusion reiterates Voegelin's understanding of politics as a search for order in tension with the transcendent. However, I warn against overconfidence in the face of the

continued perseverance of ideological mass movements. In summarizing the work of each chapter, I complete my argument on the value of renewed appreciation for Eric Voegelin's philosophical search for truth and order.

Savannah Normand

"The Failures of Moral Philosophy: An Analysis of Ethics in Nazi Germany"

Arguments of morality are embedded within nearly every aspect of society. Despite the millennia of discussion between philosophers about the nature of morality, no single philosophy has prevailed. This thesis will argue that the moral violations that occurred in Nazi Germany show how Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics alike all fail in their goal of being a universally applicable understanding of the nature of morality. Because of these failures, an alternative approach to ethics ought to be more seriously considered within the academia of morality. The suggested alternative approach is that of phenomenology, which considers the subjective experience of being in relation to an "Other" and the ethical responsibilities that follow.

Chapter One explains the philosophical background knowledge crucial to understanding the overarching argument. Additionally, Chapter One outlines the goal of the thesis and the steps taken in each subsequent chapter to achieve it. The history of Nazi Germany, starting with the German Wars of Unification up until the Holocaust, is provided in Chapter Two. This chapter establishes that the actions of the Nazi regime throughout their time in power were in fact moral violations.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five show how each of the "big three" analytic moral philosophies were both utilized and perverted by the Nazis. These three chapters each establish how the actions of the Nazi regime provide sufficient ground for the claim that an alternative approach to ethics is necessary to prevent future moral violations. Chapter Three starts with an analysis of Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, especially his understanding of the "categorical imperative," rationality, duty, and religion. Having described the tenets of Kantian morality, the chapter explains how the Nazis both adopted and perverted the philosophy in their actions.

Chapter Four describes the hedonistic calculus that guides the arguments of utilitarianism promoted by philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The chapter then shows how the inherent problems of this calculative approach to morality, such as the violation of minority rights, unfair distributions of pleasures and pains, and lack of personal integrity, were demonstrated by the Third Reich.

Finally, Chapter Five concludes with an explanation of the virtue ethics created by Aristotle and an application of its approach to the Nazi regime. Here, it is established that virtue ethics failed because of the lack of foundational knowledge crucial for moral guidance in future generations. Virtue ethics still maintains value insofar as phenomenologists can utilize the Aristotelian framework and build upon it.

Chapter Six explains the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas and his concepts of ethical responsibility towards the "Other" discovered in face-to-face interactions. The chapter shows how Nazism exists in opposition to the phenomenological approach of ethics as the Nazis desperately tried to avoid encountering the non-Aryan Other and totalize them within their worldview.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by recapping the failures of the "big three" analytic philosophies and why phenomenology exists as a valid alternative. This final chapter considers how phenomenology requires a better integration within the structures of society to be taken more seriously within discussions of morality. Until institutional knowledge of phenomenology is cemented, society continues to risk avoidable moral violations.

Tessa Saporito

"Death Becomes Her: An Autopsy of White Feminist True Crime"

Many cultural commentators and researchers widely acknowledge that white women are the most voracious consumers of contemporary true crime. This thesis contends that, in response to this demographic shift, true crime has not only amassed an overwhelmingly white female audience but has also given rise to *white feminist true crime*, a subgenre that seeks to reclaim narratives of gendered violence through empathy, awareness, and feminist solidarity. By analyzing its distinct narrative tropes, I argue that this subgenre does not destabilize the logics that sustain traditional true crime's voyeuristic fascination with white women's suffering but rather reanimates them in more palatable feminist terms.

