

# TABLEAU

THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | FALL 2021



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ON THE COVER

Matthew Metzger, *Still*, 2021, installation view at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. Photography by Useful Art Services.



*Still, 2021, comprising two works by Matthew Metzger, MFA'09, was installed in his solo exhibition Heirloom at the Renaissance Society this past summer.*

LEFT: PHOTOGRAPHY BY USEFUL ART SERVICES, © RENAISSANCE SOCIETY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO; RIGHT: PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ZICH

## Dear Alumni and Friends,



Anne Walters Robertson

I look forward to seeing colleagues and friends on campus soon—in three dimensions at long last! At the same time, I continue to reflect on how we have adapted to the pandemic in the Humanities Division.

The immediacy of Zoom meetings made for efficient, and sometimes even invigorating, work: rather than walking from one room or building to another or waiting for colleagues to gather, we moved from meeting to meeting with a computer click.

Still, I have greatly missed what I like to call “the serendipity of the drop-in,” with the colleague who stops by my office, sparking new conversations and ideas. More important, our students will return to face-to-face interaction with teachers and mentors, which is so critical to their development.

Clearly the element of human contact, virtual or in-person, has been vital during this challenging time. Likewise, the humanities have proven central to national conversations about everything from education to vaccines, and the work of humanists has become more accessible through the electronic platforms now so familiar to us.

We were gratified that 500 viewers tuned in to our Dean’s Salon Series for a presentation by **Susanne Paulus** (Oriental Institute and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations), “House Hunters: Babylon, 1300 BCE.” Paulus began by noting that her own quest for a home in Hyde Park resembled her research into the social, legal, and economic aspects of dwellings built 3,000 years ago. For more on this fascinating topic, see Paulus’s contribution to “Two Perspectives on Urbanism” (see page 4).

While the relevance of the humanities seemed

to grow during the pandemic, COVID-19 unfortunately placed stress on university budgets, affecting the humanities academic job market and those who will bear the torch of humanistic inquiry into the future. We have been able to sustain many of our PhDs through our Humanities Teaching Fellowship program, which allows them the opportunity to teach undergraduate students and the time to prepare the publications that will launch their careers.

We are leaders in humanistic teaching and research today in part because of the loyal and generous support of our alumni and friends. For instance, the Abigail Rebecca Cohen Postdoctoral Fellowship, established by **Daniel G. Cohen**, AB’91, was awarded for the first time this spring, and the Arnaldo Momigliano Postdoctoral Fellowship, established by Sara McDougall and **James Whitman**, PhD’87, will be presented to a worthy recipient in 2022. I also thank **Lois**, AM’66, and **Jerry**, EX’67, **Beznos** as well as Ted Carlson and **Catherine Mouly**, AM’76, PhD’86, who continued the fellowships they generously established last year honoring Julius Rosenwald and **Margaret Deffenbaugh Carlson**, AM’43, respectively.

For their confidence in us and their gifts that are so indispensable to our mission, I am truly grateful to our wonderful friends.

*Anne W. Robertson*

Anne Walters Robertson  
Dean, Division of the Humanities  
Claire Dux Swift Distinguished Service Professor  
Department of Music





# RELEVANT RELICS

BY LUCAS MCGRANAHAN

Archaeologist Timothy Harrison helps model the contested past—and the climate future.

“Doing fieldwork in the Middle East is not an easy thing,” says University of Toronto archaeologist **Timothy Harrison**, AM’91, PhD’95. “Everything’s contested.”

Since 2004, the OI-trained professor has directed the Tayinat Archaeological Project in the Amuq Valley in southeastern Turkey. That project began in 1999, but it can be viewed as a continuation of an earlier expedition that packed up its gear more than 60 years before.

From 1935 to 1938, an Oriental Institute expedition excavated the archaeological mound of Tell Tayinat, discovering a complex of buildings dating from the Iron Age (800–500 BCE), as well as indications of a much earlier Bronze Age settlement from the third millennium BCE. The team’s finds included a wealth of pottery sherds and other artifacts inscribed in the ancient Akkadian, Aramaic, and Luwian languages. They also found a structure that so closely resembles King Solomon’s temple as described in the Old Testament that biblical scholars have used it as a model for what that building, said to have been located in ancient Jerusalem, might have looked like.

