



CLAS CHATS 3: ISABELA FRAGA 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.

Hi, my name is Isabela Fraga and I am a PhD student in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Studies at the Romance Languages Department. And I work on cultures of slavery in late 18th- and 19th-century Latin America, and specifically on Brazil and Cuba.

What drew you to Latin American Studies?

I was born and raised in Brazil and I did my bachelor's and my master's degree there. Brazil is a country that has a kind of a weird relationship with the rest of Latin America. Honestly, what actually drew me to Latin American Studies was leaving Brazil and coming to the U.S. I think the distance, both geographical and also emotional distance from Brazil and the fact that I was here in the headquarters of the American empire, kind of made me think of Brazil as being part of Latin America and not part of Latin America at the same time. I could see some of the possible connections and interactions and articulations between Brazil and the rest of the continent that I hadn't noticed before.

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

This is a tricky question because there are many people in my committee involved in this. But I think I can say that the course that I took with Professor Larissa Brewer-García, I think it was 2018, and I think it was called *Empire, Slavery and Salvation: Writing Difference in the Iberian Atlantic*. It's not really my period of study but it was really amazing to dive into colonial sources and colonial texts that I think really shaped the way I understand issues of race and bodily difference in my own work, which deals more with the 19th century.

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

The two books [that] I think have been foundational in my work in Latin American Studies are Julio Ramos' *Desencuentros de la Modernidad en América Latina*, which was translated as *Divergent Modernities*, and it examines 19th-century more canonic writers from Argentina to Cuba. And the other is Pablo Gomez's *Experiential Caribbean: Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic*. Again, even though it's not the precise period of study which I work on, I find myself going back to it again and again because I think it's such an interesting and refreshing approach to colonial archives in Latin America. And it also examines the role of Black ritual practitioners in the

Spanish Caribbean and how they developed what he calls an experientially based knowledge about the body, about nature, and about illnesses. This knowledge is produced by these Black ritual practitioners' work, at the same time, independent from and also in articulation with some other European-based knowledge. I find that book really interesting.

What role has CLAS played in your time at UChicago?

First of all, the Workshop on Latin America and the Caribbean, which I co-coordinated in 2017, I think. It was an incredible space to learn and keep learning about many other different fields across the humanities and social sciences that address Latin American issues. I also received the Tinker Field Research Grant in my first two years here, which allowed me to go to Cuba and then to Bahia in Brazil and to do some preliminary research for my dissertation. These two trips were fundamental, crucial for my project, and not only because of what I found during the trips but also because of the experience with archival research, which is something that I found I really, really love doing even though it can be really frustrating. And finally but not—it's not the least important thing—I really enjoyed the lunchtime talks about current issues in Latin America, not only for the food, even though the food was great, it was also because it was really a way of understanding current issues in other Latin American countries that I wasn't that familiar with.

What made you choose your dissertation topic?

I think it started to come together when I was doing research at the Cuban National Library for the first time in 2017. I came across this 19th-century bulletin issued by an insurance company and it called my attention because it was a slave insurance company. I knew I wanted to study slavery in Cuba but at that point I had no idea that there was such a thing as slave insurance companies in Cuba or anywhere in Latin America. But most of all, what called my attention in this was that there was a list in the end of the bulletin of all the enslaved people who had died in the previous months and there was the cause of death of each of them. And two of them had died of "nostalgia." I was very intrigued by that because then I came to understand it was an illness that afflicted Africans, enslaved Africans. So that opened the door to understanding how people conceived the mind of the enslaved at that point in the late 18th- and 19th-century Cuba and Brazil.

Can you give us a quick summary of your topic?

In my dissertation I look into the different ways in which conceptions of feeling or affect played a role within cultures of slavery and also in the processes of emancipation in Brazil and Cuba from the late 18th century to the late 19th century. And by feeling, I mean, being able or unable to feel, feeling too much, or feeling too little. So, the gradations in feeling, right? And particularly I examine texts by slavers and formerly enslaved people written during the expansion of the slave trade and also through the aftermath of abolition in Brazil and Cuba. I try to show how central feeling and affect was in discourses on the humanity of the enslaved. I work with medical, literary, and anthropological discourses to show that feeling informed theories and practices of slave management and racialized care, as much as it also inspired the sentimental accounts on the horrors of slavery, with which I think many of us are familiar.

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

There hasn't been any major change or turn in my project, but it's more of a continuous process of delineating the issues that I want to work with or the issues that I think are important to work with, and to turn something that used to be more of a blurred image, like a vague idea, into something that I think is more a defined silhouette or a more defined outline and hopefully in the end something...a more well-defined image.

How does your work connect to broader global issues?

I think my work aims at reconstructing a genealogy of an imagined Black affect that has informed legislation, public policies, and policing practices all over the Atlantic World. So, for example, many of the texts that I'm working with are basically white scientists and intellectuals trying to decide if enslaved people or free people of color felt more or less emotional pain than whites or if they were more inclined to become criminals. This was more towards the late 19th century. So even though most of these theories have been debunked, right, especially by movements for Black liberation, it still somehow informs much of the contemporary statistics that we see of police violence, mass incarceration, and racialized medical care that people of color still endure throughout the Americas, not only in Brazil and Cuba. And I think the second way my research connects to more global issues is that I hope that it also shows some ways in which Afro-descendants themselves have refuted these ideas of white superiority by appropriating and repurposing some rhetorical tools that were denied to them, such as sensibility, for example, right? It is the center of my project.

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

Sometimes when you are looking through the archives you see glimpses of everyday life that, for me at least, are hilarious. Once when I was doing research at the Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística in Havana, I was looking through this classified ad section of this 1844 edition of a newspaper called *Diario de la Marina*, and there I found an ad of somebody looking for a "very talkative large parrot" that they had lost. And the one thing they mentioned to identify the lost bird, because they were trying to get it back, was that it had favorite words. And the favorite sentence that the parrot had was, "yo no quiero ir a la escuela." So "I don't want to go to school." I just stared at that ad, imagining this family who had a kid who was complaining every day about not wanting to go to school and the parrot just picked it up and just started yelling to the whole neighborhood, "no quiero ir a la escuela." And I don't know, maybe somebody got annoyed at the parrot and just stole the parrot or maybe the parrot got fed up with the kid and fled...I don't know. I just think those little glimpses of life are really funny to me, at least.

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

It has to be Bahia in Brazil. Any place in Bahia, it could be Salvador, it could be the Recôncavo Baiano, anywhere actually. And my reasons for this are the most cliché ones: it's beautiful, the food is great, people are great, it has a very interesting history. I really don't have more to add to that.

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Thanks for watching.