Teaching Western Political Thought Through Western Literature

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"The truth about stories is that that's all we are."
Thomas King *The Truth About Stories*

Because this conference track and this panel S*tudying Politics through Literature and Film* focuses on the role of Political Science in "collaborating with other departments to achieve interdisciplinary teaching goals," I will be guiding my discussion through the insight that classic and modern literature and storytelling have played an important and indeed a necessary role in the tradition of Western-European-American political theory. In this presentation I will begin by situating and accounting for my pedagogical decision to teach the Fall 2019 section of Modern Political Thought, a third year undergraduate course that follows directly from the survey course in Ancient and Medieval Western political theory, through the lens of Western-European-American literature.

This course focused on the use of the novel in Western-European culture as a commentary on contemporary political experiences. For example, the texts that were covered in this course aimed to convey to the reader themes like the power of political will, the place of utopia and dystopia in the political imaginary, the development of ideological bias, the emergence of gender politics, and the power of religion and the consequences of civic engagement, among others. Throughout the course we read books as they spoke to their time and to our own, encouraging an historical perspective on the development of Western – European -American political ideas. The texts under consideration were;

Plato's *Timaeus and Critias , Utopia* by Sir Thomas More, *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley, *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler, *Continental Drift* by Russell Banks, and *Linden Hills* by Gloria Naylor.

They were chosen to engage students in analysis and understanding while following well-constructed and well known situational narratives in Political Science fiction. By reading and providing commentary in various forms on well-regarded literary texts, students gained insights into how the themes of Western Political Theory are embedded in and emerge from "acts" of writing which reach larger audiences and can inspire political action. These books also situated students in historical debates that were designed to convey the reader towards an understanding of "imagined communities." Works of fiction are by design works of space and place, surrounding the reader with well-described locales and circumstances of social and political interaction. The books chosen in this course developed a general theme of the describing the spaces and places of the Western-European-American imagination, which, I believe , is one of the primary goals of the teaching of political theory. More than a stringing together of principles and ideas, literature presented and discussed in this way allows readers an advantage: to see the places and consequences that political theory opines. In short, I refer to these works of literature as "political science fiction" because they tell stories that have political and social resonance, capture the imaginative impulses of a generation of texters and situate them in a new place in history and political practice.

This year we began the course by negotiating the dialogic parameters of the discussions that we were to have in class. Students noted that the traditional approach to the study of political ideas and political theory through primary texts rendered their efforts to understand

complex political ideas and situations difficult and sometimes tediously pedantic. They would rather find a way to be immersed in a situation, a kind a reader role-play exercise that allowed them to explore their own "internally persuasive discourse" (Bakhtin) as opposed to the traditional authoritative role of the classroom instructor. Nonetheless, the books were chosen by myself and the class began with an agreement to use Socratic dialogic teaching style, allowing for and encouraging free-flowing discussions, moments of reflection and fiercely contested interpretations of the texts under consideration. in other words, political and social values, using a dialogical pedagogy, are unendingly contestable – which is the ultimate goal of exposing students to political theory itself. This exposure and exposition, I argue, also enables students and instructors to carry or convey ideas with them to other parts of their lives as citizens.

A Word on Political Theory as Civic Engagement

Civic engagement contains two components. first, students must be engaged in the process of "civics." They must learn how to be informed and participating members of a democratic system. Second, students must as well be "engaged actively" in the learning process. The outcome should be "deep learning" that implies the development of factual, contextual, procedural and metacognitive knowledge as normal when confronted with a problem-centered approach, the "real" debate emerges in how to determine and implement solutions. (Pettenger, West and Young 2013)

I contend that the dualistic process of civic engagement should focus on promoting "civic literacy," defined by Milner (2002) as "the knowledge *and ability* capacity of citizens to

make sense of their political world" [emphasis added] (Milner 2002, 1). He argues that there are "two aspects of citizenship as measurable dimensions of civic literacy: ability manifesting itself in the form of political knowledge, and willingness in the form of political participation" (ibid, 1). His statement implies that knowledge acquisition is not sufficient; a will to act is required:

> Through political participation, as John Stuart Mill taught, people ensure that their interests are taken into account in the decision-making process. In so doing, they gain the skills and knowledge to act effectively as members of the community – such skills and knowledge then contribute to the well-being of the community" (ibid, 1-2).

I agree with his discussion that the use of the term "civic literacy" is essential to the differentiation from the term civic engagement. The word *literacy* is chosen because it implies that there is a known quantity that is attainable by each individual that cannot be 'stocked"- unlike, say, knowledge or capital which can….though one person may read much more than another, both contribute equally to the overall literacy rate of their community (ibid, 2).

Literacy, as a public good with no excludability or rivalry, can benefit all. Civic literacy then is an end-goal and an overall societal measurement of the knowledge *and* capability of the society to engage in the political process. The term unites the concepts of knowledge/skills, drive/will and participation/engagement. The assumption is that increasing civic literacy will increase political efficacy "the power or capacity to produce [political] effects" (Oxford English Dictionary). many educators have introduced civic engagement and participatory and experiential learning into their curriculum at all levels of the educational system (Bell and Lewis, 2015). The reason for the increase in civic education and engagement courses and programs,

according to Ottllia Chareka (2006), is because voting among young, college and university aged students is in sharp decline: a key indicator of this retreat from civic participation is drastically declining voting rates among young people. In Canada, for example, voter turnout hit a record low of 60.5 per cent during the 2004 federal election with only 22 percent of eligible 18-22 year-olds turning out to cast their ballots (centre for research and information on Canada, (Cook, 2004). This significant retreat from a key aspect of representative democracy has fueled both public and academic speculation and a renewed interest in political socialization research (Chareka 2006, 522). Chareka and others argue that the inclusion of civic engagement experiences in and out of the classroom allows educators to "shape, extend and contextualize" (*ibid*., 535) students' perceptions of their roles as citizens. moreover, educators, as public servants, have a duty to respond to the decline in civic participation and engagement by bringing students into the real world of decision-making, at least in a setting of measurable outcomes in the classroom. moving outside the classroom requires a different set of skills and comprehensions (Torney-Purta et al 2001).

It is extremely important to recognize the difficulty that educators face when attempting to bringing students to civic engagement and civic literacy. According to Timothy Stanley, educators in Political Science always must proceed with a degree of caution:

> The problem is that not everyone enters democratic spaces under the same conditions. In Canada and the United States, public memory and the widespread historical representations of movies, tv shows, newspapers, popular fiction, public monuments, and school textbooks makes it appear as if certain people belong in certain spaces while others do not. These same representations seem to

> explain the intentions of those who appear to belong, while making it seem as if the intentions of those who seem not to belong are at best unpredictable. Addressing this inequality is one of the main challenges facing democratic education (Stanley 2003, 38).

