

FALL 2024 NEWSLETTER

On the surface, democracy in 2024 is thriving, with more people voting this year – some two billion in more than sixty countries – than at any time in history. The world’s electoral schedule was packed even before early balloting was called, years ahead of time, in the UK, France, and Iran – sending scores of millions more to the polls. All elections are not equal and voters’ verdicts are still in arrival, but an early tableau has emerged. British and South African voters chose political alternation, an indicator of democratic health. Iran elected a presidential reformer; the Turkish President and Indian Prime Minister unexpectedly acknowledged their losses. The French electorate declined to give a majority to the Far-Right party, while the first female president was elected in Mexico. The twists and turns of the US presidential campaign have transfixed publics around the world, confirming an appetite for the give-and-take of representative politics.

Yet despite appearances, there is a foreboding sense that democracy is in danger. In recent years, Freedom House found that twice as many countries moved towards authoritarianism rather than away from it – including several of those named above. A global survey by the Open Society Foundation reported that while most respondents desire to live in a democratic state and “believe in its potential to deliver results, they are less convinced by its current performance.” In the US, an attempt was made on the life of a leading presidential candidate, while judicial interventions roiled attempts at executive accountability. In France, electoral results revealed a deeply-divided society and President Emmanuel Macron evoked the specter of civil war.

These infelicities reflect the uncertainty inherent in democracy and its fluctuating balance of powers. But democracy’s progress has always been one “great leap in the dark” after another, as electorates expanded and changed. A key function of elections is



to air out the room and to “pass the torch to the next generation,” as President Biden said upon withdrawing from the presidential race.

Elections are indeed a critical democratic mechanism for turnover, alternation, and eliciting the most capable leadership. We should not idealize the act of voting, however: constitutional democracy requires even more than regular, genuinely contested elections. It needs the rule of law, the separation of powers, free speech, and religious liberty, as well as a robust press and civil society. It needs to balance economic freedoms with protections from the market.

Fine-tuning and finding compromise over the divisive details is the work of public policy, but constitutional democracy is premised upon agreement to the rules of the game. And in many places that consensus is under concerted attack. As the scholar John K. Glenn wrote in the latest *Journal of Democracy*, today’s challenges are “not limited to the moments of voting, but precede and follow it, as trust in democratic institutions comes under threat” – pointing to disinformation, low turnout, and sham elections around the world. Even within relatively functional democracies, how should voters distinguish routine partisan clashes – signs the system is working – from outside interference or legitimate concerns over the system’s viability? If we can agree that there are burdensome loads on a sagging structure, how do we reinforce it? What are the flying buttresses of our future republics? What kind of democratic tomorrows can we imagine?

To reflect on these questions, the Clough Center dedicates its 2024-2025 programming to the theme of “Envisioning Democratic Futures.” The class of Clough Fellows includes thirty-five Boston College students from the fields of literature, law, philosophy, political science, education, and theology

who will study these themes in regular seminars and contribute their research to volume three of the *Clough Center Journal*, published to coincide with our annual Spring Symposium. They are joined by twelve faculty affiliates from across the University, who share an interest in our annual theme and who have distinguished records in related fields.

The center is pleased to welcome Isaiah Sterrett as this year’s postdoctoral research fellow and center coordinator -- supported by an ongoing collaboration with Martino Mona and Anina Schwarzenbach of the University of Bern -- as well as two visiting scholars: religion anthropologist Ahmet Yukleyen and literary critic Danson Kahyana. Returning as this year’s senior research fellow is the historian of South Asia, Chandra Mallampalli.

The community of fellows and affiliates contribute to the Clough Center’s regularly-held seminars, and to a rich lineup of events that are open to all of Boston College and the general public, including a Fall Colloquium on October 10, 2024, and a two-day Spring Symposium on March 21-22, 2025. All of these developments are previewed in this newsletter and on our website. Please join us for this year of envisioning democratic futures, and add your voice to the conversation.

Jonathan Laurence
Director, Clough Center
Professor of Political Science



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Upcoming Events

The 2024-25 programming opens with the Clough Center's third annual edition of **'What the Constitution Means to Us.'** On **Tuesday, September 10th at 5PM** in Gasson 100, we will host renowned journalist and humorist **A.J. Jacobs** -- author of a new memoir documenting his year of "living constitutionally" -- alongside an array of BC students and professors, who will engage in a public reflection on the role of constitutions in their lives.

Next up will be a day-long conference entitled **'On Democratic Participation' on Friday, September 20th from 8:15AM-1:30PM** in Vanderslice Hall (Cabaret Room). This multi-speaker event will pay homage to the career and retirement of BC Political Science Professor **Kay Schlozman**, who has taught at Boston College since 1974.