Chapter 1 investigates the representational politics of white feminist true crime through a comparative analysis of *Helter Skelter* and *Restless Souls*, both centered on the Manson Family murders, with particular emphasis on their respective portrayals of Sharon Tate. I suggest that, while white feminist true crime narratives purport to rescue the salacious image of the dead woman from the clutches of the male gaze by giving an account of the victim's life before her death, they instead reinforce victims as icons of innocence whose value is implicitly rooted in whiteness, beauty, and purity. These portrayals not only reflect the true crime's historical investment in rendering only certain lives publicly grievable but also reassert the legitimacy of state violence under the guise of feminist care, as exemplified by the Victims' Rights Movement and the subgenre's recent fortification of anti-immigration sentiment and punitive policy, all while disavowing politics through appeals to the universality of white female victimhood.

Chapter 2 investigates the pedagogical function of white feminist true crime, tracing how it instructs women to manage and rehearse gendered precarity. Through the authorial intervention of Ann Rule, alongside Kathryn Miles' *Trailed* and Anna Kendrick's *Woman of the Hour*, I show how the subgenre facilitates the vicarious identification with victims and enables white women to translate their embodied archive of cumulative encounters with quotidian patriarchal harm into a more narratively satisfying and containable fear of spectacular violence at the hands of extraordinarily violent men. While presenting itself as therapeutic and empowering,

white feminist true crime commodifies women's pain as a fetish object and naturalizes white women's victimhood, reinforcing the notion that survival hinges on individual vigilance and the correct performance of victimhood.

Chapter 3 attends to white feminist true crime podcasting and digital communities, analyzing how podcasts construct ostensibly communal spaces geared toward mourning and individual trauma processing. Podcasts and digital media collapse the boundaries between consumer, creator, and subject, producing a community bonded by vicarious victimization and the fetishized wound. As such, this chapter examines how this community, rooted in wound culture and bolstered by its individualized therapeutic aims, gives rise to a "safe space" that is inherently resistant to criticism due to its deep investment in narratives of suffering and a collective attachment to injury.

My conclusion calls for a reimagining of how we consume and circulate narratives of suffering. By reorienting our interpretive practices, I suggest that stories of harm can catalyze collective, transformative responses that neither sanitize violence nor surrender to carceral logics of retributive harm.

Andrew Seidel

"Narcissus, Consumed: The Culture of Capitalism, Education, and the Fetishism of Being"

Political theorist Wendy Brown argues that "we are living in nihilistic times!" The collapse of dogmatic religious authority and the fallibility of scientific hypotheses have created a vacuum of objectivity. The individual is left disillusioned by objective moral value and in a Nietzschean dilemma of self-expression. Yet, capitalism has commodified existence to the extent free choice is unobtainable. Anselm Jappe writes, "In a society dominated by commodity fetishism, there can be no true human subject: it is value in its metamorphoses (commodity and money) that constitute the true subject... [commodification] effectively turns everyone into all-powerful magicians who only have to announce: 'I want.'" This thesis explores the process of becoming consumptive. Implicated within systems of discipline and control, this thesis contends that institutionalized education systems serve as the main reproductive source of neoliberal capitalism within the contemporary cultural hegemon.

Chapter One grounds the argument, describing the systematic effects capitalism has in shaping individual dispositions. Utilizing critical theory and psychoanalysis, I contend that the irrational logic of capitalism that seeks the endless production and extraction of surplus value has created an insatiable desire for consumption. Individuals have become wholly narcissistic, reducing the Other to their use-value; simultaneously they become listlessly nihilistic as they become further alienated from community.

Chapter Two presents a post-structuralist explication of the rites of educational institutions. Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, education institutions serve to inculcate socially prescribed values within the habitus of students. Contemporary education, as

stressing neoliberal ideology, inculcates values of capitalist domination. Students learn to reproduce their class habitus while being provided with no ontological purpose to do so.

Chapter Three analyzes the role of therapeutics in reinforcing narcissistic dispositions and faultily ameliorating nihilistic woes, particularly in education. I argue that the contemporary subject lacks both deference to the past and vision of the future, leaving them lost in the present. Therapeutic education reaffirms self-interested notions of living in the present, often at the expense of communal attachments and the broader social good. Consequently, this leads to individuals fetishizing consumption as an ontological end or rejecting life entirely and resorting to violence.