The challenge of this course was to interrupt the equality of the classroom and introduce students to unfamiliar texts with familiar lessons. The human condition, as Hannah Arendt described, is charged with and judged by the making of distinctions. Somewhere in-between the truths and fictions of human experience lie the frailty and tragedy of human existence as well as the joy of imagining a better world. In this course, we distinguished between utopia and dystopia (*nowhere and everywhere), c*olonialism and decolonization (*motives and effects)* history and discursive strategy (*storytelling or propaganda)* identity and othering (*multicultural and universal)* nature and science (*grounding movement and fearing change)* gender and sexuality (*appearance and structure)* philosophy and ideology (*knowledge and power)* and finally politics and civic engagement(*end game or process).*

Setting the Connection between Storytelling and Civic Literacy

Plato's *Timaeus and Critias*

Plato wrote the Timaeus and Critias after he wrote his Republic as companion texts in order to appease a suspicious and literate Athenian public with his understanding of the power of creation stories. In the Timaeus, we listen to Socrates tell of the origin of the universe and the settlement of the positions of the gods in that universe – each having a function to check the authority of the others while serving the interests of a demiurge (Zeus) the creator of creators. The story continues to describe how the demiurge gave harmony to the world and matched it at its origin to the eternal harmony of eternity and the heavens, and then created humanity to receive the same harmonious combination of the essential elements of the universe.

Unlike those in the *Republic*, these stories were meant to connect Socrates to the gods in a way that showed intelligence and respect. In contrast, the Socrates of the *Apology* and the *Republic* is clearly interrogative and disruptive to the Athenian reverence for the panoply of gods that animated storytelling, myth, poetry and education. (Bloom) However, we should also recall Socrates dying words in Plato's *Crito,* "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Do pay it. Don't forget." as a gesture to his detractors and as an acknowledgement of his own journey "towards" the truth in death.

In the *Timaeus*, Plato recounts the origin of the world using "familiar" names and occasions that help the story convince the reader of its value. In the Critias, Plato introduces the Myth of Atlantis, perhaps the most enduring tale of creation and human misery that survives into our present day in multifarious forms and as cautionary tales of the use and abuse of knowledge and science for political and social gain. At the heart of this first rendition of Atlantis is the role of the great minds, brought together as an example to the world of the attainment of intellectual and social prowess – a utopia for intellectuals, created by the gods and ruled by intelligence and passion. As a creation story, the Myth of

Atlantis animates a deeply human desire for truth and scientific wisdom – but it fails. Why? Because of hedonism and greed. The cautionary tale here is that there are limits to human truths and that hedonism, hubris and greed lead to human destruction. Atlantis disappeared into the ocean from whence it came, but has never really disappeared from the popular imagination. Most telling is its ending. As Plato explains,

> Zeus, the god of gods, who rules according to law, and is able to see into such things, perceiving that an honourable race was in a woeful plight, and wanting to inflict punishment on them, that they might be chastened and improve, collected all the gods into their most holy habitation, which, being placed in the centre of the world, beholds all created things. and when he had called them together, he spake as follows…

As Benjamin Jowett, esteemed translator explains, "the rest of the dialogue of Critias has been lost." (Jowett) Perhaps the end of the myth of Atlantis is lost on purpose because as mere mortals how could we ever understand and use the "words of god." There are, after all, limits to human experiences and talents.

Utopia

Sir Thomas More wrote ***Utopia*** (1516) in Latin to honour his belief in the sacred language of the Roman Catholic Church, and became a casualty of Henry 8th's campaign to control the newly established Church of England , later canonized by the Roman Catholic Church as a martyr. His "little book" has remained a stalwart literary companion to princes and heads of state ever since. As he explains in the Letter to Peter Gilles, the encounter that they had with one Raphael Hythloday (peddler of nonsense) was so unique that it led him to write slowly and methodically because "all I had to do was repeat what Raphael told us."

Utopia begins with two letters, one from Thomas More to Peter Gilles and the other from Gilles to a publisher in Antwerp. These letters leave the reader with a sense of credibility as correspondence of this sort was common in England and abroad. Both letters corroborate the story of the "founding" of a new world. In both we are introduced to Raphael Hythloday, a traveler on the voyages of Amerigo Di Vespucci who describes Utopia in great detail to More and Gilles at a diplomatic meeting. Hythloday is depicted as a seasoned scholar and a worldly voyager and as Gilles explains " he made us feel that Vespucci had seen absolutely nothing". (33) This ironic statement exemplifies the complexity of the text. Utopia was "discovered" by Hythloday after leaving Vespucci and travelling with a group of sailors who never used a compass. The exact location of Utopia can never be proven, of course, and we have only More's rendition of what Hytholoday said – that during the voyage someone sneezed and the boat took a new direction which led them to Utopia. Indeed, Utopia was "nothing to see", " no place to go". Discovery discovers no places – new places that have not yet been named by the discoverers. Utopia – not a place – had been discovered!

Book 1 of Utopia is a " dialogue of counsel" between More, Gilles and Hytholoday and begins with a description of a new alphabet, the Utopian alphabet and new poetry, Utopian poetry. This is a new language from a New World and will require, as More explains, a new art of diplomacy and a new language for kings and princes. As Hytholoday explains, the real the cause of society's ills is the enclosure movement which is continuous and menacing to the common citizen. It is, he explains, a policy in England and elsewhere of property theft, the enclosing of common land for the purpose of extending wealth of the upper classes. As we shall see in Book 2, in Utopia there is no enclosure or personal wealth because there is no such thing as property.

Hytholoday's account of the New World is instructive because it begins with encountering "new people" who get along well with the voyagers until they start to settle. It is better advice to get along with indigenous inhabitants of new places. As More opines:

> We did not ask him if he had seen any monsters, for monsters have ceased to be news. There is never any shortage of horrible creatures who prey on human beings, snatch away their food or devour whole populations.; but examples of wise social planning are not that easy to find. (40)

With this, More and Gilles engage Hytholoday in a discussion of kingship, land enclosure, thievery and other examples of "old" world practice. He says that there is no real privileged place in the world he has seen - "you can get to heaven from anywhere". When More suggests that because of his travels and vast knowledge, Raphael would be of great service to any king, he replies that in a speech that indicts kingship in general (42-3) and eventually the King of England. More's intention here is to challenge the authority of kings as legitimate masters of their domain. The conversation turns to penalties for thievery, which in England were sentencing to death. The greatest thievery, says Hytholoday, is the theft is of land from peasants. Even in Plato's perfect society of philosopher-kings, they had no property of their own. (47) . Kings are too "infected" with wrong ideas at birth. In other societies that Raphael has seen like Tallstoria, and Happiland, and finally in the kingdom of Utopia, greed and thievery have been replaced by sharing. (61-2) Voyages to new world to discover better societies were designed to improve the old world, to escape it's arcane and rigid structures. In Book 1 of Utopia, the authority of the crown is challenged by considering their inability to keep the people happy through their retention of power through war. The role that war and the

accumulation of property play in the emerging modern world is challenged by More's thinly disguised analysis.