Today, Harrison, who has more than 35 years of experience in the field, brings to Tell Tayinat a particular interest in how small, complex societies arose in the Eastern Mediterranean amid clashes between regional and local powers. The site seems to have hosted the capitals of a succession of Bronze and Iron Age polities that lived in tension with more powerful states. Then as now, this borderland, situated between Antakya (ancient Antioch), Turkey, and Aleppo, Syria, is a dynamic and disputed cultural crossroads.

A major twenty-first-century challenge to the region—including its cultural preservation—has been Syria’s now decade-long civil war. The looting and destruction of antiquities by ISIS, supposedly to combat idolatry, peaked in 2014–15 when the organization had captured large swaths of territory. But Harrison offers a subtler example of how cultural heritage is bound up with nation-building, identity, and politics.

In 2012 the University of Toronto team unearthed an unexpected pair of objects under a gateway leading to a royal citadel. First was a colossal stone sculpture of a human head and torso measuring 1.5 meters tall (likely 3.5 meters when it was intact). On the back was a Luwian inscription extolling the deeds of the bearded figure, one



Timothy Harrison dusts off an Iron Age tablet imposing an oath of loyalty to the Assyrian king's successor (shown reconstructed on the left). Below: a statue of revered neo-Hittite King Suppiluliuma also discovered by Harrison's team at Tell Tayinat.



King Suppiluliuma—probably the neo-Hittite king known for waging war against Assyria's King Shalmaneser III in the early ninth century BCE. The second object was a roughly one-meter-tall column on which the figure presumably rested, which bore carvings of a winged bull and sphinx.

Harrison says it is interesting how the figure became part of the local public discourse. Tayinat stands at the crossroads, he explains, of “the Turkish highland Anatolian cultures and the Syrian Semitic populations.” Because the Hittites are an ancient Anatolian culture, the discovery of a likeness of a neo-Hittite ruler at the site helps to locate it within the cultural history of Turkey rather than Syria.

Unsurprisingly, the find was hailed by Turkish media and officials, who visited the site and held news conferences with Harrison and his team. There are now licensed miniature replicas of King Suppiluliuma for sale. “We don’t make any money from it,” Harrison says, “but it’s entered into the public imagination.”

Although they have not become souvenirs, other findings from the Tayinat excavation have included a mysterious defaced sculpture of a woman whose thousands of fragments the team is now reconstructing, a sculpture of a seated lion that gives clues to local artistic traditions, and another temple resembling King Solomon’s. Within this temple was discovered a remarkably complete “succession treaty” from the seventh century BCE that imposed on the local population an oath of loyalty to the son of the Assyrian king—a tangible representation of the growing power of the neo-Assyrian Empire at the time.

Harrison’s excavations at Tell Tayinat “have proved transformational for our understanding of Iron Age social processes,” says **James Osborne**, assistant professor of Anatolian archaeology in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

Harrison’s work goes well beyond this one site. He also heads up the Tell Madaba Archaeological Project in Madaba, Jordan, part of an international effort to analyze “the adaptive strategies and social institutions developed by human communities in the semi-arid highlands of central Jordan.” This focus on integrating data from disparate sources—including climate data—is also indicative of broader concerns in his work.

Since 2012 Harrison has directed the Computational Research on the Ancient Near East (CRANE) project, which addresses the idiosyncratic and specialized nature of much archaeological research: “Everybody has their own methods, their own recording systems,” Harrison says. “We are building more standardized methodologies.” Project members include UChicago professor in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations **David Schloen** and **Scott Branting**, AM’96, an archaeologist at the University of Central Florida.

Some of Harrison’s most enthusiastic collaborators are not archaeologists but climatologists. If climate researchers have mathematical models running on supercomputers, archaeologists hold the rich historical data that can help validate those models. This information is valuable: if your theory matches up with what we know of the past—

based on, say, chemical analysis of ancient plant material found at a particular site—it is that much more reliable for predicting the future.

Scientists often reach out to Harrison to collaborate, and he urges humanists to take a similar attitude to working across fields. “I think that we have intense relevance,” he says, noting that as department chair he often articulates this relevance for the “grand challenges” facing humanity—whether this means modeling climate change or examining cultural identity and conflict in the Middle East.

Fascinated by archaeology since childhood, Harrison says the University of Chicago was his “dream school.” Raised in what he describes as a conservative religious family—his parents were both missionaries in the Philippines, where he grew up, and he got his bachelor’s degree at Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian school in Illinois—he says the University was a “pure place of learning” that was “invigorating, challenging, and just incredibly stimulating to me coming from my background.” ■



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER JACKSON

LEARN ABOUT THE SUCCESSION TREATY HARRISON’S TEAM DISCOVERED at [tableau.uchicago.edu/harrison](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/harrison).