On **Thursday, September 26th from 5-7PM** in Fulton Honors Library, the Clough Center is thrilled to host **Aziz Rana** (BC Law), who will present his latest book, **The Constitutional Bind: How Americans Came to Idolize a Document That Fails Them.** Rana is a leading constitutional scholar who has focused on the impact of race, citizenship, and empire on American legal and political identity. The Clough Center is delighted to welcome him back as a 2024-25 Faculty Affiliate and as the first Clough Distinguished Lecturer of the year.

The following month, we will host our annual Fall Colloquium on **Thursday, October 10th from 4:30-7:30PM** in the Murray Room to formally launch our exploration of the annual theme, **Envisioning Democratic Futures.** CNN's Chief National Correspondent, **John King**, and several renowned scholars will discuss democracy's current and future, and the stakes and possible outcomes of the 2024 U.S. elections.

On **Thursday, November 7th**, two days after the U.S. presidential election, the Clough Center will host leading political scientists to reflect on a year of democratic elections held around the globe, including BC Faculty **Lauren Honig** and **David Hopkins** of the Political Science Department alongside **Sheri Berman** (Barnard) and **Rahsaan Maxwell** (NYU). Join us in-person in the Heights Room **from 5-7PM** for **What Comes Next? Assessing a Year of Elections.**

For our final event in the Fall, the Clough Center will host **Anna Grzymała-Busse** (Stanford) to discuss her latest book, **Sacred Foundations: The Religious and Medieval Roots of the Modern State**, in which she reinterprets how the medieval Catholic Church influenced modern secular states and continues to have an impact on today's political landscape. Join us on **Thursday, December 5th from 5-7PM** in Devlin Hall 101.

2024 - 2025 CALENDAR OF EVENTS



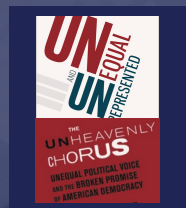
The 3rd Annual

What the Constitution Means to Us

Featuring A.J. Jacobs, author of The Year of Living Constitutionally (2024)

Tuesday, September 10th | 5:00PM
Gasson Hall 100

with Boston College Faculty
Mary Sarah Bilder (Law)
Marsin Alshamary (Political Science)
Fernando Bizzarro (Political Science)
Min Hyung Song (English)
Martin Summers (History)
& Select Student Speakers



On Democratic Participation

A Celebration of the Career of Kay Schlozman

Friday, September 20th | 8:15AM - 1:30PM
Vanderslice Hall, Cabaret Room

Jeffrey Berry (Tufts)
Traci Burch (Northwestern)
Philip Jones (Delaware)
Henry Brady (UC Berkeley)
Jane Junn (USC)
Gary King (Harvard)
Jane Mansbridge (KSG)
Shauna Shames (Rutgers)



A Clough Distinguished Lecture

Book Launch: The Constitutional Bind

Thursday, September 26th | 5:00PM
Fulton Honors Library

Aziz Rana
Boston College



Clough Fall Colloquium

Featuring CNN's John King
Chief National Correspondent

Thursday, October 10th | 4:30-7:30PM
Murray Room

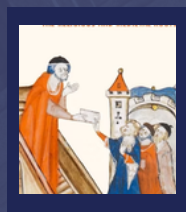
Hélène Landemore (Yale)
Theda Skocpol (Harvard)
Daniel Ziblatt (Harvard)



What Comes Next? Assessing a Year of Elections

Thursday, November 7th | 5:00PM
Heights Room

Sheri Berman (Barnard)
Lauren Honig (BC)
Rahsaan Maxwell (NYU)
David Hopkins (BC)



A Clough Distinguished Lecture

Book Talk: The Medieval Roots of the European State

Thursday, December 5th | 5:00PM
Devlin Hall 101

Anna Grzymala-Busse
Stanford University

SAVE THE DATE • 3/21-22/2025 • SPRING SYMPOSIUM WITH EZRA KLEIN & MORE

 **Focus on the Constitution**

Since the founding era of the United States, the American Constitution has been central to our public life. It has inspired hope, and it has provoked despair. It has remained in place as no other national constitution has. Yet it has also repeatedly been updated and amended, and some today think it needs to change again. During an election season, when its basic meaning seems more contested than ever, how should we look at the Constitution today?

To engage this urgent question, the Clough Center is delighted to sponsor its third annual “What the Constitution Means to Us.” Inspired by Heidi Schreck’s award-winning play, and timed to coincide with Constitution and Citizenship Day, this event provides the Boston College community with an opportunity to reflect on America’s founding document.