Book 2 of *Utopia* is the actual description of the discovery and creation story of the island. As Hytholoday explains, the original name of Utopia was Sansculottia inhabited by "savages" who were reeducated to the ways of "somebody named" Utopos, the first king. Originally a peninsula, the land was engineered to become an island easily defended. All property was shared and never owned. Utopia was a place of the constant refinement of rules and regulations and constant planning where every person watches every other person. Each city in Utopia, and all were planned after the same model, had a Styward – a person who watched over the behavior of every person in their city. Along with decreeing that there would be no property or gold or riches, all people must work and be involved in involved in planning governance and work. All are involved in creating laws. No legislation can be enacted until all understand it. Everyone leads at one time or another and wears the same clothing. Fashion and marriage are dictated and day to day life rarely changes. Because "nobody sits around doing nothing," everyone eventually learns every job and works only for 6 hours a day. (80) Participation in politics is mandatory but no one is allowed to campaign for public office. There also is no money in utopia and public officials are not meant to be overbearing or awe inspiring; rather they should be seen as fathers who the people voluntarily treat with respect. There are very few laws, all clearly written. Utopia has no lawyers. Marriage and relations between women and men are arranged and both are thought of as equals except in the home where women are subservient nd do less physically arduous tasks relationships. Families are monitored and managed and the children are collectively raised as everyone is considered a

father or mother. There are large, collectivist churches and people are discouraged from thinking about war unless attacked. The disposition to war is replaced in Utopia with a dedication to dialogue and diplomacy and building cooperation (130-1) Utopia has slaves who are either people captured by the Utopians in battle, people who have committed a horrible crime within utopia or people who have committed crimes in other countries and been condemned to death, and saved from their fates by the Utopians. The children of slaves are not born into slavery. Death is treated a joyous occasion and burial, like all other familiar rituals is simple and quick. There is no ostentation in Utopia as gold and jewels are thought of as a waste of time and energy. People in Utopia live simply and orderly and keep the peace at all times. There is no need to increase wealth because there is no conception of wealth. Finally, those who are too old to work are generously provided for. In the end, Utopia is not a perfect society it is an engineered one in which people are, as Rousseau might say, "forced to be free".

More's *Utopia* engages us in a reflection on the uses and abuses of power and people but also leaves us with many questions. Is Utopia a metaphor for heaven on earth? Is Utopia a "literary device" that allows the author to make comments on contemporary society? How does the idea of "discovery" lend itself to the "politics" of Utopian ideals? How is Utopia linked to colonization? How is Utopia linked to liberalism, socialism and communism exemplified in contemporary society? How are the doctrines of "discovery", settlement and colonization understood in light of reading Utopia? Is Utopia a paradise or a police state?

Even though the word Utopia was coined by More, writers have written about utopia-like places for centuries, including the biblical Garden of Eden in The Book of Genesis and Plato's *Republic* – which is partially about the construction of a perfectly just state ruled by

philosopher-kings and partly about the education of the soul. Utopias are usually depicted as novel places, intellectual havens depicting some form of eternity in time. They are far away, hidden from view and waiting to be discovered. Utopias tend to be climatically and geographically perfect but also xenophobic. Citizen participation is high and is usually forced. Arts and culture are highly developed as are centralized planning and clean model communities. Following More, early European utopias include *Christianopolis*(1619) by Rosicrucian Johann Valentin Andrae and *City of the Sun* - a new Eden(1602) by Tommasso Campanella and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis.* These works amplified the possibilities of utopias in the modern age by pushing out the ideas of divine providence mixed with scientific and technological innovation and social planning.

The word utopia comes from the Greek words **ou** , meaning "no" or "not," and **topos** meaning "place." Utopia has come to mean a place that we can only dream about, a true paradise. Another version of its meaning comes from More himself where he also paints Utopia the place as 'somewhere good' (eutopia) and 'nowhere' (outopia). Dystopia has come to mean the exact opposite of utopia. They are, as Machiavelli explained in *The Prince*, also "imaginary republics". Utopian and dystopian writing as protest mirror More's protesting of contemporary English life by describing an ideal political state in a land called Utopia, or nowhere land. Other early fictional utopias include the various exotic, dangerous and comic communities depicted in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Utopias and dystopias share characteristics of science fiction and fantasy, and both are usually set in a future in which technology has been used to create perfect living conditions. In dystopian work, the focus of the novel is usually on the psychology and emotions of the characters who live under such

conditions. Recognizable dystopias include Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1944) and *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). As imaginary republics, utopias and dystopias conjure spaces and places in order to teach the literate public to dream and experiment. While bringing light to the effects of poverty, More also described a very "catholic" and authoritarian place where women were controlled, regulations were strictly enforced and war, while inevitable and discouraged seemed to be waged on the people by the systems of governance that he envisioned. However, as Lynn Sargent explains,

> Even though More's *Utopia* is authoritarian, hierarchical, and patriarchal and has colonies solely for the benefit of Utopia, it asks questions about social organization that we still have not dealt with adequately. (Sargent, 19)

Other utopian scholars have echoed this sentiment by cautiously celebrating More's enduring success and remembrance with a statement of the effects of excessive social organization. According to Gerard and Sterling.

> Although More portrays Utopia as an ideal society because of its egalitarian economy and government, considerate social practices, and temperate officials, the author realized that in reality such an existence is impossible to create. Thus, More calls the island Utopia, Greek for "no place"—the only location where an ideal society could exist. More juxtaposed Utopia with England to accentuate the sociopolitical shortcomings of the latter but to do so openly was impossible; others had been punished for criticizing King Henry VIII (87)

Utopia opened the criticism of England in the 16th century but it also opens a discussion of the value of social engineering and the "science of politics" as a modern promise. As European thought emerged from the repetitive mantra of Catholicism and kingly repression, it began to be shaped by More's sentiment toward the fate of the common man, a theme that resonates into our world.

Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus

Mary Shelley's ***Frankenstein*** (1815) is a cautionary tale about the limits of science and experimentation and the belief that with the correct application of scientific and physical principles, we can re-animate death back to life. On the surface, the politics and ethics of this classic novel are clear and have been repeatedly overstated for centuries. The dangers inherent in science and technology have lasting and permanent side effects for the human condition. The imaginary republic that Shelley creates in Frankenstein is impossible, like all utopias, to exist for us. Shelley's monster, however, the book and the character she creates, still have the capacity to haunt our digital dreams in a post-modern age. That is because Shelley's contribution to politics and political thought can be measured by her treatment of bodies in motion, interacting with systems of law – those of Nature and those of humanity - presents the politics of the body to her readers in a way that foreshadows the expansion of the justice of human rights, feminisms and identity politics. Furthermore, I argue that Shelley's Frankenstein represents an understanding and politics of indigeneity. As the imaginations of social contract theorists led us into the discussion of common elements of human nature living in a State of Nature, they also were imagining the lives of indigenous peoples. Contact with indigenous peoples and nations were at the very heart of the modern experience of the "new world" . As we saw in *Utopia*, More depicts the local pre-Utopia inhabitants as lacking in imagination. Utopos' task was to establish a new autochthonous potion for his new experimental kingdom. The fiction of Utopia was meant to provoke

England to examine its own life, so to speak. In the process, however, More started a modern narrative about indigeneity, followed by Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, that situate *Frankenstein* the novel in a new state of being– a manufactured human nature that cannot be controlled or control itself. The creature in *Frankenstein* is not the only character in the novel, but when we read the book we can try to see the world through its eyes. As Michael Laplace-Sinatra explains, "*Frankenstein* is an open-ended series of dialogues between present and absent characters, between active male and passive female characters, and between science fact and science fiction. " (254) As a novel, its novelty was to place constantly bodies in peril: the peril of the arctic ice, the peril of being a woman in a man's misogynistic world, and the peril of unbridled science and technology. It is about the in-betweens of life, the moments of self-reflection that make us pause in our business to survive and ask deeper questions about where we really are in the world.

