



CLAS CHATS 5: PEDRO DORESTE TRANSCRIPT

This is CLAS Chats, brief video interviews featuring ten questions that focus on the experience and work of students affiliated with the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Chicago. I'm your host Natalie Arsenault, Associate Director of CLAS.

My name's Pedro Doreste. I'm a fifth-year student in Cinema and Media Studies specializing in the transnational cinemas of the Hispanic Caribbean.

What drew you to Latin American Studies?

I guess Latin American Studies, for me, was a bit of a late development in my academic career. Originally, I was attracted to film, because I come from literature. In Puerto Rico, film studies isn't its own standalone discipline. So once I started taking more advanced classes in English literature, I realized that some professors would let me write about film. And I thought, this is neat. So when I applied to grad school, I made sure to apply to the film studies programs.

The thing is, once I got there, I realized that there was a complete lack of Latin American film studies in the curriculum, or, not complete, but pretty much. On the one hand, I had this outside pressure of people telling me, "Oh, so you're studying Latin American cinema now. Isn't that you doing 'me-search?'" And I took that to heart. I don't know what "me-search" even means, because studying Puerto Rican cinema or Cuban cinema or cinema of the Caribbean in general...that's not something deeply personal, especially as a person of Cuban descent who has never been to Cuba. So really I just embraced the confusion of that accusation that I was doing "me-search" and started following the thread wherever it led me.

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

My favorite course at the University of Chicago, cross-listed with LACS, has been, Salomé Skvirsky's the Afterlives of New Latin American Cinema, because I always found...I mean, I knew 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, and that 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 these...this movement, or at least this poetics, didn't just disappear. You know, it's still going strong even though 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.

What book do you consider foundational to your education in Latin American Studies, and why?

One of the books that I just recently encountered and started influencing the direction of my thought and my research has been Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* and, to a lesser extent, *Caribbean Discourse* as well. Seeing as how the Caribbean is usually understood through an

ethnographic and sort of anthropological lens, and Glissant is applying what's called grand theory, or in conversation with grand theories, emerging from Europe and the Americas, but it's all...I'll talk to this, to the context of the Caribbean. Reading *Poetics of Relation* by Glissant taught me that these theorizations are more of an impulse of the intelligentsia, the intellectual class. But really the process of misunderstanding yourself in your own culture and your own place of origin, that's part of the experience, especially in the Caribbean, where you have a mishmash of all sorts of cultures, ethnicities, languages. I think he calls it "opacity." So the Caribbean is this sort of opacity. And I think you need to resist the impulse, to fully grasp or fully understand the region and its peoples. The thing is that you can mellow in your misunderstanding. And that's part of what makes the Caribbean an exception, I guess.

What role has CLAS played in your time at UChicago?

First things first: I came here and I already knew that I was a Latin Americanist, but I spent at least the first two years of my program trying to find an institutional home. CLAS provided me a scaffolding that I never thought I needed. I started realizing that I needed a firmer background in Caribbean theory, anthropological methodologies, Latin American history...and working at CLAS really helped me recenter my priorities. So they lie less with film as an academic field and more with Latin America and the Caribbean as a politics.

What made you choose your dissertation topic?

My very first project in Latin American Studies was a reception study of *The Godfather* films in Cuba. I realized that I could marry my interest in American film or American genre, or American convention of filmmaking, with Latin American Studies through reception studies, through how these American products are consumed or responded to by Latin American subjects.

I wanted to do the same thing, or have the same approach, to the study of Puerto Rican film for my dissertation, because Puerto Rico is this sort of stateless nation in between Latin America and the US. Nobody really knows what it is. I think more young people are now willing to admit that it's a colony, and I count myself among those. I wanted to know, how does the concept of a national cinema evolve in a modern colonial state. And that meant expanding my definition for what a national cinema is, to include Puerto Rican cultural production in the diaspora, whether elsewhere in Latin America, in New York City, or in Europe, but to also include the way that American films or films from elsewhere in the world have been received and reappropriated in Puerto Rican culture. And that's where I'm at right now.

Can you give us a quick summary of your topic?

Right now, the tentative title for my dissertation is "Free Associated Medium: The Puerto Rican Cinema in the American Century." I'm thinking through the lens of Puerto Rico's official political status, which is the status of free association or commonwealth, or as has become known most recently as a colony. But I'm also trying to apply that theory to the modes and genres of filmmaking in Puerto Rico, historically.

What unexpected turns has your research taken (or, how have your central questions changed since you first embarked on your research)?

What happened in the middle of my coursework here is that the oldest ever feature film in Puerto Rico was found in an archive in 2017, called *Romance Tropical*, directed by Juan Emilio Viguíe. So that changed my priorities because I'm like, okay, here's this 1934 film, the second ever sound film in Spanish. And it was thought lost for over 80 years. All of a sudden some archivist at UCLA finds it, and people were celebrating it. There was a big premiere planned and everything. And then, in 2017,

Hurricane Maria happens. And of course, *Romance Tropical* sits on the back burner, because there's other things happening in Puerto Rico, particularly the archives that were meant to house this film suffered some damage. The exhibition venues also suffered some damage. The entity in Puerto Rico that organizes cultural events—they were the subject of budget cuts and things like that. There were a lot of bureaucratic and infrastructural problems that affected the film's repatriation.

At that time I was like, you know, I really want to study Cuba. I have this good project going, but it seems like what's happening in Puerto Rico is more urgent. With this new film that was found all the obstacles that were placed in the way of its repatriation, some natural, most manufactured. I felt the need to attend to it, to put it out there, so people know what's happening and how our current history of non-sovereignty and not having this political autonomy is also affecting other cultural sectors. It's also affecting our heritage. And that's how I settled on the issue of Puerto Rican cinema as the project for me to work on, at least for the next couple of years.

How does your work connect to broader global issues?

For me, the way, I know I've alluded to sort of connections between Puerto Rican cinema and international cinema... For me, the way is to write, I want to write Puerto Ricans into the established histories of film movements and styles and manifestos. So these global histories where, very often, Puerto Ricans or Caribbean people in general, have been sort of excluded. It's not difficult to find the agency or the traces of Puerto Ricans or people from the Caribbean in any aspect of cultural production. So there is this role for Puerto Rican filmmakers internationally that just hasn't been studied yet.

What interesting tidbit won't make it into the research report/dissertation, but makes for a fun anecdote?

For the chapter that I'm working on [about] this film, *Romance Tropical*, I found a very popular book about Puerto Rican radical history. It's a popular press book, non-academic. It's called *War Against All Puerto Ricans* by Nelson Denis. At one point, he claims that the director confided in him that the inspiration for *Romance Tropical* unironically came from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, that he wanted to make a film that spurred these nationalist emotions in people in the style of Leni Riefenstahl. Yeah, so he basically claimed that the director of our first feature-length film was inspired by Nazi propaganda.

When you aren't traveling for research, which is your favorite place in Latin America to travel to, and why?

The first trip I'm going to take, as soon as the pandemic allows, is going to be to Holguín, Cuba, because I promised my family that I was going to visit them. They've been trying to get me to visit them for almost 15 years now. So, yeah, I'm going to go there to visit. I'm also going to do a little bit of research, but really the trip has been long overdue. These next couple of trips after the pandemic, I think not a lot of it is going to be tourism. It's going to be mostly...if it's not research, it's going to be seeing the people that I've been meaning to see for a long time.

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