*For 2018's Art on theMART show, Jason Salavon enjoyed illustrating "multiple perspectives and simultaneity, maybe even the psychedelic a little bit," on the aged, gritty surface of the iconic Chicago building.*

# TWO PERSPECTIVES ON URBANISM

AS TOLD TO JEANIE CHUNG

Sometimes an unexpected angle tells an interesting story. An Assyriologist learns about ancient cities from an unconventional source, while a visual artist uses technology to provide a new perspective on contemporary cities.





**Susanne Paulus** is an associate professor of Assyriology in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and the tablet collection curator at the Oriental Institute. Interested in ancient writing since she was a schoolgirl in Germany, Paulus now examines real estate documents—in the form of cuneiform tablets—from Babylon’s Middle Babylonian Period (1500–1000 BCE).

There are two ways to approach ancient cultures. One is through the material cultures—through archaeology—and the other is through the textual culture. I think we get the most out of it if we combine those perspectives.

Real estate documents tell us that in terms of ancient cities, location does matter. If you’re close to a really important temple in Babylon, or close to the king, that’s where you want to be. If you’re an adviser to the king, you have to see the king regularly. There is no subway system; you don’t have a car. A lot of things happen just by being close to power.

As in a lot of modern cities, including Chicago, the river is a focal point. And not all the land is built. We see that people had gardens for fruits and vegetables. The city center in Babylon is pretty densely occupied—houses, streets. But the further we move out of the center, the more gardens and green space we see. Even most of the smaller houses have courtyards, where there is a lot of daily activity.

There is also a surprising amount of activity on the rooftops. For example, when I visited traditionally built cities in Iran, you could walk from one rooftop to the next rooftop. Archaeological sources usually take the ground level of things, but my texts sometimes mention roofs, so I started paying a lot more attention to what’s happening on those upper levels. We know, for example, that they store grain on the roofs, or they go up on the roof to observe the stars.

There is definitely income inequality—it’s a typical triangle society, with the king on top and a small elite. There is also definitely diversity. The texts speak of different ethnicities. There has been a lot of ink spilled on the topic, but it’s really hard to tell if a person’s ethnic designation influences their status in society. We know the Babylonians perceive some people as foreigners. They fight wars constantly, so they have prisoners of war, and elite households had slaves.

But there is not any official segregation or redlining that I’m aware of. The way they kept housing markets socially stratified, then as now, was price. If you ask a certain price for a house, only a certain social stratum can afford it. The few examples that come to my mind speak to the fact that ethnicity doesn’t play a role.

What we do know is that usually extended families want to live close together, and they do everything to buy houses next to each other. Building walls made of clay allows them to be very flexible. So if you’re sharing a wall with your neighbor and the neighbors are your cousins, you could open a wall just to connect houses.

In private houses, you also find a lot of school texts. I recently taught two classes on schooling in Nippur, a Mesopotamian city excavated by the OI. My graduate students enjoyed discovering the work (and struggles) of students who lived more than 3,700 years ago. ■



**Jason Salavon** is an associate professor and chair in Visual Arts. His studio uses custom computer software processes of his own design to manipulate and reconfigure preexisting media and data to create new works of visual art.

One of the issues my work has attempted to tackle for a long time is a kind of simultaneity of the microscale, or scale of individual entities, and the macroscale, or scale of groupings. Cities are a really interesting site for that investigation. If you look at the contents of a large building during the work-week you have this macrostructure of swarming activity. And then, with difficulty, you might try to imagine all of the small local—even subjective—narratives in each of the building’s offices, cubicles, and workspaces.

Something that contemporary computer technology allows us to see is that those distinct points of view can be held at the same time. You can hold the representation of a kind of macroperspective and a zoomed-in microperspective in the same artistic representation or, more frequently, database entity.

For example, I had a project where I was interested in this question: is it possible to simulate every building in the Loop—including buildings that no longer exist and buildings that were going to be built—and render them such that you might get a sense of some simultaneous full expanse of the cityscape from a single camera perspective? That led to my pieces *City (westward)* [featured on *Tableau*’s Spring 2014 cover] and *City (southbound)*.