Frankenstein is about body politics in many ways. The practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the body and the struggle between the individual vs. social control of the body. It is also about transcendence or extending our understanding beyond the limits of ordinary experience in science fiction. It is also situated in the birthing moment of Romanticism, the literary movement in late 18th/early 19th century Europe that focused on concepts of the individual, the subjective, the imaginative, the emotional and the personal. In this sense, *Frankenstein* lives in the art of romantic criticism where conceptions of imagination, sympathy and perception are propagated by theorists like Jean Jacques Rousseau. Victor Frankenstein engages in what we might call a "mis-guided enlightenment experiment". This action is not unlike Rousseau's creation of the General Will as the sympathetic cause for a revolutionary republic. The concept of sympathy lies at the heart of romantic attempts to

civilize and develop the world. What started with Machiavelli and Hobbes with an empirical observation of the machinations of power in political science, eventually became known as the "white man's burden" – the struggle to gift indigenous peoples with civilization begins in the imaginations of the social contract theorists, who see indigeneity as an earlier version of themselves – needing to know how to move out of a state of nature and into modernity and the projection of the Western mind into the mind and body of the "other."

Shelley was dogged by getting *Frankenstein* "right" and tasked herself with constantly explain and interrogating her own motives for creating this book. This alienation from the concerns of masculine romanticism makes the novel, rather than poetry, an attractive and accessible creative space for women. The novel affords women cultural authority especially in genres that emerge from and establish a strictly female field of knowledge. Shelley presents the traits of masculine romanticism -creative imagination, transcendence and autonomy -in their most extreme forms. (Laplace-Sinatra,) Her male characters are the embodiment of masculine romanticism's unstable, self-deluded products. In some ways, in *Frankenstein* Shelley satirizes the dangers of uncontrolled creativity and inspiration and also suggests the difficulties that the possibility of feeling inspired may have represented for women creators. Who is the modern Prometheus here? Is it Victor *Frankenstein*, or is it the who creature has stolen his life and the lives of others from Victor? Or is it Shelley herself, stealing from classic mythology to create her own cautionary tale? (Edwards) The unrelenting self-punishment and self-pity that all three experiences is a telling foreshadowing of the psychosis of modernity and the failed promise that enlightenment and creativity will save humankind from itself. Victor makes a life that he wants to avoid, the creature is given a life that he does not understand and Shelley gives birth to a

legend in the body of literature. Like More, she abandons social convention to imagine a new space for justice. Also, like More she reminds us that we don't have bodies we *are* bodies. The ontological imagination is the heart of the story – creating a being that searches for its own identity in a space that was created by an unknown writer requires care and patience. Bodies, although fully constructed as physical and tangible objects, only become visible as acceptable subjects through the ability to properly perform what is expected of them from the hegemonic power structure within which they exist. (Edwards) This leads our Western narrative of political thought into a consideration of reproductive rights, sexual and domestic violence, gender performance, body modification, slave trade, population segregation and racism and human rights. Moreover, as Karen Piper explains in her work on "Inuit Diasporas and Frankenstein and the Inuit in England", the creature created by Victor Frankenstein is a reminder of the excesses of European colonialism.

> In the novel, the 'birth' of the creature in Europe could be said to represent cultural fears of the invasion of the 'primitive' in 'civilized' society, or the arrival of the colonized, in search of revenge, on the shores of the colonizer. (1)

The political context for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is decided in her own birth. She is literally surrounded by political thought through the work of her father William Godwin and her late mother Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine and the leaders of social contract thinking, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau. (Craciun, Mellor) She learns from their work an appreciation of the causes and consequences of political and social revolution, the need to develop lawful limits on government in a sound constitution of laws, a limit on patriarchy, the rites and practices of citizenship and the power of public education. When

Frankenstein is read, we must read around it the words of her time and situate the book in the history of political thought more firmly than ever.

The goal of political thought and philosophy is to situate humanity in new places, to create options for political action and the educate citizens in the values inherent in the good life. In the opening of *Frankenstein*, we are introduced to a brother and sister communicating about life and adventure. Robert Walton and his sister represent the family, communicating across the vast expanse of the arctic ice to the gentleness of the English countryside. In fact, the tale of *Frankenstein* is told one of these letters by Walton himself who is caught in the adventure of arctic exploration by the forces of nature. His need to communicate this predicament from a "land of ice," searching for the Northwest Passage and a new route to the riches of the Orient, because this condition is "unnatural" to him. In some ways, the Arctic represents a real utopia that doesn't really exist in the Victorian imagination, but serves as an Orientalist "other" to the firm and potent European continent. (Said) The preoccupation with the Arctic and Antarctic geographies is part of the legend of colonial burdens. These same burdens are Victor's burdens as he flees across the ice from the pursuit of his monstrous creation. He carries the weight of colonial guilt in the creation of the Monster, who pursues him not for revenge but for forgiveness and understanding. We must also remember that the dialogue that Victor and the Monster have that regards the creation of a female mate takes place in the middle of the Alps, another frozen locale that can hardly sustain life. Victor's creation and Walton's imagination have led them both to an encounter on board a ship once bound for glory but now bound, like Prometheus, to an unforgiving fate in a cold, dark place. This is where the story of *Frankenstein* takes place – in a new world that is foreign and other to the European imagination but at the

same time needs it settlement and help. In more than one sense, *Frankenstein* is a story of dystopic creation that challenges Shelley's intellectual legacy in the invention of states of nature imagined by her intellectual predecessors. Here is a real state of nature.

As *Frankenstein* opens, Walton explains the depth of his despair. " But I have one want which I have been unable to satisfy… I have no friend Margaret" (7) *Frankenstein* begins with a plea for friendship. A call to end the feeling of despair and homelessness. This is the same call made by the monster to his creator. In their encounter, the Monster, having encapsulated his life of survival for Victor, explains:

> Increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was. I cherished hope, it is true, but it vanished when I beheld my person reflected in water….I allowed my thoughts, unchecked by reason, to ramble in the fields of Paradise and dared to fancy amiable and lovely creatures sympathizing with my feelings and cheering my gloom,,,,But it was all a dream: no Eve soothed my sorrows nor shared my thoughts. I was alone. I remembered Adam's supplication to his Creator. But where was mine? He had abandoned me, and in the bitterness of my heart I cursed him. (131)

This is the central message of *Frankenstein*: life requires community. Living means living with others. Thus, the central task of politics and indeed of political thought and philosophy is to imagine a community of like-minded people who share their affection through sympathy for life itself. The realization of this community can only be perfected in story and narrative.

Victor's creature is a revolutionary man, not Caucasian or not European, searching for an identity and validation of belonging. He is the first of a new species or race of human in a new time, perhaps the first indigenous person finding themselves in a new world not of their

creation. (Mellor, 2001) This is political science fiction.: a story of a very long journey through a new modern world of creation and change. A new victorious society is required to accommodate this new and gigantic creature. [1] He leaves the story but he never leaves our imagination.

In the modern age, the world has been colonized to the point of geologists and social scientists have coined our historical era as the Anthropocene, the of the world's history where humanity owns and controls and names everything. Modern imagined communities can be understood as "land occupied by violence" [2]. Created with a terror and a politics that we had never seen before –totalitarianism.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* serves a number of purposes for the study of political thought and philosophy. First, by writing a story about the new world order of science and its limitations, she has created a novel of enduring thematic value for future generations of scholars concerned with the rapid advancement of technologies of power. Second, Shelley's invention of a new order of human being foreshadows the struggles of liberal contract theory to determine the extent of freedom's options. Thirdly, I believe that Shelley's text is valuable for the understanding of colonialism and the 19th century march into industrial revolution nationalism and world violence. Finally, Mary Shelley secured a space for women in the

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[1] The latin word *francus* is the origin of the name "Frank" means freedom and Stein derives from the latin for "brick" or "rock" and by extension "Frankenstein" could mean rock of freedom. "Victor" means what it says. Together, the names suggest freedom's victory. Is Victor Frankenstein the creator of a new order of freedom? See Lewis Gordon's essay in *The Common Reader,* October 26, 2018. Retrieved from https://commonreader.wustl.edu/c/decolonializing-frankenstein/ October 27, 2019.

