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COVER PHOTO
Masked Olmec Head
Agnes Mondragón Celis
PhD Candidate, Anthropology

Established in 1968, the University of Chicago Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) brings together faculty and students across the University in interdisciplinary and interdivisional research, teaching, scholarly events, and public engagement related to this vital region of the world.

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Letter from the Director
Benjamin Lessing, Associate Professor in Political Science

We find ourselves in a moment of expectant but uncertain transition. On the one hand, we are returning, supposedly, to campuses, field sites, workplaces, colleagues, projects, routines—to a world, in short—that we know will never be the same. At the same time, we are still (more than 20 months later) navigating and negotiating the restrictions on our most basic instincts for contact and interaction that the pandemic has forced on us.

The dissonance of the moment is heightened, I think, for those of us that study, work in, and hail from Latin America and the Caribbean—especially those of us who do so from Chicago and the US in general—by both the depressing disparities and surprising synergies it laid bare. As we all know, vast differences in economic, social, and political resources made COVID’s impact uniquely devastating throughout the region. Yet if, from the perspective of vaccine-strapped Brazil or Mexico, the vision of US officials contemplating paying citizens to get vaccinated while thousands of doses went to waste was a bitter reminder of the costs of global inequality, the unexpected agreement among their otherwise politically disparate presidents that denialism in the face of record death tolls was a winning strategy seemed like a symptom of deeper, darker trends threatening democracy everywhere.

Yet for all that, the pandemic also brought some surprising and undeniably silver linings. In Brazil, for example, a drastically overcrowded prison system not only avoided disaster but got through with a far lower death rate than the general population, thanks to some clear-headed de-carceralization policies and cooperation with inmate leadership; police killings fell for the first time in years; and social scientists looking at thousands of Brazilian municipalities found that having a female mayor reduced the COVID death toll.

Here at CLAS, the silver linings were clear: under the steady leadership of Claudia Brittenham, who bravely stepped in as interim director, CLAS (together with the Katz Center) sponsored or cosponsored 80 scholarly events that drew a total audience of 2,400, with 14 event videos edited, captioned, and shared online. The virtual format, for all its limitations, also helped CLAS engage with a wider range of scholars from a variety of backgrounds, reaching a broader audience than ever. A great example was the GIS in Latin America Webinar Series, organized by Diana Schwartz Francisco (CLAS/History) and Sarah Newman (Anthropology), which showcased scholars working in the humanities and social sciences who conduct innovative research combining traditional methods like ethnography with spatial analysis. The series took great advantage of the “remote moment” by inviting speakers who would have been difficult to bring to campus, while promoting new international collaborations by making the webinars open to invited speakers’ campus communities, providing live translation, and recording and archiving the webinars on the CLAS website.

Meanwhile, CLAS’s many other activities continued full speed ahead. For example, 26 BA, MA, and PhD students graduated with a Latin American and Caribbean Studies (LACS) focus, with 19 majors and minors in our BA program and more than 100 graduate students focused on LACS overall. CLAS listed and cross-listed 89 Latin American and Caribbean Studies content courses, and also made 11 grant and fellowship awards and 14 teaching appointments for graduate students. Even our Tinker Visiting Professor program weathered the storm: while most of our scheduled visiting professors were able to postpone their visits, one could not, and was able and willing to teach remotely from Argentina—an important contribution at a time when so many planned activities had to be canceled. CLAS also launched its formal LACS graduate certificate, open to all graduate students at the University, through which we expect to serve larger cohorts of graduate students than our earlier stand-alone MA. My heartfelt thanks and admiration go to Claudia, as well as to Natalie Arsenault, Lindsay Ortega, and Diana Schwartz Francisco. I also want to recognize the great contribution made by our previous director Brodie Fischer; her tireless stewardship of CLAS during her tenure is an inspiring example to live up to.

The year to come will see a mix of smaller, live in-house events; a robust series of virtual talks, seminars, panels, conferences, and discussions; and—conditions permitting—an increasing stream of invited guests. Our Tinker Visiting Professors will enrich our campus once again. Our office will re-open, with some experimentation with a hybrid model that permits the kind of high-productivity remote time that is another one of the pandemic’s silver linings. I cannot tell you how much I look forward to seeing old and new faces this Fall.

The larger challenge ahead—for CLAS, its affiliated faculty, students, staff, and larger network—is to reconnect and rebuild our campus community safely, while retaining the aspects of broader engagement that the pandemic surprisingly allowed. This mirrors the challenge we all face as scholars, colleagues, and citizens to rekindle our shared intellectual life here in Chicago as well as our research, engagement, and advocacy in the places and populations we work with. CLAS has always been about community. I believe the next few years offer a great opportunity to not only reconnect but also expand that community, becoming more intentional about inclusion and diversity both on campus and beyond. We have room to expand creatively, from a core of on-campus interactions that we will perhaps newly appreciate, through the virtual events that we now know can bring us closer in surprising ways. I look forward to sharing this next chapter of CLAS’s story with all of you.
More Than Maps: CLAS Series on GIS-based Research in Latin America

While scholars have long worked with maps, and with technical experts who could draw maps to illustrate their research, the increasing availability of spatial data in recent years has opened new possibilities for how they tackle their research questions. Knowledge of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can help scholars across disciplines present space, place, location, distance, and interaction in new ways. But before faculty members or students can integrate spatial thinking into their work, they must learn both how to use new spatial data technologies and how to approach their research questions from new perspectives.

In recent years, CLAS has seen increased interest in the integration of GIS into courses and field work from students and faculty. In an effort to present more content about GIS to our community, we were planning a GIS skills workshop before campus was shut down in 2020. Our plans were postponed, but the idea expanded into a collaboration between Diana Schwartz Francisco (CLAS/History) and Sarah Newman (Anthropology). With the generous support of the Department of Anthropology’s Lichtstern Fund, CLAS presented a six-part GIS in Latin America Webinar Series. The series showcased scholars working in the humanities and social sciences who conduct innovative research combining traditional strategies (ethnography, interviews, archival research, archaeological fieldwork, etc.) with spatial analysis. It aimed to highlight the innovative work of our peers—many of them from Latin America—as a way of inspiring our students and faculty to use spatial thinking in new ways. For those who were intrigued by the application of GIS, but didn’t know where to start, we offered examples of how scholars in Latin American and Caribbean Studies integrated spatial data into their own work.

In addition to presenting a diverse array of approaches to using GIS, the series had the aims of taking advantage of the global “remote moment” by inviting speakers who might we might not normally be able to bring to campus; encouraging students and faculty to consider how existing spatial data (much of it readily available online) can be used to enhance ongoing research projects when field work is not possible; and promoting collaboration with Latin American scholars and universities by making the webinars open to invited speakers’ campus communities, providing live interpretation, and recording and sharing the webinars on the CLAS website.

THE USE OF LIDAR TO UNDERSTAND ANCIENT ANTHROPOGENIC LAND USE AND OCCUPATION IN THE UPPER BURITACA RIVER BASIN, SIERRA NEVADA DE SANTA MARTA

Santiago Giraldo Peláez, Global Heritage Fund (Colombia), and Daniel Rodríguez Osorio, University of Minnesota

“What we were able to do with the LiDAR data—and this is the initial LiDAR data that we received from National Geographic—is that we were able to strip away all of the vegetation in that part of the watershed and go down to a 30-centimeter resolution, so about a one-foot resolution, that allowed us to see all of the masonry structures that were located below the canopy and also the stone paved roads and trails that led in and out of the site.”