Chapter Four serves to posture towards a better future. I argue that students demand from educators more than just training and discipline. Students call for moral value generation and ontological purpose. Where the current system represents a cruel optimism, an unfulfilling meritocratic sham, I contend that a "pedagogical ethic of responsibility" responds to the complete needs of becoming. To be human is not merely a bodily experience, it requires a sense of purpose. Where the endlessness of capitalism cannot provide satisfying purpose, community serves as respite from nihilism.

Hewan Shimelis

"The Reality of Reconstruction: Analyzing the Black Experience in Virginia's Convict Leasing System"

From slavery to convict leasing to current issues regarding mass incarceration, the criminalization of Black Americans is deeply woven into the development and societal structure of the U.S. This thesis aims to analyze the structure of convict leasing in Virginia and in what ways it became a reproduction of chattel slavery. Furthermore, I plan to explore the ways this system and larger cycle of forced labor has been used as a tool to surveil and restrain Black mobility in our society.

In Chapter 1, I analyze the condition of the South at the end of the Civil War and the changes brought about by the Reconstruction period. Understanding the history before and during the Reconstruction era sheds light on the fact that white Southerners were forced to put an end to chattel slavery but were still determined to preserve its structure and racial order it provided. With the enforcement of laws such as Black Codes, vagrancy laws, and the 13th Amendment, there seemed to be hope for white Southerners in maintaining their dominance and ideals of white supremacy through a new system of labor exploitation: convict leasing. Although various laws and means of extralegal resistance created many barriers for Black mobility, African Americans of the South fought for their agency and various rights they now held as free people in the U.S.

In Chapter 2, I establish the legal foundations and enforcement of convict leasing in Virginia. I discuss the ways in which white Conservatives gained state power after rejoining the Union and the need for political representation of Black Virginians in the time of Reconstruction.

Although the vague language of certain laws did not explicitly target Black individuals, several accounts of the enforcement of these laws made it clear that "vagrancy" was being used as a term to surveil and restrict Black mobility and criminalize freedmen in order to obtain similar means of control before the abolition of slavery. Virginia, similar to the other Southern states, was left in an economic crisis after the war and convict leasing provides a means of cheap labor and significant economic growth.

In Chapter 3, I examine how the freedoms of Black Americans were shaped and restricted under convict leasing. Although the central focus of my research is the labor system in Virginia, the intense privatization of prisons and lack of documentation pushed me to expand my focus to the available accounts of convict leasing in other states in the South and from other critical perspectives, such as Black women convicts. Highlighting the lived experiences of Black convicts under this system goes beyond the creation of policy and provides insight into the ways in which slavery may have been reproduced or used as a blueprint during Reconstruction.

I then conclude by discussing the unique history of Virginia and how the criminalization of blackness after the Civil War was a means to replicate slavery under legal justification. I address my findings and challenges when trying to research and discover the lived experiences of Black convicts in Virginia. Virginia's history with convict labor is tied into present issues regarding the mass incarceration of Black Americans. The roots of systemic control and surveillance run deep in the South and the best way to understand its structure is to interrogate its roots.

Izzy Spanswick

"A Crisis of Symbolization: Making and Unmaking the Female Scapegoat in Myth and Practice"

This thesis locates the origin of women's public disenfranchisement in René Girard's framework for analyzing the roles violence, ritual, and myth play in generating patriarchal social structures.

Chapter One explores René Girard's concept of the sacrificial crisis and the mechanisms of surrogate and ritual victims who are scapegoated to end and stave off outbreaks of disordered violence in communities. I critique Girard's assertion that women occupy peripheral positions in social hierarchies by choice and instead argue that their marginalization enables societies to displace violence into the private sphere, preserving the illusion of peace in the public realm. I contend that, if we take Girard's own dismissal of "biological truths" seriously, women must be acknowledged as capable of violence, particularly during moments of social upheaval.