Most popular narratives focus on an individual story. I understand why, and I agree that the personal, local-scale story, and the feeling that the telling of stories engenders in others, is important. At the same time, I really am interested in how multitudes of stories quilt into a dense and complex entity that has its own life: the life of the entire city, not the life of the individual.

Those are definitely harder stories to tell, and they’re harder stories to get people to attach to emotionally. But perhaps with computational image-making and other fine art forms, one can get to those things in a way that audiences might have some strong feeling for.

The way we tell macrostories tends to be dry and analytical. It is the narrative of the economist and the cosmologist. I’m not sure that detachment is a requirement, though. And I think contemporary art is a place where one can explore those large-scale phenomena in simultaneity with the smaller scale. That city piece is trying to address the fact that the literal scope of one’s own field of view—what one can see—is necessarily limited. There might be ways to have that kind of personal, local scope live in concert with different kinds of scopes that are only available to technology processes that combine many fields of view.

Another example is *American Varietal*, a 2009–13 project I did for the US Census Bureau. This project is essentially a rendering of US County data from 1790 to the present. All the humans that were counted in all these different places represent points in a complex visual architecture. In that case, it’s more about the humans and where they reside than the architecture they reside in. ■

OPPOSITE: PHOTO COURTESY ART ON THEMART. THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ZICH; PHOTO COURTESY JASON SALAVON STUDIO

**WATCH PAULUS’S LECTURE “HOUSE HUNTERS: BABYLON”** at [tableau.uchicago.edu/babylon](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/babylon).



*New Humanities faculty members prepare for the year. Left: John Duncan Proios and Anne Eakin Moss. Right: Patrice Rankine and Melissa Van Wyk.*

# NEW FACULTY FALL 2021

BY COURTNEY C. W. GUERRA, AB'05





project, tentatively titled “The Special Effects of Soviet Wonder,” traces how Soviet cinema of the 1930s created extravagant spectacles for viewers using techniques that were borrowed from Hollywood but offered a very different form of engagement with spectators. Eakin Moss joins the University from the Comparative Thought and Literature faculty at Johns Hopkins, where she was a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow and received an award for excellence in teaching and mentorship. Prior to her faculty appointment, she held a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard’s Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. She received a PhD in Slavic languages and literatures and an MA in Russian literature from Stanford, and she holds a BA from Harvard in the history and literature of Russia.

**John Duncan Proios** is an assistant professor in Philosophy. His specialization is ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, and he has additional expertise in applied ethics, Buddhist philosophy, the philosophy of science, feminist philosophy, and the philosophy of race. His dissertation, “Classifying Difference and Value: The Metaphysics of Kinds and the Search for the Good in Plato’s *Philebus*,” analyzes a dialogue between a hedonist and Socrates—who advocates for knowledge over pleasure—and places the work in conversation with contemporary metaphysics and social philosophy. In addition to articles examining Plato and Aristotle, he has written on modern-day ethics issues pertaining to resistance and upward mobility, especially within the context of higher education, and is currently working on a coauthored piece entitled “Plato’s Scientific Feminism.” Proios received his BA in philosophy and classical studies from Swarthmore, his MA in philosophy from the University of Arizona, and his PhD from the Sage School of Philosophy at Cornell.

**Patrice Rankine**, Professor in Classics, earned his BA in Ancient Greek magna cum laude from Brooklyn College, City University of New York (CUNY), and his PhD in classical languages and literatures from Yale University. He researches the Greco-Roman classics and their afterlife, particularly as they pertain to literature, theater,

and the history and performance of race. He is author of *Choice Magazine* Outstanding Academic Title *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006) and *Aristotle and Black Drama: A Theater of Civil Disobedience* (Baylor University Press, 2013), as well as coeditor of *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas* (Oxford University Press, 2015). His current book projects include *Theater and Crisis: Myth, Memory, and Racial Reckoning, 1964–2020* (Lever Press, forthcoming) and *Slavery and the Book* (Harvard University Press, forthcoming). His ongoing writing includes contributions to *Queer Euripides* and the Critical Ancient World Studies project, and he will coedit a volume on race, racism, and the classics for *Transactions of the American Philological Association*.