—Santiago Giraldo Peláez

This presentation focused on the use of LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) and other technologies to produce an unprecedented view of pre-Hispanic land use and occupation of the Upper Buritaca River Basin on the northern side of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia. Since the site of Ciudad Perdida was discovered in 1976, research and restoration have been conducted there and in the surrounding area, but efforts to find and document the hundreds of local pre-Hispanic sites have been impeded by dense vegetation. When approached by National Geographic, the team saw the opportunity to build on 40 years of research by using aerial and terrestrial LiDAR to gather data. In doing so, they were hoping to be more efficient in their data collection, identify more precise locations through better coordinates, and learn new ways of documenting structures for conservation purposes. Key questions included how they could adapt
remote sensing technologies to their local physical conditions and how to make the resulting visualizations significant to archaeological research. With raw data comprising more than five million data points, they were able to ask more sophisticated questions and begin to see how the topography and the architecture of the sectors comprising the Teyuna-Ciudad Perdida archaeological site affect their visual relationships and inter-visibility.

THE PAULICEIA PROJECT AND LATIN AMERICA FROM ABOVE
Luis Ferla, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, and Frederico Freitas, North Carolina State University

“When I started doing research on these two parks [Iguaçu National Park in Brazil and Iguazú National Park in Argentina], I wanted to reconstruct the landscape of the parks and the entire borderland areas before settlers arrived in the region and in the parks, during the time they were arriving, and after [their removal].”

—Frederico Freitas

Luis Ferla shared Pauliceia 2.0, a database and website that focuses on the history of São Paulo during the period of its urban and industrial modernization (1870–1940). This platform for collaborative historical research uses a web portal and GIS plugins that allow scholars to upload data points from their research, create maps and other visual representations, share their data with others, use others’ data to enrich their own work, and publish about the history of the city. Early challenges included how to locate addresses of the past and how to include a variety of neighborhoods in the data. The vision of the Pauliceia team for a site representing myriad areas of interest to researchers has already begun to come to life as they beta test the site.

Frederico Freitas presented on his work with aerial and satellite images, which historians can use to reconstruct past landscapes and see changes in land use over time. He presented two projects. One was a chapter of his book, Nationalizing Nature: Iguazu Falls and National Parks at the Brazil-Argentina Border (2021), that uses a wealth of historical images from state government surveys in 1953 and 1980, declassified United States CORONA satellite program images from 1967, and contemporary images from 2014 to reconstruct land use and land cover in a border area between Brazil and Argentina. Using ArcGIS, Freitas georeferenced the images, painstakingly putting each image in place to create a mosaic that offered a visual assessment of the park from 1953 to 2014. His second project, focused on Brasília, uses images from 1972 to 2012 to construct a land cover analysis of the federal district and the city as a whole.

FUNCTIONAL DEFINITION OF CITY LIMITS, OR HOW TO DEFINE THE URBAN EXTENT IN THE AGE OF SMARTPHONES AND URBAN SCALING
Horacio Samaniego, Universidad Austral de Chile

“To provide a functional definition of the city is very important because it provides a fluidity and a dynamic aspect that we might be able to use later to design policy, to design management plans, and overall to understand how we interact among ourselves (the people) and how we interact with the infrastructure.”

—Horacio Samaniego

This project and presentation addressed possibilities for using ongoing big data—the data deluge of the modern age—to look at and understand cities. The definition of the city differs by discipline, with no cross-disciplinary standard for how to set the boundaries of the city or tool to define the functionality of cities. Researchers sought to use cell phone data from one of Chile’s largest providers (with 37% of the market) to develop a methodology that would propose a functional definition of the city rather than an administrative one. With four weeks of cell phone use and more than three billion records, all anonymized, the team was able to map a residence for each user as well as the specific antennae pinged and the duration of those pings for phone calls and data package downloads (e.g., WhatsApp or email). They were able to develop
tools that could help set urban boundaries and define inner and outer boundaries of cities using big data. This preliminary exercise sought to develop tools that both challenge and integrate current theoretical developments in the science of cities, as well as explore the potential of large datasets to understand the complexity of urban dynamics.

GEOSPATIAL DATA AND HUMAN-CENTERED LANDSCAPES IN GUATEMALA
Omar Alcover Firpi, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

“What’s great about these new technologies and sensors is that they don’t really answer all of our questions, but [rather] allow us to pose new ones that then, using more traditional methods in archaeology and supplementing that with ethnohistoric and ethnographic research, [enable us] to continuously grow the research and make it a more accessible enterprise for everybody.”
—Omar Alcover Firpi

Using his own research in Macabilero and El Zotz, Alcover focused on how archaeologists have employed GIS systems and remotely sensed data, along with traditional methods, to document archaeological sites at greater scale and precision, analyze activities and movements in the past, and present results to wider publics. Using LiDAR, researchers can create very detailed, high-resolution renditions of sites, often discovering features/sections of their sites that they have not identified using traditional methods. New technologies can supplement drawing and traditional recording methods. In order to best interpret how landscapes were used over time, Alcover and his colleagues continue to use ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources, including work conducted by scholars in the early 1900s and documents such as the sixteenth-century Lienzo de Quauhquechollan. The combination of techniques has allowed them to “see” beyond the jungle canopy, revealing the extent to which the Indigenous communities of this region modified their landscapes over time.

BLUEPRINT FOR MODERNITY: THE GLOBALIZATION OF ENGINEERING
Israel García Solares, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/University of Notre Dame, and Ted Beatty, University of Notre Dame

“This is our idea or our contribution... to find these transnational paths of engineers that are impacted North to South, but also this circulation of knowledge, power, and technocracy South to South but mediated by the North Atlantic.”
—Israel García Solares

This ongoing project seeks to construct a global history of engineering from 1870 to 1940, the period seen as the first era of massive globalization and encompassing the first 50 years of engineering as a profession. During this period, engineers were everywhere—building the modern world—and yet they are little covered in the historiography. Using alumni records from a dozen schools in the US and Europe and one in Mexico, membership records for the American Institute of Mining Engineers, and corporate directories, researchers built a new database of roughly 60,000 engineers. This allowed them to geolocate and trace engineers’ working lives across the globe. In addition to their own focus on mining and metallurgical engineers, Solares and Beatty have been working with collaborators who focus on South Africa, East Asia, India, Mexico, and Chile—with scholars using the database to address their localized, qualitative case studies. Finally, they created an undergraduate course at Notre Dame that combined the history of engineering, data science, and historical methodology in a project-based course in which students researched their own questions.
“I think that jurisdictions and trying to map them can help us understand multiple things...[showing] us that jurisdiction was a space of politics: legal, relational, interpersonal, as well as spatial.”

—Bianca Premo

Domains is an online project that explores the concentric, contested domains of legal jurisdiction in colonial Spanish America. The site came out of an intellectual problematic that arose in a course on legal history, where students wanted to examine interactions with and perceptions of the law by ordinary people, legal representatives, and low-level officials. Premo attempted to draw a dynamic map that could outline the choices that a litigant or petitioner might have had about where to lodge a complaint or ask for a particular grant or privilege. Her struggle to represent this visually led her students to suggest a GIS project, which soon became a collaboration among students, colleagues, postdocs, and library staff. The resulting small-scale project, constructed using ArcGIS StoryMaps, represents the different levels of jurisdiction in Peru, including the viceroyalty of Peru, the audiencia of Lima, corregimiento, ecclesiastical jurisdiction, military jurisdiction, and the cabildo of Lima. Using GIS for this type of project revealed both its strengths and its limitations in illustrating how individuals change their orientation, not just spatially, but when they think abstractly about how they want to route themselves to power.