In addition to showcasing contributions from select students and faculty, this year’s celebration features special guest A.J. Jacobs, *New York Times*-bestselling author with a flare for comedy and “immersion journalism.” In conversation with Founders Professor of Law, Mary Bilder, Jacobs will share insights (and hilarious anecdotes) from his most recent work, *The Year of Living Constitutionally* (2024).

Please join us for a rich evening of conversation, debate, and reflection, followed by a lively reception.

A campus-wide critical reflection featuring Boston College faculty



Marsin Alshamary



Mary Sarah Bilder



Fernando Bizzarro



Min Hyong Song



Martin Summers



A.J. Jacobs

with
special
guest

and student speakers, to be announced

Co-Sponsored by the Schiller Institute for Integrated Science and Society

A celebration of Constitution & Citizenship Day



**WHAT THE
CONSTITUTION
MEANS TO US**

**Tuesday, September 10th | 5:00PM
Gasson Hall 100**



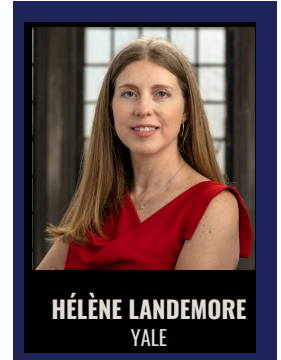
Fall Colloquium

Thursday, October 10 | 4:30-7:30 PM | Murray Room

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, democracy seemed destined to spread around the world. One generation later, many scholars see democracy as endangered or in urgent need of reform. While new challenges -- from climate change to the rise of AI -- threaten to disrupt global society, democratic political systems have come under increasing pressure from internal problems as well, not least resurgent populism, pervasive misinformation, and a growing disenchantment with democratic institutions. But if democracy's future is riddled with obstacles, it also promises new possibilities. Might tomorrow's technologies, for example, redress some of the problems that today's have created? Could the climate crisis prompt a shift toward more democratic and sustainable forms of political economy? Will the global scale of today's challenges spur greater citizen participation or enhance cooperation among democracies?

To engage these questions from a variety of angles, the Clough Center has dedicated the 2024-25 academic year to the theme **"Envisioning Democratic Futures."** We launch our year-long exploration of that theme with our Fall Colloquium on October 10th, which features an exceptional set of speakers. The Colloquium will open with a keynote address by **Hélène Landemore** (Yale), a political theorist renowned for her bold vision of a more radically participatory and deliberative democracy, and the potential of new technologies to create it. It will continue with a panel discussion featuring leading scholars **Theda Skocpol** (Harvard) and **Daniel Ziblatt** (Harvard) on the present state and future prospects for democracy in the U.S. and around the world. The Colloquium will close with a keynote presentation by the eminent journalist **John King**, CNN's Chief National Correspondent, on the stakes and possible outcomes of the 2024 elections in the U.S.

Please **join us** for the Clough Center's major event of the Fall, and a worthwhile kickoff to our annual theme.



On Democratic Participation: A Celebration of Kay Schlozman

Friday, September 20th from 8:15 AM - 1:30 PM

Cabaret Room, Vanderslice Hall

Fifty years ago, Dr. Kay Schlozman launched her academic career at Boston College where she was appointed Assistant Professor of Political Science in 1974. Over the ensuing decades, she established herself as one of the University's most distinguished faculty members and one of the leading scholars in her field.

To celebrate her many contributions to the study of democracy, and her retirement from Boston College, the Clough Center is delighted to co-sponsor "On Democratic Participation: A Celebration of Kay Schlozman." This conference, organized by her colleagues in the Political Science Department and co-authors, will feature nine speakers from across the United States who have worked with Professor Schlozman during her illustrious career.

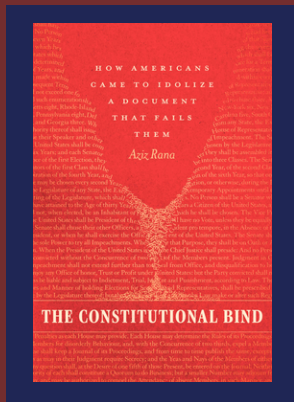


 **Clough Distinguished Lectures**

Aziz Rana: “The Constitutional Bind”

Thursday, September 26, 2024 | 5:00 - 7:00 PM | Fulton Honors Library

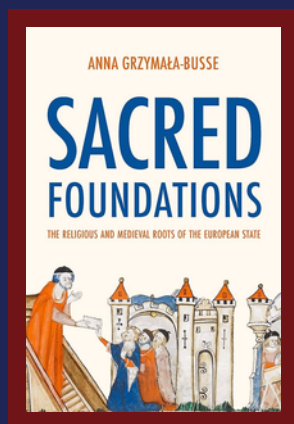
Aziz Rana has emerged as one of the most incisive and provocative constitutional scholars of our time. Drawing on his dual background in political theory and law, Rana’s work focuses on how shifting notions of race, citizenship, and empire have shaped American legal and political identity since the founding of the country. His breakout first book, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Harvard, 2014), situated the American experience within the global history of colonialism and examined the intertwined relationship in American constitutional practice between internal accounts of freedom and external projects of power and expansion. Now, as the recently appointed J. Donald Monan, S.J., University Professor of Law and Government at Boston College, Rana continues to drive public conversation on the future of American democracy.