**Melissa Van Wyk**, assistant professor in East Asian Languages and Civilizations, researches the kabuki and spectacle shows (mise-mono) of early modern Japan. Her dissertation, which she is currently adapting into a book, is “Restaging the Spectacular: *Misemono* and Kabuki Theater 1700–1900.” In it, she draws attention to stage elements like acrobatics, extraordinary bodies, and mechanical devices to question existing narratives about kabuki and argue that public discourses of knowledge and medicine were theatrical in nature. Next, she plans to explore a project on “true crime” in early modern Japan that examines how elements like scandal, sensation, documentary, and fictionality manifest in both drama and fiction. Van Wyk was previously a research fellow at Waseda University in Tokyo and also received a Fulbright Fellowship to conduct dissertation research in Japan. Her BA, in classical studies and Latin, is from Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and she holds an MA in Japanese studies from the University of Michigan, where she worked as a curatorial assistant on the exhibition *Japanese Prints of Kabuki Theater from the Collection of the University of Michigan Museum of Art*. Her PhD, in East Asian languages and cultures, is from the University of California, Berkeley. ■

OPPOSITE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ZICH; RIGHT: PHOTOS COURTESY PATRICE RANKINE AND MELISSA VAN WYK

This year the Division of the Humanities welcomes four new faculty members: three assistant professors and one full professor.

**Anne Eakin Moss**, assistant professor in Slavic Languages and Literatures, studies Russian culture from the mid-nineteenth century, the era of the classic Russian novel, through the twentieth century, using other media in Russian as well as English, French, and German to consider how works of art capture audiences’ imagination and create communities. Her first book, *Only Among Women: Philosophies of Community in the Russian and Soviet Imagination, 1860–1940* (Northwestern University Press, 2019), examines the privileged place of women’s relations in Russian culture and thought over eight decades, and the relationship of this fraught conception of collectivity to European intellectual history. Her next

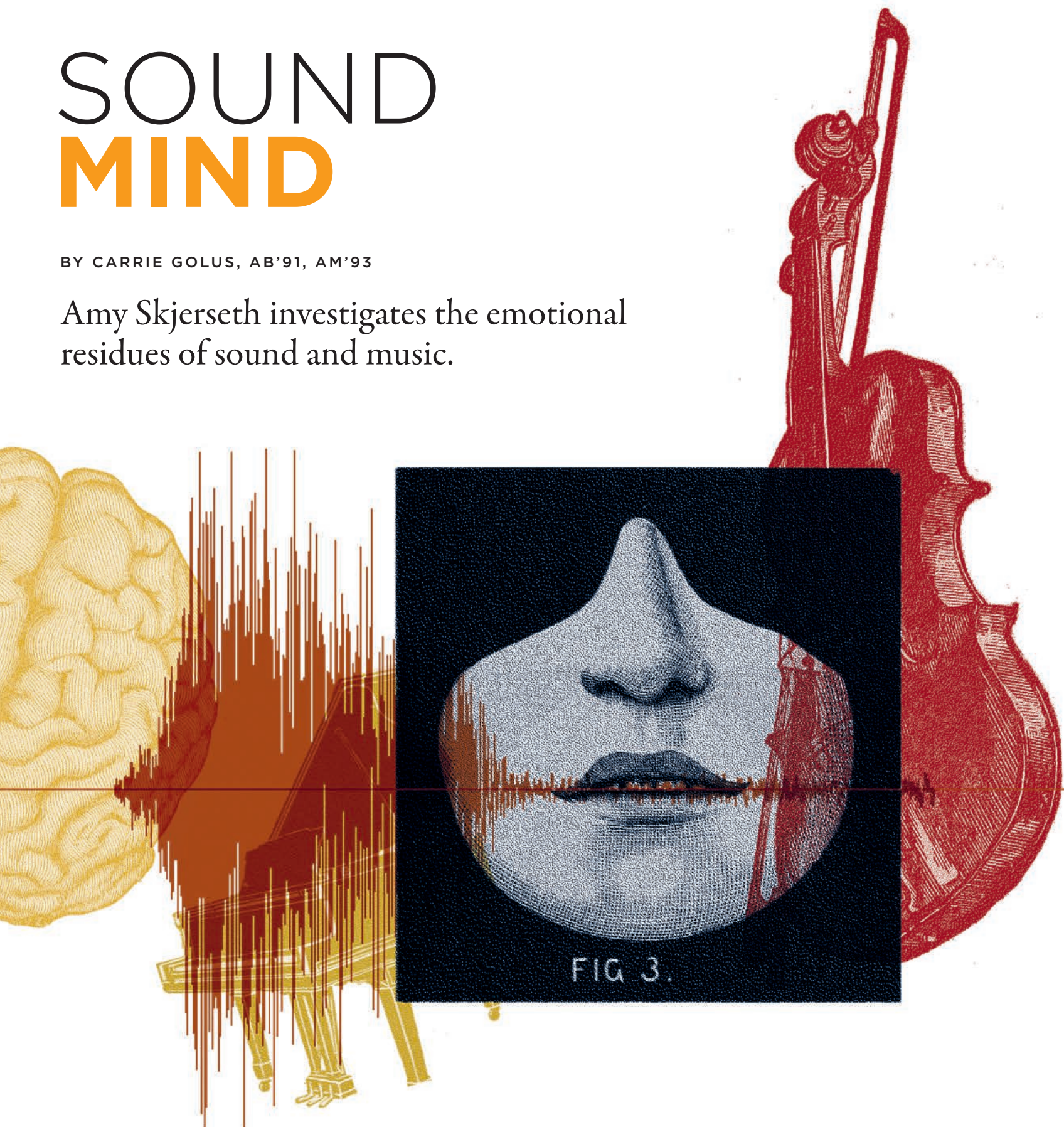
READ AN EXPANDED VERSION OF THIS STORY at [tableau.uchicago.edu/newfaculty2021](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/newfaculty2021).