Judging by the increasing number of attendees at our GIS events over the course of the year, as well as their geographic diversity, we were successful in drawing members of our community and beyond to learn more about the various ways that GIS can be used in the social sciences and humanities. The six projects that were presented offered a variety of approaches to spatial thinking and included both small- and large-scale integrations of GIS into current research and teaching. We hope that the event videos, available on our website and YouTube channel, continue to educate and inspire audiences beyond those that were able to attend the live events.

The GIS in Latin America videos are all available on the CLAS website at https://clas.uchicago.edu/multimedia-resources/videos.

Katz Center for Mexican Studies

The Katz Center’s 2020–2021 Mexican Studies Seminars focused on a wide range of political and economic issues affecting Mexico, its people, and the world. From its distinguished lineup of lecturers, the following provide a glimpse into this past year:

Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan, president of Sarukhan + Associates, LLC and former Mexican ambassador to the US (2007–2013), provided a timeline of pivot points in US-Mexico relations from the 1980s to the present. In his lecture he presented the term “intermestic” to characterize his approach to his tenure as ambassador: first pushing to address domestic policy issues then later moving a bilateral agenda forward.

Catalina Pérez Correa, a distinguished faculty member in Judicial Studies at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, illustrated the state of violence in Mexico, especially the recent and sudden rise in the military presence in multiple sectors of civil society. She expounded on the spike in its presence, citing the deployment of 50,000 military personnel across Mexico from 2007–2021 in what seemed to be justified as an effort to counter drug cartels. However, much of this violence, she elaborated, leaves many injured with little or no follow-up investigation, leading to many unaddressed human rights violations.

On a similar note, Jesús Silva-Herzog Márquez, from the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, provided an incisive analysis of AMLO’s political ideology by pointing out many parallels between his COVID-19 skepticism and the “fake news” rhetoric that the populist Mexican president and former President Trump espouse despite each identifying with ideologically oppositional parties.

Looking ahead, the Katz Center will continue to host an array of eminent public figures and scholars to enrich our dialogue on Mexico’s most pressing issues.
In 1979, the Tinker Foundation launched the Tinker Field Research Grant program to provide support for graduate students to conduct pre-dissertation and master’s thesis research in Latin America. As stated at the time, “The purpose of this new Tinker program is to make it possible for people of ability to work in specific regions of Latin America to acquire as profound and intimate a knowledge as possible of language, terrain and culture; to gather research data; and to develop contacts with scholars and institutions in their field.” Through this grant funding, which is matched by the universities that receive the grants, the Tinker Foundation has supported more than 9,000 students at over 40 US universities to conduct field research in the region.

CLAS has a long history with the Tinker Field Research Grant program. We initially received funding in 1983, and CLAS soon became the primary source for short-term, preliminary field research funding for UChicago graduate students who concentrate on Latin America. Since then, CLAS has awarded more than 600 field research grants. These grants have been essential for students in master’s programs and early phases of doctoral programs, when few sources of funding exist for exploratory work. Students benefit greatly from the opportunity to explore and refine their research projects through field experience that allows them to acquire language and cultural knowledge, identify significant information sources, and develop scholarly contacts—all of which enable them to develop their theses and dissertation proposals.

Expanding the Vision of the Tinker Field Research Grant Program

In 2019, after 40 years of administering the program, the Tinker Foundation commissioned a strategic review of the field research grant program to measure its impact and continued relevance. The results of this review were unsurprising to those of us who had benefited from the program. Faculty, staff, students, and alumni noted several program strengths, including its unique focus on providing early field work experience, flexibility and openness to a wide range of disciplines, and provision of funding otherwise unavailable on many campuses. In terms of how the program should evolve, the recommendations focused mainly on increasing engagement: allowing for more collaboration between funded centers and the Tinker Foundation and better connections between student grantees at different institutions—recommendations that the foundation embraced.

In 2020, the foundation launched the Tinker Field Research Collaborative, which provides five years of support to selected centers and brings them together as a group to “promote opportunities for joint experimentation, tool-building, and knowledge exchange on the institutional level.” In doing so, the foundation sought to establish a community of practice.
that would enhance the value of the field research grant program. UChicago was invited to join the new collaborative—comprising 11 grantees and 3 of our peer Tinker Visiting Professor Endowment institutions—and we enthusiastically accepted the invitation to work more closely with this exceptional group. The collaborative includes Columbia University; Florida International University; New York University; San Diego State University; Stanford University; Tulane University; University of Arizona; University of California, Berkeley; University of Florida; University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; University of Kansas; University of Michigan; University of Texas at Austin; and University of Wisconsin-Madison.

First Steps in New Directions

The collaborative held its first meeting virtually in summer 2020, after having to cancel a planned in-person kickoff scheduled for the Latin American Studies Association Congress. Our first meeting focused in part on the challenges presented by the pandemic and how best to support students who would need to adjust their plans and potentially their projects. We quickly established a set of priorities and three working groups dedicated to curating advice and resources on field research for students, building a cross-campus networking platform, and supporting students to share research externally.

As part of the first group, tasked with the creation and dissemination of field research resources, CLAS met with colleagues from five peer institutions to discuss the development of guidance, webinars, and other resources that would help prepare students for fieldwork. The initial plan had been to create tools—such as an overview of how to access archives, a workshop on mixed methods approaches, a guide on ethical considerations—that would be useful to students at our universities. However, with students across the nation awarded funding but without a clear notion of when they might be allowed to travel to their field sites, our conversation quickly shifted to a discussion of how to address the current moment by providing resources related to digital research. We also discussed how to engage students who had no choice but to postpone their field work, students for whom a transition to virtual research was not an option. We hoped to help students continue their momentum and plan for their eventual fieldwork.

Our group decided that a first step would be to open planned virtual field research workshops to our peers. In the face of the many limitations of the pandemic, the move to online events presented all of us with an opportunity to extend our events to larger and more diverse audiences. We invited institutions to share announcements for their research and skills workshops with the collaborative mailing list. In doing so, we learned about great programs, including “Digital Fieldwork Symposium: Ethics and Methods” organized by NYU’s Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. Student access to Latin America-focused training from other institutions served the mission of the collaborative to build a community of learning.

Creating Training Opportunities for Students

In addition to extending existing events to students and faculty at peer institutions, CLAS collaborated with Tulane’s Stone Center for Latin American Studies to create a workshop designed specifically for field research grantees. In April, we presented “Data across the Disciplines: Notes from Field Research in Latin America,” aimed at students thinking about the possible uses of spatial imaging and other types of technology-collected data in their research. Marcello Canuto (Tulane) presented on the use of Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) and other geospatial methods in his work in Maya archaeology, and the ensuing discussion on the benefits and challenges of implementing new technologies into field research was moderated by CLAS interim director Claudia Brittenham. The event drew attendees from institutions across the country, and we posted the event video to the CLAS website.

Inspired by the collaborative, CLAS designed a second event, this time focused on a need that had been identified by Brittenham: training students across disciplines on how to work with images. Working with UChicago’s Visual Resources Center, we organized “Capturing, Using, and Crediting Images from Latin America: A Workshop on Integrating Visual Resources into Your Field Research,” which introduced methods for how to take better pictures, how to catalog images, and how to negotiate image permissions in the United States and Latin America. More than 70 attendees from 20 institutions, including some in Latin America, attended the event. Both the video and the workshop slides, which include links to related resources, are now available on the CLAS website. This workshop addressed the current moment, by helping students prepare for fieldwork and offering advice for organizing images from previous field work, and enabled us to create evergreen resources, materials that will continue to be useful to students beyond the pandemic.