The Clough Center is delighted to welcome Professor Rana, one of our 2024-25 Faculty Affiliates, as our first Clough Distinguished Lecturer of the year. In his lecture, which doubles as a book launch, Professor Rana will address the core themes of his just published work, *The Constitutional Bind* (Chicago, 2024). How did the veneration of the Constitution become an American habit—and, Rana argues, an ingrained vice—during the 20th Century? And how has it continued to constrain our politics ever since? Please join us for this lecture to engage with a new book that is already being hailed as a major landmark in the field.

Anna Grzymała-Busse: “The Religious Roots of the Modern State”

Thursday, December 5, 2024 | 5:00 - 7:00 PM | Murray Room



From the aftermath of communism to the place of religion in politics, **Anna Grzymała-Busse** has spent her career engaging some of the most vexing questions of contemporary political life. The Michelle and Kevin Douglas Professor of International Studies at Stanford, Grzymała-Busse is also a Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies and the Hoover Institution. Her first two books *Redeeming the Communist Past* (Cambridge, 2002) and *Rebuilding Leviathan* (Cambridge, 2007) established her as a leading authority on the political transformation of Eastern European societies. More recently, she turned her attention to the intersection of religion and politics where she examined the political influence of churches in differing national contexts in her third book, *Nations Under God* (Princeton, 2015).



In her latest work, *Sacred Foundations* (Princeton, 2023), Professor Grzymała-Busse offers a striking new interpretation of the origins of the modern state. How did the medieval Catholic church birth the modern secular state, and how does this surprising history continue to shape our political life today? To share her insights into the paradoxical past, and uncertain future, of contemporary democratic states, the Clough Center is delighted to welcome Professor Grzymała-Busse as a 2024-25 Clough Distinguished Lecturer. Please join us for a thought-provoking lecture and the final event of our Fall semester.



CLOUGH CENTER IN THE WORLD

International Working Group on Democracy, Ethics, Social Trust



The working group on "**Democracy, Governance, and Education**," chaired by **Center Director Jonathan Laurence**, is entering its second year. Part of the newly-created **Program on Global Ethics and Social Trust**, led by Vice Provost **Jim Keenan** and Director of International Studies **Erik Owens**, the working group explores effective educational and formative experiences for maintaining resilient democratic systems. The partner Working Group on Climate Change and Migration is chaired by BC **Law Professor Katherine Young**.

In June, the two groups met in person at Boston College for several days of conversation and collaboration. They reflected on the past year and determined tangible outputs and action items for the second year of the Program. A public panel on "University Ethics and Social Trust" conveyed the early findings of the working groups. The discussion featured **Linda Hogan** (Trinity College, Dublin); **Juan Larrain** (Universidad Católica in Santiago); **Hanqin Tian**, Schiller Institute Professor and inaugural director of the Center for Earth Systems Science and Global Sustainability at BC; and Lynch School Professor **Christopher Higgins**, author of *Undeclared: A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education* (MIT Press 2024).



Dublin Seminar and Conference at BC Ireland

In May 2024, for the second consecutive year, the Clough Center co-sponsored a seminar and conference in Dublin, Ireland with the **Italian network Reset Dialogues on Civilizations** and the **French Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme**. Held from May 27 to June 1 at Boston College's Ireland campus, the gathering brought together a remarkably diverse group of international students and eminent faculty to explore the theme "**Dreams of Peace and Realities of War: The Friend-Enemy Polarization**."

The Clough Center was represented by **Director Jonathan Laurence**, who helped preside over the gathering, with critical contributions from Postdoctoral Fellow **Nicholas Hayes-Mota** and Senior Research Fellow **Chandra Mallampalli**, and the participation of Research Fellow **Emily Turner**.



Thinking About the Middle East

The Clough Center remains committed to understanding the intersection of religion and politics, and its influence on the conflicts roiling the Middle East. As part of the **Dartmouth Dialogues** initiative, **Professor Laurence** spoke on "**The Arab World and the Demise of the Caliphate**" with Professor **Yoav di Capua (UT Austin)** this spring.

In recent months, Professor Laurence also participated on campus in "How to talk about Israel and Palestine," led by **Boisi Center Director Mark Massa** with **Daniel Joslin-Siemiatkoski** and Center Affiliates **Peter Krause** and **Marsin Alshamary**.