[2] Students were directed to William Connolly's excellent essay on the American experience of founding in "Tocqueville, Territory and Violence" in *Theory, Culture and Society*. Vol. 11 (1994) 19-40.

Western political narrative and opens our world to her appreciation of the absolute and intolerable excesses of patriarchy and misogyny that still linger and haunt us.

Darkness at Noon

Arthur Koestler's ***Darkness at Noon*** (1941) , a quasi-auto-biographical account of the Moscow Show trials that occurred in the Stalinist version of the Soviet Union, serves as another cautionary tale of political science fiction that engages the reader in a discussion of the essence of socialist and communist ideas. Nicholas Rubashov is introduced as a victim of his own designs, a former and now failed member of the inner circle in a government of an un-named country. His struggle is to understand how he got caught up in the dialectic of history and when his bullet is coming.

The themes and literary structure of **Darkness at Noon** give us access to the mind of a revolutionary who wants to convey the meaning of history and what counts as legitimate historical knowledge. His personal identity as a citizen of this un-named country is questioned against the backdrop of a false legal system that treats him as a prisoner whose crime is just being. Not only does Koestler interrogate the motives behind revolutionary action, he also situates the reader inside the novel by letting us see and hear Rubashov's worldview through his intelligent and capable eyes and ears. It is as if the reader is on trial for entering this fictitious world inhabited by others who are sure that they have the answer to one of the most important questions of the study of political thought and philosophy: "What is to be done?" The function and fiction of revolutionary action require others characters to emerge. The "masses" , says Rubashov repeatedly, will triumph in the end. When history and historical inevitability are finished, the masses remain. Koestler cautions us with the structure of his

book. The first three chapters are aptly titled First, Second and Third Hearing. They mock the seeming conventionality of Rubashov's treatment and interrogation. In the last chapter, A Grammatical Fiction, the character of Rubashov and , indeed, the need for any character that is distinguished from any other, disappears. The identity of the individual is "eclipsed" by the radiance of the masses. Koestler's caution is that without memory and action the human race will also disappear into a mindless whirr of never-ending change directed by "nobody", as Hannah Arendt argues. Throughout the novel Rubashov is haunted by the foreshadowing of his own demise but also by then fleeting and uncontrollable memories of sympathy for a fallen savior, depicted deftly by Koestler in recurring encounters that Rubashov has with images of the "pieta". [3]

In The First Hearing, "so far, everything was in order." The condition of Rubashov's world is exactly how he had designed it. He marvels at the efficiency of the prison, it's situation in the community and the promise of freedom that lies outside the window. He was settled into the prison of the dystopia that he had helped create. He knew how the rest of his life would unfold. " For the first time in months he was not afraid of his dreams."(3) He was in the protective lap of the un-named country that he had served and protected, In other words, his dream of revolution and historical change had been realized. He was now a legitimate criminal of history, a citizen who realized that , even here, he was human and had the right to be heard.

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[3] Students were directed to read a short essay by Kristy Puchko. **15 Things You Should Know About Michelangelo's *Pietàc*** https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/63602/15-things-you-should-know-about-michelangelos-pieta

While he waits for the First Hearing, Rubashov remembers No.1 , the real grammatical fiction, the head of the party and a former colleague. In a new society there is need for a reordering of the logic of governance and No.1 exemplifies the new world order. What number was Rubashov? How would history remember him?

> History will rehabilitate you, thought Rubashov, without particular conviction. What does history know of nail-biting? He smoked and thought of the dead, and of the humiliation that had preceded their death. Nevertheless, he could not bring himself to hate No. 1 .(13)

He remembered that he had been taken away in a new American car. ",,, perhaps an American had discovered how to counteract gravity…" and the world was starting to turn again. Why has he been given pencil and paper? (93) Perhaps to leave a memory to be discovered later. Or to practice his confession. The "darkness" was starting to pass, nature was back. Rubashov has a toothache, a reminder that his body is still alive if only for another hearing. (95)

The Second Hearing begins with an excerpt from Rubashov's diary. In it, he recalls that No. 1 had Machiavelli's ***Prince*** is the text by which No.1 lives. It was Machiavelli who alerted the West to the danger of believing in "imaginary republics." For him the reality of politics and success lay in the use of virtue as a means to the end of power and control. All is *realpolitik* and nothing else. Rubashov obsessed with making the connection of action to historical precedent. How did we get to this point?

> We resembled the Great Inquisitors in that we persecuted the seeds of evil not only in men's deeds, but in their thoughts. We admitted no private sphere, not even inside a

man's skull. We lived under the compulsion of working things out to their final conclusion. Our minds were so tensely charged that the slightest collision brought a mortal short-circuit. Thus, we were fated to mutual destruction, I was one of them.(100)

In The Third Hearing, Rubashov begins to realize that he cannot reason with the system any more. He also realizes that his rehearsed confession is what the Party needs. As "we have replaced decency by reason," the capitulation is achieved as Rubashov accepts that he is no longer useful to the revolution. History is over for him and he becomes human again, a fallen man like any other in the arms of the masses. However, the capacity of the masses to govern themselves is directly proportionate to their ability to understand their society as a whole mass consciousness. The real mistake, he now understands, was that the masses make mistakes and the "swing of the historical pendulum" has begun. In the end he is a martyr not for the revolution but for the end of the revolution. He will be remembered as a hero in the demise of the Party and the un-named country. The revolution had become stable -and then dogmatic. How do we keep "founding" impulses alive in our society so that people "feel" connected to their country - to "their revolution" whatever that may be? In the end, he pleads guilty to a charge that he no longer is useful. He no longer understands his place in the revolution. He is better off dead.

I please guilty to not having understood the fatal compulsion behind the policy of the Government. I plead guilty to having followed sentimental impulses and in so doing to have been led into contradiction with historical necessity. I have lent my ear to the laments of the sacrificed, and thus became deaf to the arguments which proved the

necessity to sacrifice them. I plead guilty to having rated the question of guilt and innocence higher than that of utility and harmfulness. Finally, I pleased guilty to having placed the idea of man above the idea of mankind. (193)

In the Grammatical Fiction, the epilogue to Rubashov's struggle to be understood, he disappears into the chimera of history, unaware of any potential eulogy or utopia. His identity is sealed forever in time and in this book. Forever looking for the Promised Land (271) .

Darkness at Noon turns on the definitions of individuality in what counts as history. Political and social identity are subsumed in the state, and, like in Hobbes' Leviathan, the people are always "inside the state." Thus, justice is functional to the survival of the state and the individual human being who, for some reason not their making, is outside the state. They struggle, like Rubashov to get back in. The real revolution is the one which continuously reminds us that we are accountable for our identities and that we must inhabit their fictions. What is meant by the "grammatical fiction"? How is this related to modern life? How does the interpretation of history influence political choices? What is the relationship between political power and emotion? How does this book remind us of *Utopia*? Of Plato's *Republic* or the myth of Atlantis?