CLAS’s engagement with the Tinker Field Research Collaborative has led to new fieldwork-focused initiatives that have benefited our students and extended our knowledge and expertise to students at peer institutions. We look forward to continued participation in the collaborative and to partnering with our peers to create more field research resources. Tinker Field Research Grants have long provided foundational field work experiences for Latin Americanist students at UChicago, and the collaborative has the potential to make new connections among scholars at leading Latin American Studies centers across the nation. We are excited to participate in this next phase of the Tinker Foundation’s work.

Footnotes:
Highlighted Faculty Awards & Publications

Michael Albertus
Political Science


Angela S. García
Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice

Thomas and Znaniecki Best Book Award 2020, American Sociological Association, for *Legal Passing: Navigating Undocumented Life and Local Immigration Law* (University of California Press, 2019)

N. Tulio Bermúdez
Linguistics


Larissa Brewer-García
Romance Languages and Literatures


Claudia Brittenham
Art History


“Disease, Inequality, and Resilience in Sixteenth-Century Mexico,” Learning from Premodern Plagues video series, Newberry Center for Renaissance Studies, available on YouTube

Benjamin Lessing
Political Science

*Violencia y paz en la guerra contra las drogas: Ofensivas estatales y cartelas en América Latina* (Universidad de los Andes Press, 2020)

[Spanish translation of Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America]

Luis R. Martínez and María Angélica Bautista
Harris School of Public Policy


Miguel Martínez
Romance Languages and Literatures

Critical edition of *Vida y sucesos de la Monja Alférez* by Catalina de Erauso (Castalia, 2021)

Stephan Palmié
Anthropology


Danielle Roper
Romance Languages and Literatures


Victoria Saramago
Romance Languages and Literatures

*Fictional Environments: Mimesis, Deforestation, and Development in Latin America* (Northwestern University Press, 2020)

Honorable Mention, Antonio Candido Prize, Brazil Section, Latin American Studies Association

Susan Stokes
Political Science

Andrew Carnegie Fellow, Carnegie Corporation of New York (2021)

Guillermo O’Donnell Democracy Award and Lectureship, Latin American Studies Association (2021)

Mauricio Tenorio Trillo
History

“Estados Unidos y algo más,” *Historia Mexicana* (2021)

“De promiscuidades norteamericanas: Métis, mestizo, miscegenado,” *Historias conectadas de América del Norte*, Catherine Vézina and Maurice Demers, eds. (2021)

Brodwyn Fischer
History

“Historicising Informal Governance in 20th Century Brazil,” *Contemporary Social Science* (2021)


SJ Zhang
English

Members of the CLAS community found cause to celebrate this year—two book events on recent books by faculty members in the Humanities Division invited distinguished guests to comment on the books’ contributions to their fields. After years of refining arguments, discussing the work-in-progress, and integrating constructive criticism, these faculty authors were able to engage in a celebration of their accomplishments, hearing praise from their peers and receiving a stream of congratulatory messages (via chat) from colleagues and students. A hearty congratulations to all of our faculty authors, including those whose work we have not yet had an opportunity to celebrate.

Beyond Babel: Translations of Blackness in Colonial Peru and New Granada
Larissa Brewer-García, Romance Languages and Literatures

In Autumn 2020, the Slavery and Visual Culture Working Group organized a celebration and discussion of Beyond Babel, with special invitees Michelle McKinley (University of Oregon), Cécile Fromont (Yale University), and Anna More (Universidade de Brasilia).

Beyond Babel examines the influence of black interpreters and spiritual intermediaries in the creation and circulation of notions of blackness in writings from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish America. It uncovers long-ignored or lost archival materials describing the experiences of black Christians in the transatlantic slave trade and the colonial societies where they arrived. Brewer-García’s analysis of these materials shows that black intermediaries bridged divisions among the populations implicated in the slave trade, exerting influence over colonial Spanish American writings and emerging racial hierarchies in the Atlantic world. The translated portrayals of blackness composed by these intermediaries stood in stark contrast to the pejorative stereotypes common in literary and legal texts of the period. Brewer-García reconstructs the context of those translations and traces the contours and consequences of their notions of blackness, which were characterized by physical beauty and spiritual virtue.

“In this scrupulously researched and rigorously argued book, Brewer-García releases from archival obscurity and historiographical neglect the voice of Afro-Latin American men and women, demonstrating their role as vital thinkers and authors of the early modern era. Her close, historically grounded analysis of texts featuring black thought in colonial Lima and Cartagena offers a powerful revision of the definition and meaning of blackness in slavery-era South America, and the early modern world at large.”

—Cécile Fromont (written review)

The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor
Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, Cinema and Media Studies

In Spring 2021, CLAS organized a presentation and celebration of The Process Genre, with special guests Vinzenz Hediger (Goethe University, Frankfurt), John MacKay (Yale University), and Alice Lovejoy (University of Minnesota).

In The Process Genre, Skvirsky introduces and theorizes the process genre—a heretofore unacknowledged and untheorized transmedial genre characterized by its representation of chronologically ordered steps in which some form of labor results in a finished product. Originating in the fifteenth century with machine drawings, and now including everything from cookbooks to instructional videos and art cinema, the process genre achieves its most powerful affective and ideological results in film. By visualizing technique and absorbing viewers into the actions of social actors and machines, industrial, educational, ethnographic, and other process films stake out diverse ideological positions on the meaning of labor and on a society’s level of technological development. In systematically theorizing a genre familiar to anyone with access to a screen, Skvirsky opens up new possibilities for film theory.

“[This is] a book with a dazzling scope and important ideas. It’s a book that doesn’t just put Jeanne Dielman, Drifters, A Man Escaped, and Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood into dialogue with one another but it does so via ballet, online cooking videos, pottery, and sixteenth-century military training manuals. In other words, this is a book that situates cinema within its historical, cultural, intellectual, media, social, and material frameworks simultaneously. This is a very difficult thing to do, but in mapping The Process Genre, [Skvirsky] has done it.”

—Alice Lovejoy (remarks during book celebration)
2020–21 Faculty Awards for Collaborations with Latin America

UChicago supports international faculty collaborations through awards funded by the Office of the Provost and administered by UChicago Global. The Provost’s Global Faculty Awards provide annual awards to support international faculty activities with a collaborative element in key regions where the University has strong engagement: mainland China, Hong Kong and East Asia, South Asia, and Latin America. Funded proposals showcase UChicago scholarship in projects incorporating meaningful participation and expertise from both the University and partner(s) in the target region.

Since 2018, nearly $400,000 has been awarded to 25 collaborative faculty projects in Latin America and the Caribbean. For 2020–21, 16 Latin America-focused projects were funded, although many were postponed due to the pandemic. Here we list all the 2020–21 projects on Latin America, with brief summaries for those awarded to CLAS affiliates (affiliated faculty indicated by italics).