This summer, Professor Laurence delivered talks on "The Battle for Al Aqsa" and "The 21st Century Governance of Islam" at LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome. These presentations drew on his recent book ***Coping with Defeat*** and his March 1st *Wall Street Journal* essay on how fractures from the end of the Ottoman Empire have created an opening for the Islamic Republic of Iran.



Continued Cooperation with the University of Bern

The Clough Center deepened its collaboration with the **Initiative on Religious Conflicts and Coping Strategies** at the University of Bern. This was spearheaded by the 2023-2024 Postdoctoral Fellows **Anina Schwarzenbach (Bern)** and **Nicholas Hayes-Mota (BC)**. At the 2024 Spring Symposium, Nicholas led discussion on a dynamic panel on "**The Place of Digital Space**," where Anina shared insights from her research on how cyberspace is transforming traditional state power, in dialogue with Fabio Benincasa (Duquesne). Anina also published an article in the *Clough Center Journal*. Nicholas and Anina have launched a joint project examining the challenges and opportunities posed by artificial intelligence to democratic deliberation, focusing on the impact of AI on the role of religion in the deliberative public sphere.

NEW HORIZONS AT THE CLOUGH CENTER

New Postdoctoral Fellow



Isaiah Sterrett is an historian of nineteenth-century America with particular interests in culture, politics, and the intersections of private and public life. He earned his Ph.D. (2023), M.A., and B.A. all from Boston College. His most recent work concerns the American North between the 1830s and the 1860s. His dissertation, *The Perfection of Government:*

Childrearing, Freedom, and Temptation in the Nineteenth-Century North draws upon a diverse range of sources, from periodicals and personal correspondence to popular literature and Christian sermons. The study explores the connections that contemporaries drew between childrearing, the home, and the exercise and preservation of individual liberty in a rapidly changing U.S. Isaiah has presented his work at the annual meeting of the Society for U.S. Intellectual History (2020) and was an invited respondent in 2021 for the Boston College History Department's lecture series. He was a recipient of the Donald J. White Teaching Excellence Award for Graduate Teaching in 2021 and held four year-long graduate fellow appointments at the Clough Center from 2018-2022.

As a Clough Postdoctoral Fellow, he will prepare his dissertation for publication while contributing to a variety of research projects at the Center. He is excited to rejoin the Clough Center as its new Post-Doctoral Fellow for the 2024-25 academic year.

Last year's postdoctoral fellow, **Nicholas Hayes-Mota**, is moving on to a new position as **Assistant Professor of Social Ethics at Santa Clara University**. We wish him all the best in **Santa Clara's Religious Studies Department**.

Senior Research Fellow



Chandra Mallampalli is an historian of modern South Asia with interests in religious pluralism, nationalism, and the secular state. In 2023-24, Dr. Mallampalli continued to research, write, and speak about challenges facing India's diverse democracy and their resemblance to global trends. He conducted research at

London's British Library for his new project, "The Virtues of Mixture: Religion, Labor Migrants and Cosmopolitanism in the Indian Ocean," and drafted a grant proposal for the project. In the Spring, he spoke about Hindu nationalism and India's general election for a panel at Harvard Law School, and participated on a panel about American Christian nationalism in Los Angeles. In May, he spoke in Dublin at a Boston College co-sponsored conference on "Overcoming the Friend-Enemy Divide," and spoke about his most recent book, *South Asia's Christians* (Oxford 2023) at Cambridge University. Dr. Mallampalli reviewed four books last year, which will appear in *American Historical Review*, *Anthropos*, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, and *International Journal of Asian Christianity*.

He looks forward to another exciting year at the Clough Center as its first Senior Research Fellow.

Clough Visiting Scholars



Ahmet Yükleven received his Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from Boston University in 2006 and afterwards worked as the Croft Associate Professor of Anthropology and International Studies at the University of Mississippi from 2006-2015. Additionally, Ahmet was a senior fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center from 2011-2012 and a visiting scholar at Sabanci University

in Turkey from 2013-2014. He has received grants from Wenner Gren Foundation, the United States Institute of Peace, and Dutch Council of Higher Education. His research interests include anthropology of religion, ethnicity, Muslims in Europe, Islamic movements, and multiculturalism. Ahmet's book, titled *Localizing Islam in Europe: Turkish Islamic Communities in Germany and the Netherlands*, was published by Syracuse University Press in 2012. He has also published articles in journals such as the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *Contemporary Islam*, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, and *Turkish Studies*. Ahmet teaches courses on cultural anthropology, ethnic and religious identity politics in Europe, and Muslims in Western Europe and the United States. He joins the Clough Center as a Visiting Scholar for the 2024-25 academic year.

