

**Workshop on Relational Autonomy in Fiction**  
McGill University, 19 October 2018  
Conference Room 101, Charles Meredith House (IHSP)

**Provisional schedule**

9:00-9:45	Natalie Stoljar (McGill University), Introductory notes
10:00-11:30	Sam Shpall (The University of Sydney), “Female Freedom and <i>The Neapolitan Novels</i> ”
11:45-1:15	David Collins (McGill University), “The ‘Environmental’ Undermining of Self-Governance and Self-Authorization in Todd Haynes’ <i>Safe</i> ”
1:15-2:15	Lunch
2:15-3:45	Rebekah Johnston (Wilfrid Laurier University), “Relational Autonomy and Communicative Needs”
4:00-5:30	Andrea Westlund (Florida State University), “Whose Story Is It? Relational Autonomy and the Ethics of Storytelling”

**Abstracts**

Sam Shpall (The University of Sydney), “Female Freedom and *The Neapolitan Novels*”

This talk begins to develop a philosophical interpretation of Elena Ferrante’s fictional masterpiece *The Neapolitan Novels*. My central interest is the work’s feminist moral psychology, and particularly its subtle conceptualisation of women’s path to freedom. I begin by reconstructing some of the main ideas of Italian “difference feminism” as they are expressed in the texts of the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective—texts that were controversial landmarks of Italian social theory, but that remain relatively unknown outside of Italy. I then show how these ideas animate Ferrante’s work and prove an essential frame of reference for interpreters. The discussion focuses especially on the status of Lila Cerullo and her condition of “dissolving margins,” which is emblematic of the many rich puzzles that her character, and the narrative as a whole, introduce. I conclude by commenting on some relationships between Ferrante’s exploration of female freedom and the literature on relational autonomy which may be more familiar to many English-language readers of feminist philosophy.

David Collins, “The ‘Environmental’ Undermining of Self-Governance and Self-Authorization in Todd Haynes’ *Safe*”

While the film *Gaslight* (dir: George Cukor, 1944) has been adopted in the relational autonomy literature as a paradigm example of the undermining of self-authorization and self-worth, I hope to show that the film *Safe* (dir: Todd Haynes, 1995) offers a richer, more nuanced, and more fitting example of how impersonal or ‘structural’ elements of a social environment can undermine autonomy—or, following Mackenzie (2014), self-governance and self-authorization as dimensions of autonomy. The first part of my talk will focus on the film’s fictional ‘content’ and how Haynes explores the relational dimensions of identity and autonomy through the central character Carol White (Julianne Moore), her interactions and relationships with other characters, and the metaphor of ‘environmental illness.’ In the second part of my talk, I consider how Haynes uses cinematic ‘form’—set design and blocking of action, pictorial composition, editing, use of sound, etc.—both (i) to express these relational elements and their impacts on Carol’s sense of self, and (ii) to create analogues of autonomy-enhancing and autonomy-undermining relations between the film and the spectator.

Rebekah Johnston, “Relational Autonomy and Communicative Needs”

In this paper, I engage Édouard Louis’s autobiographical novel, *History of Violence*, in order to explore the significance for autonomy of relations that fail to support our interpretive and communicative needs. In the days following an encounter in which he was raped and nearly murdered, Édouard attempts both to make sense of and communicate his complex experiences to various interlocutors, interlocutors whose own experiences and communicative skills are shaped by intersecting forms of domination and oppression. I explore the external or constitutively relational constraints on autonomy occasioned by the contexts in which he attempts to meet his interpretive and communicative needs.

Andrea Westlund, “Whose Story Is It? Relational Autonomy and the Ethics of Storytelling”

In his Aquinas Lecture “The Story of My Life”, Richard Moran questions the philosophical conceit that stories “belong” to individual persons, and that an individual’s story is properly identified with a narrative told from that person’s own perspective. Stories, he argues, are what they are in virtue of their juxtaposition of multiple (temporal and subjective) perspectives, and the story of a person’s life inevitably contains the stories of others as well. Audiences, in his view, are the only parties in a position fully to grasp the story being told, since audiences are metaphysically outside the story itself. In this paper I attempt to unpack some of these ideas through a discussion of the genre-stretching film “*Stories We Tell*” (Sarah Polley, 2012). The question of story “ownership”

is particularly fraught in this film, and I argue that we can draw some lessons for our understanding of relational autonomy from the relational dynamics of storytelling. I also challenge the idea that audiences are in a uniquely privileged position to understand stories. Not all stories have clear “insides” and “outsides”, and not all audiences are entirely “outside” the story being told.