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO FORUM IN LAW AND ECONOMICS, BRAZIL**
Omri Ben-Shahar and M. Todd Henderson (Law School)

**ALL ACCESS: CREATING US-URUGUAY PARTNERSHIPS VIA THE ACCESS GRADUATE PROGRAM**
Jeanne Century (Outlier Research and Evaluation) and Carolyn Sutter and Kaitlyn Ferris (UChicago STEM Education)

**CONTACT TRACING FAKE NEWS: ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 MISINFORMATION**
Nicole Rosner (Mansueto Institute for Urban Innovation), Kate Cagney (Sociology), and John Schneider (Medicine)

Social media is a key mechanism by which individuals gather their information, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project will examine how at-risk individuals appraise, understand, and share information through their social media networks. Rosner and colleagues will conduct a comparative ethnographic research study of COVID-19 misinformation in three global communities at risk, but who differ in national approaches to COVID-19 mitigation: the favelas of São Paulo, Brazil; the Latinx communities on the Southwest side of Chicago; and the rural borderlands of northwestern Guatemala. By analyzing the misinformation on social media platforms, the researchers will examine how social media use in vulnerable contexts can augment or buffer COVID-19 inequality in communities most at risk.

**INTIMATE ARCHITECTURES: DISPLACEMENT, IRRUPTION, AND EMERGENCY IN THE AMERICAS**
Danielle Roper (Romance Languages and Literatures)

The Hemi Graduate Student Initiative Convergence is a yearly conference organized by the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics and New York University in collaboration with a host university in the Americas. In 2021, the University of Chicago will host the convergence under the theme “Intimate Architectures.” “Intimate Architectures” names the proliferating responses and tactics developed for care and life in the midst of crisis, emergency, dispossession, and the erosion of rights across the Americas. The theme addresses the conditions of everyday life, the scripting and conscripting of power to constrain the capacity for life while also naming the networks, social and aesthetic, that irrupt these conditions to disrupt, refuse,
defy, and (re)imagine the world. The conference will bring together graduate students, artists, performers, and activists from across the Americas for a series of activities including working groups, panel presentations, keynote lectures, and performances.

**MIGRATION, EXILE, AND THE AVANT-GARDE**
Na'ama Rokem (Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations) and Abigail Winograd (Smart Museum of Art)

**WHICH SIDE IS THIS SIDE: MEXICO CITY AND OAXACA**
Laura Letinsky and Zespo Velazquez (Visual Arts)

**MEXICO VISITING SCHOLAR PROGRAM: FULBRIGHT-GARCÍA ROBLES**
*Emilio Kouri* (History)

The annual Visiting Scholar program brings a distinguished Mexican Scholar to Chicago for up to five months to do research, lecture, and collaborate with UChicago faculty and students. In addition to working with Chicago faculty and students, Visiting Scholars are also expected to organize a seminar or conference and to offer talks in Chicago’s Mexican community. The topic for 2020–21 is US-Mexico relations.

**CONFERENCE AND COURSE ON IMPROVING ROAD SAFETY IN LATIN AMERICA**
Kavi Bhalla (Public Health Science)

**GOVERNANCE, REFORM, AND LOCAL HEALTH SYSTEMS IN CENTRAL AMERICA**
*Alan Zarychta* (Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice)

The project aims to understand how institutional conditions shape the performance of local health systems in developing countries. Research will be conducted in Honduras and compared alongside health sector reform experiences in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Workshop meetings will serve to deepen existing collaborations and establish new ones between the University of Chicago and academics, policymakers, and administrators in Central America. In addition to building new relationships and fostering additional collaboration with colleagues, the research will also set the foundation for a new research proposal for a comparative, cross-national study of health systems governance within Central America.

**LAUNCHING THE PAN AMERICAN NETWORK OF HEREDITARY ATAXIA (PAHAN)**
Christopher Gomez (Neurology)

**NEUROQUITO 2020**
Christos Lazaridis and Fernando Goldenberg (Neurology)

**STEM-OUT MEXICO 2020**
Sonia Hernandez (Surgery) and Oscar Pineda-Catalan (Biological Sciences)

**BRIDGING GAPS IN GASTRIC CANCER IN BRAZIL AND THE UNITED STATES**
Namrata Setia (Pathology) and Uzma Siddiqui and Sonia Kupfer (Medicine)

**NEW DRIVERS OF MIGRATION: VIOLENCE & MIGRATION IN NORTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA**
*Susan Gzesh* (The College), *Angela S. García* (Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice), and *Emilio Kouri* (History)

This project expands upon a new theoretical and empirical paradigm for contemporary international migration in North and Central America. UChicago faculty involved in the proposal acknowledge that migration unfolds on a “continuum of compulsion,” rather than a path-dependent division between a voluntary labor migration and forced refugee migration. As such, their framework encompasses the roles of states and state violence in shaping the movement of people. The PIs want to continue to engage with Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala to further develop their project.

**SKIN COLOR INEQUALITY IN MEXICO: A SIBLING FIXED EFFECTS APPROACH**
*René Flores* (Sociology)

New findings on the significant skin-color-based inequalities in Mexico challenge Mexico’s national ideology of Mestizaje, which downplayed the significance of race within the Mexican population. However, it is still not clear what factors are producing these inequalities. This research proposes designing a survey instrument as well as adopting a sibling fixed effects approach to fully assess how class affects color-based inequalities in contemporary Mexico. With this approach, Flores and colleagues intend to identify the influence of family-level differences. This project will contribute to a better understanding of racial boundaries by evaluating the impact of race in a setting outside of the United States. This study also highlights the mechanisms that produce skin color gaps, which could inform public policies aimed at ameliorating racial inequality.

The projects listed above show the breadth of work being undertaken with Latin American colleagues by faculty across the University. CLAS has always emphasized direct engagement with Latin American scholars, and we are pleased to see that this engagement with the region goes far beyond Latin American Studies as a field. We applaud faculty in all disciplines who expand UChicago’s research collaborations, broaden our fields of engagement, and deepen the networks so vital to faculty and student research.

To read more about these projects, please visit: https://global.uchicago.edu/awarded-projects.
Although the Tinker Visiting Professor program faced some challenges in 2020–21, CLAS was able to create new opportunities to highlight upcoming Tinkers and their work. Our slate of visiting professors—who had been chosen two years prior and for whom we had been preparing since that time—were suddenly unable to come to Chicago. Of the four planned residencies, three were rescheduled for the 2021–22 academic year. One Tinker Visiting Professor taught remotely, an option that would not have been possible a few years ago, but could now be supported through Zoom. Leonardo Waisman, former researcher at CONICET (Argentina), taught Races, Castes, and Their Relationships in Latin American Colonial Music from his home in Córdoba.

In-person residencies might not have been possible, but the pandemic allowed us to explore new formats for events. At the end of the Autumn Quarter, after organizing a series of successful virtual events featuring international speakers, CLAS decided to invite future Tinker Visiting Professors to present their work. Pre-residency events allowed us to introduce them to the CLAS community, promote their courses, and share their work. More than 150 attendees in 20 countries participated in these events, giving us greater reach than expected.

In February, Waisman presented “Blackface Minstrelsy in Spain and its Colonies, 16th–18th Centuries.” Some 50 years before the emergence of blackface minstrelsy in the United States, the tradition of the *negrillas* was disappearing in the last Spanish territories where it still held sway. Originating in Christmas and Corpus Christi plays with music in the fifteenth century, the custom developed and spread throughout Spain and its colonies in the guise of immensely popular *villancicos* (carols) sung at Matins in churches as well as during processions and other festive occasions. The custom was polemical then, and its revival in our times (without blackface) has also aroused scholarly arguments that pose their performance of racism against their artistic attractiveness. Waisman discussed their musical, performative, and literary traits—both racist and subversive—in the context of the liturgy, the pastoral tradition, and the socio-cultural circumstances within which they flourished.