Danson Sylvester Kahyana is a literary scholar with over twenty-three years of experience in teaching and writing. He received a Ph.D. in English Studies from Stellenbosch University, South Africa, a Master's in Literature from Makerere University in Uganda, a Bachelor of Arts in the Social Sciences, as well as a post-graduate diploma in Education.



At Makerere University, he taught a number of courses as an Associate Professor of Literature. Additionally, he formerly served as the President of the Ugandan branch of PEN (Poets, Essayists, Novelists) International and was also a member of the wider PEN International board. Kahyana's critical work can be found in scholarly journals like *English in Africa* and *The Journal of African Cultural Studies*, and he currently writes for the Index on Censorship magazine based in the UK. He has received a number of scholarly awards and fellowships, and was most recently awarded a Scholar-in-Residence position at the Carr Center for Human Rights within the Harvard Kennedy School. Kahyana joins the Clough Center as a Visiting Scholar for the 2024-25 academic year.

INTRODUCING THE 2024-2025 FACULTY AFFILIATES



MARSIN
ALSHAMARY
Political Science



PAULO
BARROZO
Law



ERICK
BERRELLEZA
Sociology
Dean, Messina College



FERNANDO
BIZZARRO
Political Science



KRISTIN
HEYER
Theology



LAUREN
HONIG
Political Science



ALI
KADIVAR
Sociology



PETER
KRAUSE
Political Science



THIBAUD
MARCESSE
Political Science



HOSFFMAN
OSPINO
Theology & Ministry



MARÍA DE LOS
ÁNGELES PICONE
History



AZIZ
RANA
Law



LACEE
SATCER
Sociology



MIN HYOUNG
SONG
English



LAURA
STEINBERG
Schiller Institute



MARTIN
SUMMERS
History

INTRODUCING THIS YEAR'S CLOUGH FELLOWS

DOCTORAL FELLOWS



SEOYEON
BAE
Psychology



LUKE
BROWN
Education



AKASH
CHOPRA
Political Science



MACKENZIE
DALY
English



STEPHEN
DE RIEL
History



KELVIN
LI
Philosophy



JULIA
MAHONEY
Political Science



CHEIKH AHMADOU
BAMBA NDIAYE
Law



BETUL
OZTURAN
Political Science



ANDREW
PALELLA
History



EMILY
TURNER
Theology



AIDAN
VICK
English



HELEN HUITING
ZHENG
Psychology

PUBLIC SERVICE FELLOWS



DELPHINE
GAREAU
International
Studies



MARY KOZENY
Political Science
Business



CAROLINE
SULLIVAN
Political Science



CLARA
TAFT
Political Science
Classics



JOE
THIBODEAU
Law

RESEARCH FELLOWS



JACOB GLASSMAN
Psychology



WILLIAM LOMBARDO
Political Science



ABBEY MURPHY
Philosophy



MICHAILA PETERS
Philosophy



CASEY PUERZER
Political Science



JOSHUA ROSEN
History



JACOB SALIBA
History



YUFENG SHI
Economics



SHAUN SLUSARSKI
Theology



WILL STRATFORD
History



JULIA WOODWARD
English

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Political Science



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English
Hispanic Studies

Theatre Review

Gatsby.

An American Myth

American Repertory Theatre
Cambridge, MA

Directed by Rachel Chavkin

*In June 2024, the Clough Center traveled to Cambridge to attend the musical **Gatsby: An American Myth** at the American Repertory Theater. Based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous novel, the story weaves writer and first-person narrator Nick Carraway into the life of the mysterious multimillionaire Jay Gatsby and the epic parties he hosts at his Long Island estate.*

*The novel explores disillusionment, the emptiness of American consumerism, and the decay that lurks beneath seemingly unlimited decadence. **Gatsby: An American Myth** repurposes these themes for the 21st century and gives new depth to stories of haves and have-nots. Rachel Chavkin, Martyna Majok, and Florence Welch's *Gatsby* add new dimensions to Fitzgerald's venerable Jazz Age story and inject contagious life into the heartbreaking love story of the dashing Gatsby.*

Reflections



In the shadows of the American Dream

The new production of *Gatsby* at the American Repertory Theatre— assembled by an all-star cast of writers, composers, and directors—seeks to do the nigh impossible: reimagine one of the greatest works of American fiction into a new art form. *The Great Gatsby* has been baked into the American

consciousness as the American dream turned American nightmare. In this inspired musical, demure Nick Carraway continues to divulge the ill-fated rise and star-crossed love of Gatsby. The play balances veracity to the original narration with new twists and vocal turns for a contemporary audience. The glamor of the twenties carries through: elegant flappers and tweed-suited men, musical scores relishing jazz and scatting, and more than a few references to post-war hedonism-come-nihilism. Surprisingly, we see far less of our titular character than anticipated. Gatsby does not enter the stage until over an hour into the run-time.