# SOUND MIND

BY CARRIE GOLUS, AB'91, AM'93

Amy Skjerseth investigates the emotional residues of sound and music.







# What's noise to one person might not be noise to another.

—Amy Skjerseth

Amy Skjerseth, a doctoral candidate in Cinema and Media Studies, researches sound, from its emotional uses in film to lip-syncing and deepfakes. She holds a Franke Dissertation Completion Fellowship for the 2021–22 academic year. Her dissertation in progress, “The Portable Pop Archive in Experimental Cinema: Technological Transformations of Aural Memory,” explores how pop songs in film and music videos trigger emotional responses and memories for viewers. Her publications include the 2019 audio essay “Catching Flies and Catching Memories: The Skin-Crawling Sounds of Yoko Ono’s *Fly*” and the article “Multiplying Mise-en-Scène: Found Sounds of *The Night of the Hunter* in Lewis Klahr’s *Daylight Moon* and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*” in *Film Criticism* (2020).

*As an undergraduate at the University of Rochester, you received a bachelor’s degree in oboe performance from the Eastman School of Music, as well as one in English. Did that set the pattern for your interest in sound and film?*

Absolutely. I started playing violin at six and oboe at 11. I thought I wanted to be a music professor. Midway through college, I was diagnosed with a spinal cord disease. The pain made it really hard to practice and to make reeds. Oboe players make their own reeds to craft their personal sound; it’s a huge creative process, whittling down these pieces of bamboo cane.

I realized I needed to shift my focus to English, so I did a master’s at McGill. In my first semester, I took a course that included Yoko Ono’s film *Fly*. She and John Lennon also recorded the soundtrack, with Ono doing improvised vocals. She has such an amazing grasp of what you can do with a voice. My first claim in the academic world was that just as close-ups and textures in films appeal to our embodied memories, so can sound.

The idea came from my musical background, especially from making oboe reeds—sitting there for hours whittling away and trying it out between

every adjustment. That process of making and personalizing sound has helped me so much to listen closely to the films I study.

*So *Fly* was pivotal for you?*

Yes. It’s also part of the second chapter of my dissertation, and I analyze it alongside Ono’s biography in a podcast episode called “The Enduring Voice of Yoko Ono” that I produced for *Phantom Power: A Podcast on the Sonic Arts and Humanities*.

*The film itself is really upsetting.*

Absolutely. A woman is lying naked on a bed with flies crawling all over her body. This is familiar territory for Yoko Ono; she also made a film called *Rape*. Her work has concentrated on feminist topics for a long time.

Both the visual and the aural registers work on spectators in a very deep, embodied way. The music doesn’t have a tonal center. It’s defamiliarizing and not pleasant to listen to, but that’s the point.

*During your master’s program, your interest broadened from music to sound in general?*

I started to become interested in sound and noise, which is this very subjective valence of sound. What’s noise to one person might not be noise to another. I wrote my master’s research paper on voices and sound effects in horror films.

*In your audio essay, you claim viewers might respond completely differently to *Fly* based on their gender and/or sexual orientation.*

That’s super important. Scholars must account for the fact that sound is very personal. Sound and music are floating signifiers that bring up different emotions and memories depending on our backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

*Are audio essays becoming more common in sound studies or film studies?*

I’m a co-organizer of the Great Lakes Association for Sound Studies and just last night we were talking about this form of scholarship. It hasn’t quite taken off yet. The essay, the article, and the book chapter still take precedence in academic writing.