In March, Vera Tiesler presented “Body Modifications, Social Identities, and Beauty in Ancient Mesoamerica.” Ancient Mesoamericans are known for their remarkable diversity and sophistication in dental works and artificial head shapes—body modifications that have come to light in thousands of archaeological burial explorations across Mesoamerica. While teeth were filed, painted, and inlaid during adolescence and adulthood, caretakers would first modify the form of a baby’s head during the initial weeks and months of life. These practices inscribed notions of beauty and gender in their human carriers. Some embodied the emblems of divine forces, imbued with their beliefs of the body and its role in the universe. Tiesler discussed these permanent body modifications by looking at studies of the skeletal record, ancient portraiture, and historical sources. From the early times of the Olmecs, the basic visual, behavioral, and social aspects attached to such body works appear unified yet shifting across the Mesoamerican landscapes. The talk closed with an examination of the evolving roles of head shaping practices and dental modifications after European contact, providing food for thought in discussing Novohispanic domination strategies, resilience, and transformation.

These pre-residency events were a great success. Tinker Visiting Professors have always contributed to the intellectual life of the Center through public presentation of their work, but this year we were able to share their work with a wider and more geographically diverse audience. Interest in the two events, both on campus and among colleagues around the world, was so strong that we plan to continue to host virtual talks with Tinker Visiting Professors in the future.

### 2021–22 TINKER VISITING PROFESSORS

#### AUTUMN

| Natalia Majluf, Independent Scholar |
| Host Department: Art History |
| Course: Making States and Nations: Art and Material Culture in Latin America, ca. 1808–1880 |

#### WINTER

| Pablo Andrés Neumeyer, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella |
| Host Department: Economics |
| Course: Topics in Latin American Macroeconomics and Development |

#### SPRING

| Vera Tiesler, Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán |
| Host Department: Anthropology |
| Course: Body Modifications, Sociocultural Meanings, and Beauty in Ancient Mesoamerica |

| Wlamyra Ribeiro de Albuquerque, Universidade Federal da Bahia |
| Host Department: History |
| Course: Emancipation, Black Intellectualism, and Projects of Nationhood in the Era of Brazilian Abolition |

Note: Vera Tiesler’s presentation video is available on the CLAS website at [https://clas.uchicago.edu/multimedia-resources/videos](https://clas.uchicago.edu/multimedia-resources/videos).
Always looking for different ways to highlight members of our community, CLAS launched a new student profile feature on our website in 2020–21: CLAS Chats. Brief video interviews feature CLAS-affiliated students answering 10 questions designed to showcase student research and to learn more about what brought students to the field, what courses have influenced them, and what they enjoy about the region. We currently have five CLAS Chats posted on the website, featuring three students in the social sciences and two in the humanities. We hope the chats are interesting, lively, thought-provoking, and fun.

**What has been your favorite UChicago course—taken or taught—and why?**

**Agnes Mondragón Celis (Anthropology)**
Research interest: how Mexico’s “war on drug trafficking” is ideologically constituted through the production and circulation of mass mediated objects

“New Approaches to the History of Modern Cities which Mauricio Tenorio taught in 2013 when I was in MAPSS [the MA Program in the Social Sciences]. I liked that it integrated theory, history, a bit of archival methods, and that it allowed for interesting ways to study religion—which was a main interest for me at the time—through its relation to urban space.”

**Madeleine Stevens (Political Science)**
Research interest: forced disappearances in authoritarian and civil war contexts

“I was the grader for Brodie Fischer’s class on Revolution, Dictatorship and Violence in Modern Latin America….I learned so much from Professor Fischer, from the readings, and from the students—they wrote these amazing final papers in the early days of the pandemic about areas of the region that I hadn’t studied before….I don’t know whether I would have performed as well under those circumstances of writing a final paper. [It was also really] important because that’s how I came up with the idea for my dissertation—it was that class.”

**Isabela Fraga (Romance Languages and Literatures)**
Research interest: cultures of slavery in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Latin America, specifically Brazil and Cuba

“The course that I took with Professor Larissa Brewer-García, [in] 2018, called Empire, Slavery and Salvation: Writing Difference in Colonial Americas. It’s not my period of study, but it was amazing to dive into colonial sources and colonial texts that really shaped the way I understand issues of race and bodily difference in my own work, which deals more with the nineteenth century.”

**Keegan Boyar (History)**
Research interest: policing, criminal law, and citizenship in Mexico City from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century

“My favorite class to teach—or rather to TA for—is the Latin American Civilization course, which is an introduction to Latin American history in three parts. I especially like TAing the third course in the sequence, because it covers from the late 1800s to the present, which roughly coincides with my research. But really, I love teaching all the Civilizations courses, and how the TAs for the class get their own weekly section to teach, which is really generative of great discussions….Above all, I really enjoy getting the chance to introduce people to Latin America and to its history. I really hope that I can show students a little bit of what it is that I love about the region and maybe convince some of them that it’s worth studying.”

**Pedro Doreste (Cinema and Media Studies)**
Research interest: transnational cinemas of the Hispanic Caribbean

“My favorite course…has been Salomé Skvirsky’s The Afterlives of New Latin American Cinema. Latin American cinema is almost always taught in a very structured way. It’s like there’s a proto-cinematic borrowing from European cinema styles of the 1950s, it becomes more militant toward the ’60s and ’70s, and then it just fades away. But the way that she conceptualized the class, by calling it the “afterlives” of New Latin American Cinema, is to make the argument that this movement, or at least this poetics, didn’t just disappear. It’s still going strong…new film technologies and new film styles, and the inclusion of women and Black artists and filmmakers, have added new layers and new priorities to Latin American cinema.”

To watch the full interviews, please visit https://clas.uchicago.edu/content/student-profiles.
2020–21 Graduates

**BA MAJOR IN LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN STUDIES (LACS)**

Rebecca Álvarez-Ramos  LACS; Comparative Human Development
“Femicides in Mexico from 1990 to Present: The Power of the Media in Respect to Fomentation and Advocacy against Femicides”

Ava Levin  LACS, with honors; Laws, Letters, and Society
“Hidden Border Walls: A Legal and Humanitarian-Centered Analysis of the Migrant Protection Protocols’ Myth of Protection”

Jack Schwab  LACS, with honors; Geographic Sciences, with honors
“Politics and Experience in the Velha Republica: The Brazilian Army and the Conflicts of the 1890s”

**BA MINOR in LACS**

Paloma Blandon  Public Policy Studies, with honors

**MA**

Guilherme Baratho  MAPSS
“Politics above Everything: Brazil’s Evangelicals and the Election of Jair Bolsonaro”

Samuel Bloom  MAPSS
“People of the Plaza: Identity Performances in the Zócalo of Mexico City”

Kristina Durán  LACS
“Recognizing Climate Change Migrants: Puerto Rico and Hurricane Maria”

Lorhen Gomez-Alvarez  LACS
“Feminist Led Social Movements and Their Impact on Abortion Legislation in Oaxaca, Mexico”

Jennifer Jouriles  MAPH
“Knowledge, Gender, and the (Re)Configuration of the Sor Juana Icon in Jesusa Rodríguez’s *Primero sueño*”

Krizia Laureano Ruiz  Romance Languages and Literatures

Amelia Parker  Divinity School

**PhD**

Alejandra Azuero Quijano  Anthropology
“Forensics of Finance: The Science of Crime and Debt in Post-agreement Colombia”

Carlos Cisneros  Linguistics
“Free Choice from Indiscriminacy: A Study of Free Choice Indefinites and Indiscriminatives in English and Cuevas Mixtec”