Chapter Two traces the evolution of women's scapegoated role from ancient rituals to the modern legal system. I outline Girard's understanding of how ritual sacrifice and legal justice differ in their control over communities' violent instincts. I then employ Aeschylus's trilogy, *The Oresteia* as a transitional text, to explore how the establishment of the Athenian jury system mythically codified the idea that a mother's life holds less legal and moral value than a father's. I

then analyze how contemporary legal systems continue to marginalize women by systematically undervaluing gendered crimes, like domestic violence and sexual assault. Drawing on Brian Decker's application of Girardian theory, I demonstrate how this structural dismissal of violence against women constitutes a modern form of secular scapegoating. This persistent exclusion fosters a growing awareness among women of their quasi-sacrificial status, potentially inciting acts of extralegal retribution that threaten the patriarchal legal system's monopoly on sanctioned violence.

Chapter Three examines the function of myth through the lens of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist theory, focusing on how myths use binary oppositions to conceal social contradictions and preserve dominant hierarchies. I extend this analytical framework to contemporary cinema, framing film as a modern myth-making apparatus that continues to encode and transmit ideological structures. Toward the end of the chapter, I introduce Girard's critiques of Lévi-Strauss and his contemporaries to espouse modifications that can be made to the structuralist methodology by integrating Girard's claims about generative and ritual violence.

Chapter Four applies these strategies for mythological analysis to investigate the female revenge genre in mainstream narrative cinema. Building on the legal and mythological frameworks from earlier chapters, centering on women's exclusion from judicial retribution, I interrogate how cinematic narratives interpret women's vigilante retaliatory violence. Traditional portrayals tend to oscillate between vilifying or victimizing female characters, both approaches denying their agency. However, I identify emerging trends in film that challenge this binary and offer more nuanced representations. Drawing on the structuralist tools developed in Chapter Three, I identify four evolving narrative models—classical, monstrous, "rage against the machine," and collective—that begin to enrich and expand a modern mythical canon around women's responses to hidden, private violence.

The conclusion argues that meaningful legal and political reform must be accompanied by transformations in the myths we tell. Stories and their underlying symbolic structures shape how we understand agency, justice, and humanity itself. This thesis offers both a warning and a hope: that myth can be a vehicle of oppression, but also of liberation, capable of remaking the world through new narratives.

Jasmine Wang

"The Haunted 'Home': Living with Diasporic Ghosts"

What does it mean to be *haunted*? What does it mean to live with your ghosts? And how can our ghosts help us chart a decolonial poetics of 'home'? These questions anchor my exploration of 'home' within the Asian diaspora. Grounded in my own diasporic intimacy, this thesis turns to the spectral politics of memory, exile, and longing to trace how children of the Asian diaspora destabilizes the settler colonial logics that define 'home' through citizenship, the legibility of borders, and rooted permanence.

I look to the ghosts that haunt children of the Asian diaspora—of histories untold, of homelands left behind, of futures disrupted—to ask what happens when we lose 'home.' Whether through voluntary migration or forced eviction, can 'home' be recovered? Does leaving become synonymous with homelessness? Through multimodal stories of 'home'—art, literature, performance—I seek to articulate a diasporic 'home' that maps an decolonial cartography of embodied belonging that elides the oppressive confines of the nation-state.

In my first chapter, "Stitching 'Home.'" I explore Korean diasporic artist Do Ho Suh's gossamer reconstructions of his past homes. Through his embodied practice of making home, of stitching spatial memory, I seek to rupture the colonial 'home,' bound by the boundaries of national identity and private property ownership. Suh's work not only reframes the notion of 'homemaking' but also resists pathologized images of the homesick migrant, who is forever marred by a longing for 'home' and belonging. Furthermore, I suggest that the evanescent materiality of Suh's installations offers a 'poetics of refraction' that invites us to reimagine 'home' from the peripheral position of the migrant, or the other.