I think the audio essay format is crucial. If you play an excerpt of a piece of music or a film and describe what you hear in it, the listener can experience it alongside the critic and make their own conclusions.

*In the spring you taught a course of your own design, *Sound and Scandal: How Media Make Believe*, which was a Stuart Tave Teaching Fellowship course. What was on the syllabus?*

It’s a cultural history of lip sync, starting with synchronized sound in cinema in the late 1920s. The syllabus includes *Singin’ in the Rain* [1952], which dramatizes how studios were grappling with not only the technology of sound synchronization, but also a Hollywood stereotype: beautiful women must have beautiful voices. This is something that voice studies has grappled with for a long time—the idea that women’s voices are too high and too whiny. It’s a pervasive thing, vilifying women’s voices by saying that they sound irrational or noisy.

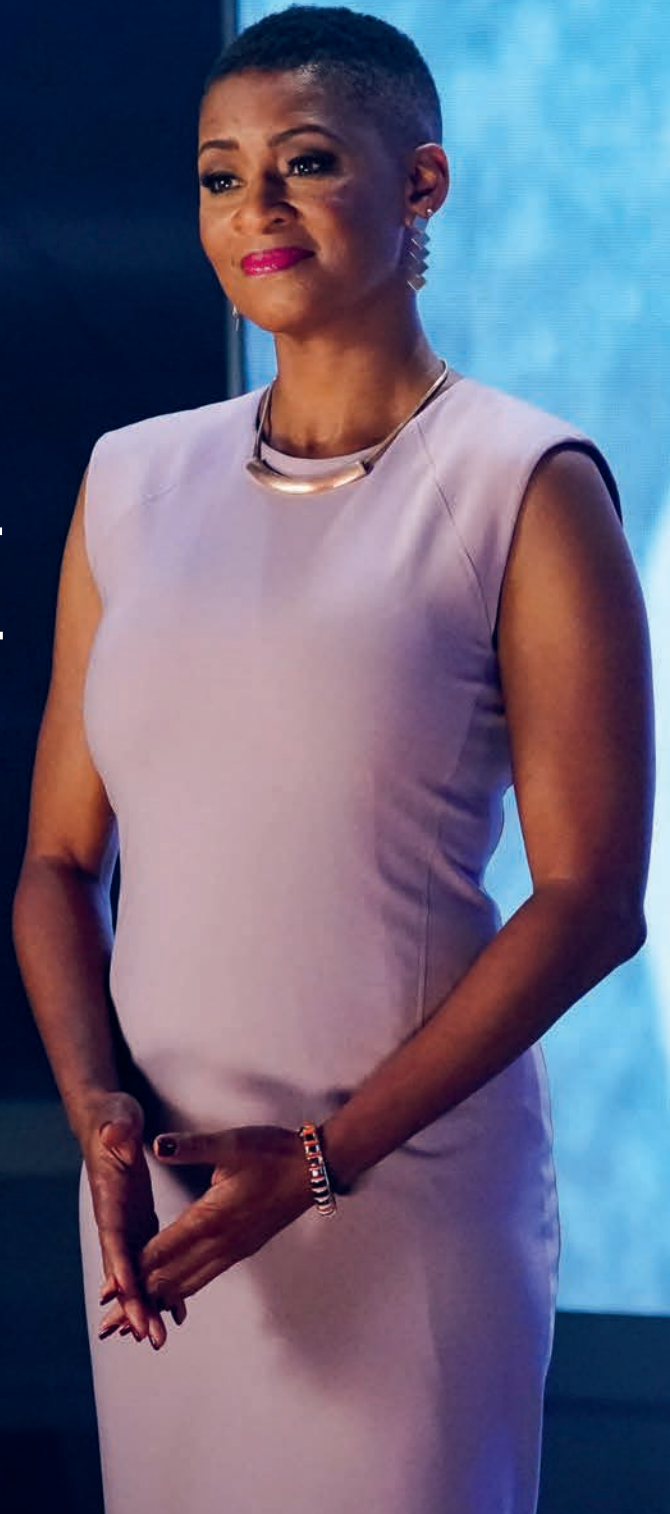
The scandal part of the class was about lip sync as deception—in Beyoncé’s performance during Obama’s inauguration, for example, or the Milli Vanilli scandal. People were upset when they found out they weren’t hearing authentic live voices. That brought us to deepfakes—the way that a voice can be taken apart and manipulated. The concept of lip syncing, of remixing voices and bodies, is a useful heuristic for thinking about how media reinforce cultural stereotypes. My students pointed out a plethora of examples in everything from musicals, music videos, and video games to anime and the Disney Channel. We ended up discussing how we still see racial and gendered stereotypes of lip syncing play out on TikTok and other media today. ■