Jonathan Mark Deming  Political Science
“The Strategic Foundations of Authoritarian Successor Parties”

Inés Escobar González  Anthropology
“Settlers of the Debtfare Society: Homes, Property, and Social Relations after Mexico’s Housing Reform”

Savannah Esquivel  Art History
“Unsettling the Spiritual Conquest: The Murals of the Huaquechula Monastery in Sixteenth-Century Mexico”

Christopher Gatto  History
“From Cochineal to Coffee: The Making of a New Rural Economy in Miahuatlán, Oaxaca, 1780-1880”

Viviana Hong  Romance Languages and Literatures
“Child’s Play and Foul Play: Childhood Narratives from the HIJOS Generation in Post-dictatorial Argentina”

Michele Kenfack  Romance Languages and Literatures
“Apocalypses francophones: histoire et (r)écriture dans la prose antillano-africaine (1968-1990)”

Hilda Larrazabal Cárdenas  Romance Languages and Literatures
“Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o la construcción de un ícono nacional (circa 1870-1970)”

Deirdre Lyons  History

Juan Diego Mariategui  Romance Languages and Literatures
“To Reach the Isle: Poetics of the Island in Puerto Rican Literature of the Twentieth Century”

Amy Leia McLachlan  Anthropology
“Cultivating Futures: Botanical Economies and Knowledge Ecologies in Migrant Colombian Amazonia”

Cristhian Seminario Amez  Economics
“Informal Rungs on the Job Ladder: Theory and Evidence from Brazil”

Héctor Varela Rios  Divinity School
“To ‘Take Care’ and ‘Venerate’: Morenita, Excessive Personhood, and Devotedness in a Puerto Rican Family”

Jessica Villaseñor  Sociology
“‘Quiero vivir en mi fantasía’: The Social World of Youth in Street Situations in Mexico City”
Aviva Levin, originally from Cleveland, Ohio, has spent the last four years working toward her bachelor’s degree with majors in Latin American and Caribbean Studies and Law, Letters, and Society. In Spring 2021, she graduated from the College, summa cum laude. She recently reflected on the experiences, people, and courses that played important roles in her personal and academic development during her time at UChicago.

Why did you choose UChicago?
I chose UChicago because it presented an environment where I could truly be myself. Everyone’s individual quirks are celebrated at this school. I also loved the many campus coffee shops and the location; it is a fantastic combination of city life and a classic campus feel.

What have been your most memorable class(es) and/or experience(s) while at UChicago?
I loved the human rights program in Vienna, which I participated in during the Spring of my second year. I studied the philosophical and historical foundations of human rights as well as current international human rights issues. Obtaining an intellectual foundation for such important topics, while applying it to weekly museum, monument, and other site visits, was an amazing academic opportunity. A highlight was a group presentation on the history of Vienna’s Jewish community. In preparation, I visited the Stadttempel, the city’s main synagogue; the Jewish Museum of the City of Vienna; and Judenplatz, a square where Jewish life centered in the Middle Ages. These visits were emotionally meaningful as I imagined my own distant relatives, also Jewish, navigating daily life in Europe throughout the centuries.

What drew you to your declared majors, and especially to the Latin American and Caribbean Studies major?
I loved how customizable both of my majors are. Because the world is not constructed along disciplinary lines, I did not want my studies to be confined in this way. I was drawn to LACS because it is a small major where I was able to form personal relationships with the professors and administration. One of the highlights of the program was studying in Oaxaca, Mexico. The opportunity to stay with a host family and to take weekly field trips provided an immersive and rewarding learning environment. I have also been impressed by the language support in LACS. My Spanish and Portuguese professors were dedicated and encouraging, and I look forward to continuing to explore these languages further as I travel to and hopefully work with Latin America in the future.

Tell us about your thesis topic.
My thesis covers experiences of asylum seekers under the Migration Protection Protocols (MPP), a policy created by the Trump Administration where eligible migrants remain in Mexico throughout their immigration court proceedings. It draws on scholarly legal literature and on original ethnographic interviews with migrants in and relevant stakeholders to the program. I conducted and transcribed 10 interviews, a majority of which I conducted in Spanish. I centered the thesis on the interviews to emphasize the voices of migrants, who often have been silenced throughout their journeys. They detailed stories of systematic human rights abuses during their time in Mexico. The thesis zooms in on tales of systemic barriers to basic social services central to life and freedom; a lack of freedom of movement due to constant fear; and great emotional and psychological suffering due to MPP conditions. It discusses the roles of nonprofits, US justice system officials, and the Mexican police, among other actors. Finally, the thesis contextualizes the migrant accounts with relevant legal theory.

What led you to this topic?
Through the Pozen Family Center for Human Rights internship grant, I worked remotely (due to COVID-19) at Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center (LAIAC) in El Paso, Texas. LAIAC is a pro bono legal aid nonprofit with a team dedicated to Migration Protection Protocols cases. I was drawn to the organization, as it allowed me to better understand the current human rights crisis and to work directly with clients. With LAIAC, I conducted intakes, spending hours each week listening to asylum seekers tell their stories, often filled with heartache, violence, drama, and ultimately persistence. I also spent weeks working with clients on their declarations for court, in which they told me in minute detail of each step in their migration journeys, from the oppression they escaped in their home countries to the hardships they faced in Mexico while awaiting trial. At the time, the Migration Protection Protocols was still a relatively new policy, so I wanted to shed more light on its disastrous human rights consequences. After my life-changing hands-on experience with LAIAC, I decided to investigate more deeply MPP through my own scholarly research: my BA thesis now and possible career work later.

What are your plans now that you have finished your degree?
This summer, I will begin working as a litigation analyst for the Chicago law firm Goldberg Kohn. My work will focus on the False Claims Act. In the near future, I hope to attend law school or graduate school. I hope to work in Latin America and apply my increased legal knowledge at some point down the road.

Anything else you’d like to say?
I would like to thank Dr. Brodwyn Fischer and Dr. Diana Schwartz Francisco for their advice and support throughout the thesis process and college generally as I navigated the LACS major. I feel fortunate to have worked with such brilliant and dedicated professors.
When Haitian storytellers have a story to tell, they say “Yee Krik,” and eager listeners answer “Yee Krak.” These introductory words are quite fitting to tell the story of Krik…Krak! Contemporary Cross-Atlantic Storytelling: Tradition, Resistance and Empowerment, a course that explored the African oral tradition and its subsequent transformations as a form of resistance in the American plantations and an empowerment tool at the heart of the Caribbean creole identity.

The art of listening to, and telling, stories is at the heart of human experience. Traditionally, storytelling has been a way of passing on social values and historical knowledge in African cultures. This tradition traveled across the Atlantic with captive Africans aboard slave ships, and it was adapted to new circumstances. Over time, space, and cultures, the art of storytelling has evolved: from oral to written and visual languages, storytellers have adopted new media to share history, customs, and legends through vivid narratives. Their work is part of a greater whole, a continuum of stories that link past, present, and future. Nelson Mandela rightly suggested that: “a story is a story; and you may tell it as your imagination and your being and your environment dictate; and if your story grows wings and becomes the property of others, you may not hold it back. One day it will return to you, enriched by new details and with a new voice.”