"The Great Gatsby has been baked into the American consciousness as the American dream turned American nightmare."

Instead, our side characters are recast as main characters to better tell counter stories to the American Dream. Myrtle and George Wilson receive far more stage time than page time. Myrtle, in particular, appears in heroic form: a savvy, multifaceted woman seeking life, love, and possibility through the means at her disposal. Her soaring vocals and significant time centerstage move her from the periphery to the center of the narrative. She works Gatsby's parties and keeps her husband's accounting, chats with neighborhood friends, and acts as the fulcrum of the play's climax. Less fallen woman and more proto-feminist, Myrtle flaunts the control of the men around her. So, too, does Daisy shine. Prolonged scenes with Daisy flashing back to her wedding night sans Gatsby or seeing her daughter off to bed explore her rich interiority. She breaks out of the trite mold of empty-headed love object, appearing as a woman striving for a semblance of joy within the constraints of her social world. The emotional arc of the play largely rests with the decisions of these two women. Their allegiances, their ambivalent and fluid relations with Tom and Gatsby, and their critical decisions in the final act structure the movements of the play.

In comparison, the men appear some-

what flat. The audience is offered little in the way of rapport with the trust-funded and handsome Tom. Eat the rich never sounded so tasty or so obvious as when Tom struts about the stage. The queer subtext of Nick, our narrator enraptured by Gatsby, becomes a somewhat heavy-handed depiction of stolen same-sex kisses and lingering glances. For this gay man, it felt like a series of friendly, if somewhat tame, hard winks to queer representation - the stage equivalent of a corporate-sponsored Pride float. Gatsby appears relatively one-dimensional as well. His grappling with the emotional turmoil of illicit dealings and his desire for Daisy fall flat, even as the musical numbers soar. His best scenes are when he plays off of Nick to show the rickety confidence underneath his polished exterior.

Perhaps most audaciously, *Gatsby* re-situates its characters within the longer, often untold, history of Manhattan. The opening number harkens back to when the island was still indigenous land, not yet corrupted by the schemes and avarice of settler colonialist enterprise. Towards the end of the play, it is (warning: spoilers ensue!) also revealed that Gatsby hid his indigeneity in his pursuit of an ephemeral Daisy. The arrival of his father, an American Indian traveling to the Big Apple to grieve his son, adds solemnity to the closing scenes.

"Gatsby looks past its assumed protagonist to offer alternative takes on the American Dream from the perspective of those forever in its shadow."



Theatre Review



Gatsby looks past its assumed protagonist to offer alternative takes on the American Dream from the perspective of those forever in its shadow. A fairly full spectrum of emotions follows, aided by the varied but uniformly impressive musical numbers. Come for the revisionist retelling, stay for the on-point bangers.

Luke Brown

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A world undone and re-made

Early in the first act of the ART production of *Gatsby*, one of its complicated quasi-protagonists sings with an arresting intensity about the world “after the war / after the plague,” into which the play’s tragic characters are emerging. This single lyric does considerable work setting up a historical parallelism between the period of the 1920s, after the First World War and the Spanish Flu, and the historical period we are living through,

increasingly characterized by war and political unrest in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The parallel is played out in a number of ways—in themes of sexual autonomy and liberation, shifting orientations toward traditional religion, and more. But the parallel most striking to me was the play’s portrayal of the ways people in different economic situations experienced the “recovery,” or the economic resurgence that is an important part of the historical backdrop of the play. That is, one of the unspoken yet prominent themes of the show is the social and economic interplay among people in different socio-economic positions. There are those who are the products of inherited wealth, those with newly-acquired wealth (who are persistently chased by questions about how it was acquired, and at what cost), and those who furnish the human economic infrastructure which enables the lives of abundance and excess at the center of play, yet do not themselves benefit from that very abundance.

Of the many reflections I had (and continue to have) after seeing the show, I have consistently thought back to the weeks and months during which U.S. regions “reopened” after the serial lockdowns of the Covid pandemic. During that time, there was lots of talk in the mainstream media about the “K-shape” of the economic recovery some foresaw—wherein those who had been well-off before the pandemic would experience an accelerated and amplified economic recovery, and those who had been at a disadvantage before the lockdowns ground the economy to a halt would be further disadvantaged. Economists and policymakers were vocal about their concern about the “K-shaped recovery,” and about their commitment to mitigating its effects on those whose work had prominently been recognized as “essential” during the crisis.