Nicholas Rubashov's encounter with ideological rigidity is a fiction based on real events in Arthur Koestler's life and work. As F. Flagg Taylor remarks, on the 75th anniversary of the American publication of *Darkness at Noon*, "Having spent about six months in total in various prisons and internment camps in Spain and France, Koestler was well-poised to relate the atmosphere of these places in a novel." (4) This great work of exposing the validity of the Moscow show trials was held in suspicion itself until more and more detail about the trials

emerged. The "virus" of totalitarianism is explained well by Hannah Arendt in her work on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she analyzes the conditions of mass culture that precipitate its arrival. The work of a totalizing political infrastructure is to destroy the individuality of the person by first destroying the logic of the legal system that protects individuals from arbitrary treatment by government and police, and then actively de-moralizing the entire society through a propaganda attack on what she called "superfluous populations". (Arendt) The initial targets of the state's policy is to create the "other" as a completely evil entity. What she calls the "banality of evil" is the description of the arbitrariness of total control over a society that bears absolutely no resemblance to the previous one. History is reclaimed and rewritten – this, of course, was the profession of Winston Smith in Orwell's *1984* for the Ministry of Truth in Oceania – to exclude any memory of these superfluous populations. How can this happen right before our eyes? How is it that we cannot see the signs of totalitarian movement emerging? Is it because we are so focused as a society on the accumulation of personal power? Flagg answers our questions well in the conclusion to his 2016 celebratory essay where he argues that,

> The psychological and moral dimensions of revolutionary devotion ought to be explored by each generation anew. For the temptations of such devotion will remain. An appreciation for the reality of Koestler's "grammatical fiction"—the beauty and dignity of each human person as a responsible being—is the beginning of wisdom for resisting the intoxicating charms of revolutionary politics and violence. (12)

Indeed, the unexamined life is a dangerous element in our modern and now post-modern worlds. The temptations of consumerism and the lengths that we go to satisfy these totalizing and sometimes frenzied actions of appetite have led us to a state of mental anxiety and debt. This anxiety and debt are felt in other works of fiction that resemble in their intensity the passion of Koestler's writing. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* resonates well in this context. The "horror" of colonialism in Africa is attributed to the breakdown of authority in the character of Colonel Kurtz, but Conrad is also reminding his reader that this breakdown may be endemic to modern experiences. But could it be part of human nature? As Jerome Kohn argues in his essay "Totalitarianism: The Inversion of Politics", totalitarianism is everywhere as a possibility because it lives inside our Western political genetic structure.

> In diverse areas of the world where political freedom and open societies have been virtually unknown or untried, totalitarian methods have been seen to exert an ongoing attraction for local elites, warlords, and rebels. Such well-known phenomena as "brain washing," "killing fields," "ethnic cleansing," "mass graves," and "genocide," accounting for millions of victims and arising from a variety of tribal, nationalist, ethnic, religious, and economic conditions, have been deemed totalitarian in nature. Totalitarianism, moreover, is frequently employed as an abstract, vaguely defined term of general opprobrium, whose historical roots are traced to the political thought of Marx or in some instances to Rousseau and as far back as Plato. (4)

Continental Drift

Continental Drift by Russell Banks is a story about two journeys to Florida, one American and one Haitian. Both journeys are well intentioned and begin in the spirit of claiming a new way of life. Both involve comradery and friendship in their execution and planning. But they eventually collide, like drifting continents and become each other's others. The meeting of Bob Dubois and Vanise Dorsinville crystalizes the effects of globalization and neoliberal economic expectaions. Banks asks the reader to consider the difference between "nomadism" and "transience". Nomads are people, rarely alone, who travel with the flows of the world's movement. As Banks writes;

> The universe moves, and everything in it moves, and by transferring its parts, it and everything in it down to the smallest cell are transformed and continue….It is marvelous… And what is marvelous to us, what fills us with wonder and admiration, we must emulate, or we die. (44)

Nomads follow natural patterns and "carry" their community and traditions with them, Transients are forced to move, usually by poverty or opportunity, and they are drawn together by the promise of a better life over there, somewhere else in the whirl of possibilities. Transiency is about abandoning and recreating. Nomads wander and wonder. Transients focus and fight. Which one exemplifies the American Dream? Which one will lead to prosperity, longevity and wealth? These are the questions posed by *Continental Drift*, written in three narrative styles that allows the reader a glimpse of the "other's" perspective while focusing the reader on their own. Banks is interested in exposing the truths of the modern search for utopic spaces: they involve physical movement and social movement that must take into

consideration the consequences of our "drifting" away from and toward the other. As Jessica Livingston explains, *Continental Dr*ift is

> … a novel about historical change during the latter half of the twentieth century, when many aspects of globalization intensified. More specifically the novel is about the shift to a neoliberal economy. Neoliberalism is the political and economic philosophy of free markets and free trade that dominated conventional wisdom in the late twentieth century. (Livingston 264-65)

Bob Dubois is on the move from Maine to Florida. And from a life of furnaces, alcohol and a quiet and lonely adulterous affair to a brash and open celebration of everything that lies at the heart of American male idealism. Bob is the everyman that every man is told that he wants to be: a successful provider and fantastic lover and a man's man. Bob has the ingredients but he needs direction, verification and legitimacy. He is moving up as he moves down to Florida, to live in the land of eternal youth and endless summer.

Vanise Dorsinville is on the move from Haiti – the poorest country in the Western hemisphere – to Florida, entry point to the American Dream. Vanise represents the abandoned woman, holding fast to her children so that she can bring them a better life. In some ways she is the object of Bob's affliction and also the effects of his actions. She is moving from the bottom to the middle, to the bottom of America.

What is at stake in their stories is the future of race relations, sometimes called the greatest stumbling block to true democracy in the Unites States. Both experience various forms of racism and identity politics as they move to their better places. Bob encounters the world of cutthroat business whiel Vanise has to deal with many forms of piracy. Both experiences are

wedded to the American manifest: the path to prosperity is destined and determined by the economy. Banks uses a number of different voices to draw the reader into these narratives. Aside from those of the main characters and those around them, he includes the "loa". Like saints or other intermediaries between the gods and the world, they tell stories of high import, stories with lessons. As Banks explains;

> This is an American story of the late 20th century, and you don't need a muse to tell it, you need something more like a loa, or mouth-man, a voice that makes speech stand in front of you and not behind, for there's nothing here that depends on memory for the telling. With a story like this, you want an accounting to occur…(2)

Continental Drift is a story that accounts for the behavior of a middle-aged white American man who is drawn to Florida, like Ponce de Leon, for a taste of eternal life, a redemption of his past ills in exchange for the promise of youth. He drags his wife Elaine and two daughters with him. There are beaches open all year round. As their journey makes it way through Georgia and into the South, they notice that the complexion of the landscape is changing as fast as the complexion of the people. Things are simple here; the black people live in one area and the whites in another. In the 1970s, when this story takes place, Jim Crow was alive and well – "*this* is home now."

As they settle in Florida, and Bob starts working in his brother Eddie's liquor store, it becomes apparent very quickly that the promise of youth has been replaced by the promise of money – Eddie has made a killing selling to displaced and disrespected black people. Bob finds himself in the centre of a new world – dystopian because it bears no resemblance to the

pictures on the bags of oranges that they would buy in Maine. Things are different here, Bob cautions Elaine. And Eddie explains what is at stake.