Storytelling is a human art form that engages our emotions, thinking, and imagination. When I was young, I enjoyed listening to and reading stories, especially folktales, not just for entertainment, but mostly for informational and educational purposes. I found African folktales quite fascinating: I marveled at the spider’s ability to outwit and triumph over more powerful animals; I enjoyed the tricks of the cunning tortoise; and I smiled at the monkey’s efforts to succeed against all odds. Through ingenious characters and realistic settings, folktales gave me a better understanding of African history, traditions, and cultures. As I explored other stories, I also learned about other cultures.

In the context of a growing and overwhelming global crisis, I wanted to bring positivity to the classroom by sharing with my students the pleasure I derived (and still derive) from folktales. In this regard, I adopted a broad, comparative approach that transcended temporal and spatial boundaries. Spanning several centuries and continents, the course aimed to offer students a platform to discover the rich African, African American, and Caribbean oral traditions and heritage, and thus bridge the historical and geographical gaps between cultures that are distinct but connected. Students engaged with a variety of materials to better apprehend the cultural context of production, as well as to appreciate the importance of human diversity. Through readings, videos, and audio, among other media, they learned about the evolution and (re)contextualization of storytelling, as it continuously adapts itself to the changing human experience.

The journey began with Bernard Dadie’s Le Pagne noir (The Black Cloth, 1955), a collection of sixteen stories which enabled students to discover the importance of oral tradition in Africa. The course expanded on African American folktales, which are deeply rooted in the African tradition, and interesting connections were established between Anansi and Brer Rabbit, two quintessential figures in Black folklore. Fittingly, Virginia Hamilton’s The People Could Fly (1985) provided the transition from one region to the other and allowed students to delve into the reappraisal of storytelling, which was used by descendants of slavery as a way to remember the past, record experiences, and thus track history through intergenerational transmission. Hamilton’s collection echoes slaves’ voices, with moving tales of resistance, freedom, and hope. Against the historical backdrop of slaves’ narratives, fictional stories became even more relevant as students were able to link fiction to real-life experiences. As the journey continued in the Caribbean (with tales from Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe, etc.), the course explored additional themes such as power, oppression, and (artistic) freedom that emphasized the subversive nature of contemporary folktales.

Videos and audio reinforced the idea of a modern approach to storytelling, as oral and written narratives challenge socio-political issues such as dictatorship and discrimination, develop social awareness, advocate for concrete changes to existing systems, and promote (cultural) identity. Throughout this intellectual and social journey, students discovered the power of stories to entertain, to stimulate action, to challenge, and to heal.

The tradition of storytelling, though often forgotten, is not obsolete. Redefined and recontextualized by contemporary griots and writers, stories have become a tool to advocate innovative forms of creativity that break existing thematic and stylistic boundaries, and thus open new avenues for (social) reflection. This course enabled students to engage critically with oral and written materials that convey the lasting idea of the storyteller as a perennial hero committed to physical and intellectual freedom.
On June 14, 2019, I rushed down the flight of stairs in my apartment in Pilsen to catch an Uber to UChicago’s commencement ceremony for master’s and doctoral candidates in the humanities. My family had traveled from the east coast to see me graduate with a PhD in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Studies, so I brought my handheld steamer to campus to get rid of the wrinkles on my cap, gown, and stole depicting the flag of Puerto Rico. My white button-down shirt was untucked because it was warm that day and all I needed to look presentable was the plum tie fastened around my neck and the dressy gray pants and shiny black shoes peering from the bottom of the rented maroon regalia. In many ways, the seven years I spent at UChicago were like preparation for graduation: on the outside it looked like I had smoothed out all the wrinkles, but underneath the dapper appearance was a graduate student who had to show courage and remain optimistic to reach the finish line of an academically and financially challenging doctoral program, with no prospects of landing a tenure-track faculty job at the end of it.

I entered the academic job market (AJM) after becoming a doctoral candidate. It is a process that starts before the academic year begins and, if successful, could last until the summer. Despite the AJM’s inevitable duration, I was grateful to have had mentors who did not discourage me from applying early as well as counselors at UChicagoGRAD and the Chicago Center for Teaching who were very generous with their support and feedback. Unfortunately, I did not get any interviews after the first application cycle, but it set me up well enough to be granted a UChicago dissertation completion fellowship. This award gave me the time and resources to graduate and enter the AJM a second time with better footing.

While I was wise to apply to a variety of positions (professorships, postdocs, and lectureships), I initially didn’t cast my net wide enough beyond my specialization in language instruction and Hispanic American literary studies to include other areas of study across the social sciences and humanities. I also struggled to draft cover letters and statements that spoke more precisely to the asks and requirements of the job descriptions and to the hiring institution’s profile. Mastering these skills was a matter of constant research, practice, and revision. At the same time, the precarity, unpredictability, and arbitrary aspects of the AJM became clearer to me. I realized that I could only control the input of my qualifications and experience, while the output of search committees’ deliberations followed its own course in most cases and was not always contingent on the caliber of my profile. For example, during my second attempt I learned that one of about 20 applications I submitted was “in advocacy,” that is, someone on the search committee was advocating on my behalf to fill the position. After following up, I was told that I would not be considered because, despite my appeal, my experience spoke too much to the existing strengths of the department rather than to its academic needs. Similarly, I applied to both a non-tenure track professorship and a President’s Postdoctoral Fellowship at Carnegie Mellon University. Although I was not selected for the former position (for the same reasons as the previous example), I was granted the latter in light of my promise as a scholar and experience in diversity and inclusion.

The demands of the AJM have increased throughout the years. Luckily, the postdoc at CMU gave me the time to bolster my research and apply to jobs during the third and fourth cycles of the AJM without financial constraints and the stress of a dissertation. I continued to seek feedback and I avoided common pitfalls. Nevertheless, I believe stretching myself a little beyond my expertise, harnessing interdisciplinary scholarship, cultivating inclusive teaching practices, and advancing diversity outside the classroom helped me reach the final stage of five faculty searches. Consequently, I accepted the offer of a tenure-track position as Assistant Professor of Black Studies with a focus on the Black Atlantic at Cleveland State University (CSU), to begin this year.

Applying to the AJM encouraged me to take rejection as an opportunity for growth and to prioritize my goals and needs in light of the market’s volatility. Therefore, I applied to places where I wouldn’t have to compromise either my aims as an academic or my integrity as an Afro-Latinx and queer individual, whether at the institutions or in their geographic locations. This required not only preparation but also faith that what was destined to be mine would arrive even if that meant having several chocolate bars before unwrapping the one with the golden ticket. I feel fortunate that the appointment at CSU aligns well with my academic goals and personal affinities. I look forward to this new venture whereby I can contribute to a welcoming university and diverse urban environment. Wish me luck!
Masked Viejo Effigy for New Year Celebrations, Veracruz, Mexico. Keegan Boyar, PhD Candidate, History

In Veracruz, the New Year is celebrated with the burning of a pyrotechnics-stuffed “viejo” effigy. This year, most of the viejos (which are put on display prior to the celebration) were wearing masks.

2020–21: YEAR OF THE MASK

KEEP IN TOUCH WITH CLAS

We encourage alumni and friends to keep in touch with CLAS in a variety of ways. While we welcome financial support, we also invite you to attend events; visit our website to stay up to date about initiatives at the Center; read our blog and listen to our podcast; and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Alumni engagement includes mentorship opportunities that allow students and alumni to connect with one another through one-time meetings, short- and long-term relationships, internships, and career shadowing.

Please contact us at clas@uchicago.edu for more information.

Engage with CLAS at clas.uchicago.edu, where you can subscribe to the CLAS email list, peruse the list of upcoming events, learn about affiliated faculty and students and their research, watch event videos, and more.