My second chapter, "A 'Home' Filled with Water,' turns to two children of the Vietnamese diaspora, author Nam Lê and visual artist Matt Huynh, and their collaboration of the 2008 short story "The Boat" and its 2015 interactive graphic adaptation. "The Boat" chronicles the perilous dispossession of Vietnamese refugees at sea during the Vietnam War. This chapter explores the poetic possibilities of a *'home' filled with water* that can buoy the refugee's body across oceans. I also reimagine the Vietnamese refugees, who were derogatorily labeled 'boat people' as *children of the water*, considering how these children made 'home' together amidst the tides of grief and displacement.

In my third chapter, "Choreographing 'Home,'" I lean on HMoob dance theater choreographer Magnolia Yang Sao Yia and her experimental dance performance, "she can be seen walking alone." Through the dancers' embodiment of the HMoob ghost, the *poj nxtoog*, I introduce a poetics of possession—an embodied practice of creating a 'home' through diasporic intimacy.

Finally, in my epilogue, I attempt to constellate these diasporic stories of 'home' together. From ephemeral fabric 'homes' to waterlogged narratives to ghostly choreography, these children of the Asian diaspora map a decolonial poetics of 'home' that illuminates a path for us all to find our way 'home.'

Nicholas Witkowski

"'Inhabiting the Spectacle': The Mediation of Queer Visual En counter"

The perception of an outside world is fundamental to the understanding of oneself and its desire. This thesis uses visual perception as a grounding point in queerness, and that becoming ungrounded to how we orient ourselves in the world has the effect of producing new meanings in the body, positive and negative. Using cases of visual encounter from the 1950s, 1960s, and late 1900s, I explore the role visuality plays in forming a subject with desire.

The project proceeds in four main parts. The first chapter establishes a theoretical framework for visual encounter by synthesizing theories of subjectivity, phenomenology, and affect. Although a combination scattered with contradictions, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan all contribute to a theory of sexual subjectivity. Read together, I argue that the three theorists provide a critical framework to understand the directional nature of sexuality and its relation to mechanisms of control and normalization. I then look to Sara Ahmed's theory of phenomenology to posit that sexual orientation concerns not only sexual acts themselves, but a way of living in the world. Finally, affect theory is used to understand how feeling informs our relationships to the objects we find in front of us.

The next chapter applies these theories to the use of psychedelic-assisted psychoanalysis for sexual conversion. The rise of counterculture in the mid-twentieth century aligned itself nearly perfectly with the golden age of psychoanalysis, and psychedelics were used as a tool to facilitate an entrance into the unconscious. Here, I argue that the use of LSD to re-experience the development of the ego is based on the notion that psychedelics have the capacity to reduce the primacy of the reality principle over the pleasure principle. In this endeavor, the patient loses perception of the world around them, becoming disoriented, and uses the innate drive for pleasure to reorient themself toward the therapist, developing a new orientation.

In the third chapter I similarly explore a practice of sexual conversion. This time, however, therapists use affects themselves–not the perception of reality–to reorient a sexual deviant. After taking the patient through a multi-stepped process to associate deviant desire with disgust and shame, therapists use the perception of images to condition the patient into heterosexuality. Reinforcing the relationship between visual perception and sexuality, the therapists guide the patient to a scripted response of repulsion at the sight of deviant sexual objects.

Between the third and fourth chapters is an interlude that bridges the gap between the pathological treatment of homosexuality in the 1950s and 60s, and the public censorship of queer aesthetics. Tracing the history of gay liberation movements and development of the New Right, I illustrate that queerness was framed as a moral corruption of American society.

Following this, the final chapter uses the public attempt to censor the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe as an indication that queer visuals create ruptures of potentiality in the hegemonic, heteronormative social order. I argue that this hegemonic order is not indestructible, but quite fragile. The introduction of queer aesthetics makes new meanings in that order, presenting opportunities for progress, and actualizations of living in queerness, rather than rejecting it.