> "You bet your ass things are different here. We got niggers with guns and razors here," Eddie says, suddenly serious, "We got Cubans who cut your balls off. We got Haitians with their fucking voodoo sacrifices and Jamaicans with machetes….We got dark-skinned crazies of all kinds…" (65)

Bob carries a gun to work and learns Eddie's quintessential America business system – buy and sell, but be very conscious of who is around you. He is becoming part of his dream, an entrepreneur and a man's man.

While brothers Bob and Eddie are pursuing their American dreams, Vanise Dorsinville sets sail from Haiti with her infant son and nephew Claude in a series of treacherous and jumps from island to island, assured that each time they stop that "this is really America, you can trust me." This is the beginning of the broken promises of the emerging neoliberal universe that has gripped America and the world. As Jessica Livingston argues:

> Through the novel's larger structure that pairs Bob's story with Vanise's, *Continental Drift* attempts to portray the larger forces of neoliberalism, but much of the novel is about how Bob understands—or rather fails to understand—neoliberal changes. Unable to see how neoliberalism increases economic disparity on a global scale, Bob only sees these changes as threatening to him as a white man. (265)

As he is threatened, Bob also becomes increasingly curious with black culture and black women. His philandering begins anew when his wife announces she is pregnant with their third

child, and, as he is learning Eddie's system, he is creating one of his own. Survival here means appropriating black culture as a settler. His affair with Marguerite Dill draws him deeper and deeper into an identity crisis – he is attracted to black music and there is an amazing scene where he asks Marguerite to teach him how to talk black. His music choices drift from country and western to soul and the blues. Bob believes that he gets it. He has accomplished the culturally impossible task of being white and being black at the same time. Banks' commentary on American white dreams reaches a new level when he explains, for both us and Bob, the differences between men and women. Men want change. Women change for them.

> Men do that to women., use them to remake themselves, just as women do it to men. Men and women seek the love of the Other so that the old, cracked and shabby self can be left behind….And so Bob, who more than anything desires to be rid of himself, falls to contemplating the love of a Southern black woman and the kind of Northern white man it will make of him. (145)

This violation of culture is juxtaposed to a robbery and killing at the liquor store and causes things to quickly fall apart. It is never appropriate to *appropriate.* The lesson here is to stay white, make money at the expense of any colored person, but always, stay white. In his trenchant essay entitled, "White Boy (American Hunger) and the Angel of History: Russel Banks Identity Knowledges," Evan Carton situates Bank's prose and commentary in a new tradition of the articulation and "trading" of identity knowledges, that represent movement in America and elsewhere toward defining race, gender, sexuality and nation. Drawing on the work of Toni

Morrison and bel hooks, as well as Robyn Wiegman's *Object Lessons*, Canton describes Banks writing, especially in *Continental Drift* in the following manner.

> Banks acutely perceives the links to racist domination of many antiracist white desires and he exposes those links here and in other less sexualized contexts of interracial encounter. At the same time, I think he also perceives something genuine and perhaps necessary in the white desire to be acted upon, changed utterly—something inextricable from but irreducible to what hooks labels "imperialist nostalgia" (Footnote 6, p. 65)

Because Bob kills a man during a botched robbery at the store he must recreate himself all over. He must regain his status as the white American man's man, who mansplains to his wife that all they have to do is find distance from this tragedy and move on to a new trade – commanding a tourist fishing boat, just like the ones that they had back in Maine. The boat becomes the liberating institution that guarantees prosperity and freedom and Bob dives deeper into the neoliberal exploitation as he agrees to become a fishing boat captain who delivers tourists to their catch, and off shore trade to his boss.

In the finale to *Continental Drift*, all hell breaks loose. There is first Bob's hell of descending to depths of off-shore human trafficking out of Moray Key at the very edge of America – there are plenty of Haitians willing to pay, his new boss tells him. There is Vanise's hell of arriving in America's waters and losing her son and nephew to the waves. She survives Bob's badly orchestrated ocean pick-up only to make it to Little Haiti in Miami, her new found home. The final hell we observe is the white imperialist hell who carries the white man's

burden to its logical conclusion . Bob is its messenger. He attempts to refund Vanise's money and gets killed as he wanders too close to the centre of creole America.

The characters and themes of *Continental Drift* are thick with the accents of American culture in a neoliberal age. The movement of Bob matches the movement of Vanise, and they both dance toward each other following a script that is dictated by global economic forces. Bob is unhappy, immoral and misguided, but free because he is white. His whiteness guarantees him safe passage from one trade to another. This privilege also allows him to die a martyr, perhaps like Rubashov in *Darkness at Noon*, he must die to save the neoliberal revolution as a capitalist martyr. Vanise is the new America, a different kind of poor, wretched person, whose colour is her strength in community with others, but, she too sacrifices her children to the loas in order to reach the promised land of America. Together they live out the themes of neoliberal America: transience, violence, identity commodification, class, alienation, racism, amorality and utopia. They see utopia in their dreams, but they also see the rigidity of their continents.

Linden Hills

Linden Hills is a novel set in suburban Detroit and is part of a tradition of black storytelling that focuses on the liberation of the individual from hegemonic tropes of hetero-normativity, neoliberal ambitions, cultural appropriation, whiteness and white privilege and the power of a dysfunctional community. It functions as a modern utopia to some and as hell or dystopia to others. Naylor's act of situating a black American community in hell is a fiction not

far from the truth. She hopes that we believe that the viciousness of living in hell on earth is more than a metaphor at the heart of the black experience in America. But what is the cause?

Linden Hills opens in a curious way. “There had been a dispute for years over the exact location of Linden Hills. Everyone associated with Wayne County had taken part in it.: the U.S. Post Office, census takers, city surveyors, real estate brokers, and a menagerie of blacks and whites who had lived along its fringes for 160 years.” (1) Immediately we question the nature of this dispute. Linden Hills was a legendary place, a utopia from the outside, a place to move “up in” . It was a model community for black acceleration and wealth management. The problem that faced its residents was easy to solve: in order to live and prosper and remain in Linden Hills, one had to sell the “mirror in their soul” and sign on to a life of power and prestige. Some refer to this as a form of appropriation and defeat. Others, especially those who lived in Linden Hills, knew that it was their only way up in a society that had kept the black community down since the days of slavery. Still others see it as adopting the attitudes and beliefs, the tropes of power and class, that animated white America. Whiteness to some is the pinnacle of human achievement.

Naylor’s *Linden* Hills is a cautionary and dystopic rendition of the perils of whiteness and white aspiration. Catherine Ward and Gloria Naylor confirm this in their essay “ Gloria Naylor's "Linden Hills": A Modern "Inferno" “ and point to the fact that in Linden Hills, Naylor recreates Dante’s Inferno on purpose as a cautionary tale to those whose mirrors have stopped receiving the light of tradition. They have, as in Faust, sold their souls to the devil – Luther Nedeed. There had been a series of Nedeeds, starting from the time of the abolition of slavery and ending with the present day Luther who owned all of the lots and houses in Linden

Hills, lived at the bottom of Linden Hills, and was an undertaker and real estate agent providing services to the living and the dying.