Since that time, many of those fears have been realized, and much of its coverage has disappeared from places

“Yet, here it was in Gatsby—as Nick, Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, Jordan, and Myrtle danced, sang, and stumbled their way through a world recently undone and now being remade.”

where a general reader is likely to encounter it. Yet, here it was in Gatsby—as Nick, Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, Jordan, and Myrtle danced, sang, and stumbled their way through a world recently undone and now being remade.

Emily Turner

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Books We're Reading

The 1619 Project by Nikole Hannah-Jones



Shortly after Juneteenth, the award-winning journalist and creator of the renowned *1619 project* Nikole Hannah-Jones spoke at the MLK Jr. Memorial Library in Washington, DC. This conversation was presided over by Glory Edim, founder of Well-Read Black Girl which is a literary community aimed at uplifting the narratives of Black women.

Hannah-Jones created *The 1619 Project* while a *New York Times* staff writer in 2019. It originated as a work of long-form investigative journalism that re-examined the role of the African Diaspora in American history. Its name derives from the date enslaved Africans first arrived in Jamestown, Virginia. *The 1619 Project* has taken many forms including a magazine, podcast, book, and an Emmy winning documentary.

The first chapter, entitled *Democracy*, begins with a description of the spotless American flag that flew outside her childhood home. As a child, she viewed her father's patriotism as evidence of submission or degradation. In school, she learned that the African Diaspora in America was entirely defined by its complete loss of autonomy and dehumanization, and was therefore unable to play a role in the creation of America.

Once she began voraciously reading various narratives of American history, she realized that her father, the son of Mississippi sharecroppers and member of the military, flew the American flag so proudly because he knew that Black people were essential to America's creation and can be understood as the original pioneers of our modern understanding of freedom and democracy. This realization encompasses the core of her project.

Another major theme is the importance of controlling historical narratives. As the only group in American history that was legally prohibited from reading or writing, Black Americans have limited archival documentation of their role in history. The white majority has tended to control the historical narrative, which bleeds into the creation of all modern systems of oppression and the perceived historical insignificance of Black Americans.

With regard to the Clough 2024-25 theme of Envisioning Democratic Futures, Hannah-Jones wants Americans to view the next chapter of American democracy in a new light. While some conservative voices have spoken out against the project, Hannah-Jones does not view this revelation as destructive. Instead, she argues for an inclusive view of American history that will allow the country to reach new levels of democratic progress. Her vision includes the eventual goal of reparations for the atrocities endured by the Black diaspora in America.

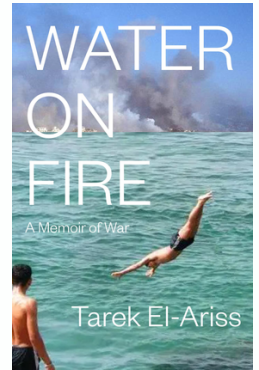
This insightful event highlighted the often overlooked significance of Black Americans in the creation of American democracy, and how that directly connects to the ongoing oppression experienced by that very same community. Hannah-Jones sees a future where things can be different, where widespread education and legislative change act as a vehicle to ensure that American democracy guarantees equal protections, treatment, and rights to all.

Madeline Carr
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Water on Fire: A Memoir of War by Tarek El-Ariss

Charming, worldly, and wise, Tarek El-Ariss's newest book *Water on Fire* explores the profound impact of war on fear, desire, and perception. Approaching the Middle East on its own terms, this book offers much for democratic theorists to mull.

El-Ariss, who is Professor and Chair of Middle Eastern Studies at Dartmouth College, engages with everything that supersedes borders: the universal and recurrent issues of the human condition. The reader's attention is drawn to the essential and elemental -- the objects and elements he believes truly matter -- and to the role played by trauma in the understanding of one's own political identity. Water and fire trigger associations and connect the present and the past, and time to space. Place names are evoked for their specificities, not because they belong to any one empire, people, or folk. The notions of checkpoints, borders and refugee camps matter more than this or that nationality. Borders are splits, divisions, and wounds that offend the author's vision of a region with far more in common than not. There is little discussion of organized religion, yet shared spiritual history and prophets make regular appearances. These places and figures do not "belong" to one group or another, the author seems to be saying: they are all of our heritage.



Most of all, *Water on Fire* is a sharp reminder of war's terrible toll. While the book discusses war vividly, it does not digress into cycles of revenge and violence or try to engage with the reasoning of unreasonable actors. This book is about everyone else, including those who cannot keep up with the reasons for the fighting. As seen through this quietly erudite masterpiece, war exposes the human condition in its purest form, through the will to survive. Tarek El-Ariss shows us what it means to resist ceding to fear, and to continue onward without rancor, despite the weight of the past. In other words, the indispensable conditions for building a democratic future anywhere at all.



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