



CLAS CHATS 1: AGNES MONDRAGON 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 is Agnes Mondragón, and I'm a PhD candidate at the anthropology department and my dissertation is entitled “Mediations of War: Formations of Truth, Power, and Political Authority in Mexico's ‘War on Drug Trafficking.’”

What drew you to Latin American Studies?

I am Mexican. I lived in Mexico most of my life before coming to Chicago for grad school and right now I'm doing few work in Mexico City actually. . .or trying. . .and currently Mexico is undergoing a crisis of violence that is unprecedented in recent history and many of whose aspects, I think, are yet to be understood.

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

I'd say it's New Approaches to the History of Modern Cities which Professor Mauricio Tenorio taught, I think, in 2013 when I was in MAPSS.

And 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.

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

One of them would be Claudio Lomnitz's *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, which is the history of the notion of death from colonial times until the turn of the 21st century. And it analyzes how this notion organizes official ideology, class relations, political critique, and notions of sovereignty in Mexico, among others.

What role has CLAS played in your time at UChicago?

So many roles, from the numerous events that I have attended and from which have learned a lot and met new scholars; the Workshop on Latin America and the Caribbean, which I have attended while in Chicago and which I coordinated during the 2016–2017 academic year; of course my field work is funded by the CLAS Mellon Dissertation Research Travel Grant; and the amazing

community that is formed from people from a bunch of different disciplines that gather together and give each other great support as we pursue our programs.

What made you choose your dissertation topic?

I wanted to understand how violence in Mexico, given its upsurge in recent years, is made sense of, addressed, and given meaning collectively, since it's something that is rather recent and it has affected so many aspects of social life in this country.

Can you give us a quick summary of your topic?

My project analyzes how the Mexican state partakes in different processes through which the “drug war” is publicly represented. And I have conducted field work at sites of drug war–related official discourse, antiviolence protests, state spectacles, and with journalists at risk, under the state's protection. I analyze how notions regarding the violence, its perpetrators, and its victims are produced at these sites.

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

It has taken a lot of unexpected turn. So I originally wanted to study the processes that lead to the canonization of President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. But research there became unfeasible around 2016 so I briefly went back to my MA topic, which is folk religious practices associated with violence in the press. And finally I settled on the topic I described earlier.

How does your work connect to broader global issues?

The state, of course, is a ubiquitous entity that I think always merits study. But also the state's relation to violence in a context like the “war on drug trafficking,” which is different from a traditional war and from authoritarian state violence, I think, is relevant beyond Mexico since it can speak of emergent forms of violence around the world.

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

I spent a long period in Colombia before coming to Mexico because my husband Steven was doing field work there and I went to Medellín at some point. And I visited one of the so-called Pablo Escobar museums in one of his houses where they had some of his belongings and there was even an actor impersonating the kingpin. So what I thought was bizarre was that apparently most of the international tourists were from Mexico. So. . .this fascination with figures like these is jarring in a context of such violence in Mexico, but it's also a big feature of this phenomenon.

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

It's a place in Colombia. Since I spent such a long time there, I think I became very attached to the place. This is a small beach town called Cabo de la Vela in the Department of La Guajira, close to the border with Venezuela, in the desert, on the Caribbean coast, in the territory of the Wayuu

Indigenous people. And it has turquoise waters, stunning views, great food, amazing people, and it's really unique and beautiful. And I really recommend it to people.

It's a nice place. It's hard to get there, but once you get there, you're very happy.

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Thanks for watching.