> In Linden Hills up is down; the most prestigious lots are those lower down the hill. To gain one of these lots, which are never sold but are leased for 1001 years, each of the residents must give up some-thing -a part of his soul, ties with his past, ties with his community, his spiritual values, even his sense of who he is. Like Dante's lost souls, the people of Linden Hills live on a circle that is appropriate to their "sins." Here most residents stay for the rest of their lives, locked in their wrong choices. (Ward and Naylor, 70)

The story covers four days in the life of a twenty-year-old black poet, Willie Mason, who lives in a poor neighborhood called Putney Wayne that lies just above Linden Hills. Working temporarily as a handyman to earn money to buy Christmas presents, he and his best friend Lester Tilson, who lives at the top of Linden Hills in one of the modest houses, begin their search for odd jobs and odd characters. They pass through Linden Hills and, like Dante and Virgil, analyze the moral failures of the lost souls they encounter. Both agree that perhaps they can make a “a little money” from doing chores for the busy residents and will follow the eight concentric circles of the development down to the bottom to Luther’s house where he runs his business and lives with his wife Willa and their newborn son. In between, the characters they meet struggle to define their identities as citizens in a white world.

Naylor not only takes us on a journey into the darkness of Linden Hills, she reminds us that the true nature of what it means to be alive is to reflect and listen to the rhythms of history and culture as they reverberate in and around our homes and work places. She uses the

observational capacities of Willie and Lester to comment on everything that seems good in America: wealth, style, social standing and education. She places them in a story that mirrors and judges the soul of a community to us. They become the muses for her work.

> Willie had left school after the ninth grade. He said that there was really nothing more that they could teach him. He knew how to read and write and reason. He was now free to read the books that were important to him, not to some rusty-minded teacher. And if you wanted to write about life, you had to go where life was, among the people.(28)

Willie cannot bear the "white fences" of education that keep the right people out and the wrong people in. The value of a real education is in the movement toward the resolution of an idea. In this case, the idea was Linden Hills. With his best friend Lester, they encounter a cast of characters who live and die in Linden Hills and who are always conscious of the shadow of Luther Nedeed. Luther's wife Willa, we find out through a different narrative style used by Naylor, is locked in the basement of Luther's house with her dead son. She had given stillbirth to a white baby, the grossest miscarriage of natural justice for the black man. Luther could not stand for the idea that he had a white son who stood to inherit his fortune. There was already too much whiteness around him and he felt that his small community was being surrounded by the waves of suburban Detroiters escaping the degradation of the inner city.

The day that Lester and Willie start their journey is December 21st, the winter solstice, the time of the movement of the sun into view, that start of the celebration of light that would be punctuated in this community by Christmas and the life of Christ. The day that their journey ends is Christmas Eve. Each night they stay in a different house and take care of different tasks

for the residents they meet. They serve at a wedding, strip wallpaper from a home where a woman has just passed, shovel snow – white snow – at the house of the local Christian pastor, whose house is directly opposite Luther's at the bottom of the hill. They meet people hiding from their true identities for the "sake of the firm" , others who discover that they have to leave Linden Hills because of their gender. They meet others who claim to be historians and musicians and poets but are working for Luther to hide the truth about Linden Hills. All the while they judge and comment and find insights into elements of the human condition. Their journey into hell is instructive and worthy as through them, Naylor methodically reveals the secrets that have lain hidden in Linden Hills for too long.

The real problem with Linden Hills was that its citizens were trying to emulate white values, they had lost direction and were locked into a life that Luther prescribed. Their individual lives were focused on the towers of success and their community lives were determined ahead of their personal schedules, by Luther and his need to control Linden Hills as a prize, or as a "wad of spit – a beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eye of America. " (9) Luther Nedeed needed Linden Hills, it was his birthright and to hold it he had to control the birthrights of all who lived there. He taught them how to be whiter than the best whites living outside their community. He financed their educations at Harvard and Yale. He placed them in prestigious law firms, got them grants for writing fictitious histories, and got them executive positions at IBM. He was the boss of Linden Hills.

Willie and Lester journey down into Linden Hills was parallel journey to Willa Nedeed's own rising to consciousness. In her locked-in state, in the basement, she finds a series of

testaments by former Nedeed women who have led locked lives as well. As she dwells in the basement of the bottom of the hills, “she discovers the history of the Nedeed women and, through their failures, learns what success should mean for a woman.” (Ward and Naylor, 70). Linden Hills is indeed a place of secrets, but as Willie and Lester learn more about the dead souls they also reveal an essential misogyny that leaves Linden Hills as barren as it was at its founding, empty of life and focused on revenge. Luther controls his wife, like all the Nedeeds before him, with a promise. If you do what I say and act the way I want and make me a father so that I can pass on my fortune to my son, then you can stay. The ultimate fate for the women of Linden Hills is to be cast out because they are not men. Linden Hills is replete with patriarchy and sexism and homophobia. The men are clearly following a path towards success, the women are having babies and keeping house because that is how a real community functions. The reproductive capacity of this community lies in the performance of gender and heteronormativity. According to Tim Engles in “African American Whiteness in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills,”* unlike the work of Toni Morrison whose characters “dream of being white,”, Naylor reveals the essence of whiteness itself in a rampant and never-ending desire for material. Naylor’s characters don’t dream of being white, they *are* white.

> Naylor offers a prescriptive statement on the corrosive, "whitening" effects of materialism by openly adopting the narrative structure and didactic thrust of Dante's moral allegory. *The Inferno.* In addition to creating a space that replicates in many ways the multi-leveled Hell posited by Dante, Naylor adopts her model's general thematic emphasis on the individual's responsibility for exerting his or her will in order to resist worldly temptation and to make better

> choices in life (thus the suggestively similar names of the novel's dual protagonists, Willa Nedeed and Willie Mason).(662)

The material culture of consumer America is the real heart of Linden Hills. The utopia of accumulation of property is the undoing of traditional black culture. By using The Inferno as a model of materialist culture, does Naylor suggest that the way back for blackness is through the spirit of Christianity? Is the dystopia of Linden Hills reversed by a coming to the light on Christmas Eve? Indeed, the story comes to a fiery end as Willie and Lester make it to Nedeed's house the help trim the Nedeed Christmas tree, and accidentally, or perhaps providentially, open the basement door and allow Willa to come up. As she makes her way into her kitchen, like the other Nedeed wives she searches for a way out, she starts the fire that will serve as the end to Luther Nedeed's legacy – hell is burning and she escapes to a new life. In the process, she transforms herself into a female saviour.

> The American "will to possess," then, also constitutes a willful repression of one's communal ties, in favor of a strictly materialistic individualism. It is this process, by which the most" all-American" people are the atomized and ironically individualized white ones, that Willie and Willa eventually come to resist. (Engles, 665)

Linden Hills has become a classic of black-American literature because it pokes the passive eye of white privilege and offers hope to the American utopic dream of accumulation and consumption to resolve itself out of the frenzy that gives it motion.

Final Thoughts

This course focused on the use of the novel in Western-European culture as a commentary on contemporary political experiences. Themes like the power of political will, the place of utopia and dystopia in imagined communities, the development of ideological bias in totalitarianism, the state o fnature and governmentality, the emergence of gender politics, and the power of religion and the consequences of civic engagement, black reality and white privilege, conspicuous consumption, among others. Books were chosen to engage students in analysis and understanding while following well-constructed and well known situational narratives in Political Science fiction. By reading and providing commentary in various forms of essays, class discussions and exams, students proved once again that they are interested in the themes of Western Political Theory and how they are embedded in stories. Stories are what we are and how we convey our ideas about the good life. These books helped situated students in classical and contemporary debates that pull us towards an engagement with "imagined communities."

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