*Jacqueline Stewart's study of marginalized early filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux (film posters opposite) led to her hosting Turner Classic Movies' Silent Sunday Nights film series and to her leadership role at the new Academy Museum of Motion Pictures.*

# FROM THE ACADEMY TO THE ACADEMY

BY LUCAS MCGRANAHAN

Jacqueline Stewart discusses  
her role at the Academy  
Museum of Motion Pictures.







In January **Jacqueline Stewart**, AM'93, PhD'99 (English Language and Literature), a professor in Cinema and Media Studies, became the chief artistic and programming officer for the new Academy Museum of Motion Pictures—a new venture by the organization best known for putting on the Oscars. As she was preparing for the in-person opening of the museum in September, she spoke with *Tableau* about her position at the museum, marginalized figures in film history, and her UChicago education.

*Can you tell us what exactly the Academy Museum is?*

It's affiliated with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Most people think of the Oscars when they think of the Academy and don't necessarily understand its broad, year-round reach as a professional organization covering every aspect of filmmaking from screenwriting to acting, directing, production design, costume design, hair and makeup—and more. What I've been really struck by is the commitment of Academy members to ensuring that the museum reflects work across these fields so that we can provide a comprehensive view of what filmmaking involves.

*Could you explain your role at the Academy Museum in a nutshell?*

I oversee the content and the intellectual mission of the museum, which is to give as complete and diverse a picture of the art of moviemaking as we can—and to do so in a way that covers all of the crafts of filmmaking and that explores the ways that film has developed across history, both as an art form and as a cultural institution.

*Is there an exhibition you're especially excited about?*

There's the core exhibition, which is really ambitious. It's called *Stories of Cinema*. It's a three-floor exhibition that walks through the various craft areas of filmmaking. But what is exciting to me is the way that it starts with a set of vignettes—these kind of capsule narratives—of significant films and filmmakers. Not surprisingly, when people enter that gallery they see *Citizen Kane*. But we also feature the film *Real Women Have Curves*, which was directed by Patricia Cardoso, about the experiences of a

young Latina in East Los Angeles. There's a vignette focused on a filmmaker I've done a lot of research on, Oscar Micheaux, a pioneering African American writer and director who started his career in Chicago and made more than 40 films between 1918 and 1948 for segregated African American audiences.

I think that elevating narratives of filmmakers and types of filmmaking that haven't been recognized before on this kind of platform is going to increase general public recognition of figures that hadn't been known much beyond scholarly circles—and make unexpected connections that can inspire more diverse kinds of scholarly work.

*So you see the museum as a resource for scholars?*

Oh, absolutely. The curatorial team is incredibly talented. And the museum draws on the unparalleled collections of the Academy Film Archive and the Margaret Herrick Library. For me, the museum is also a space for developing career paths for film scholars beyond the academy. I never expected to work outside of a university. And we know that the academic job market for PhDs continues to be difficult.

*How has the pandemic affected the planning and opening of the museum?*

The museum was supposed to be ready to start welcoming the public around the time of the Oscars in April. When I came on board [in January 2021], we decided to start programming even though the building wasn't going to be open. So we launched a series of virtual programs.

Our first program featured a discussion with four women who made Oscars history: Whoopi Goldberg, the first Black performer to be nominated for best actress and best supporting actress and the first person of color to host the Oscars

solo; Sophia Loren, the first woman to win an Oscar for a non-English-speaking role; Buffy Sainte-Marie, the first Indigenous person to win an Academy Award, which was for cowriting the song "Up Where We Belong" for the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman*; and Marlee Matlin, the first deaf performer to win an Academy Award and the youngest person still to win the Best Actress award. It was interesting to have dialogue with them about the ways their career paths and perspectives have been shaped by the intersections of gender with other aspects of their identities.

*How did your UChicago education set you up for this kind of work?*

I'm also a native South Sider. So much of my research has drawn on that nexus of having grown up on the South Side and also being at the University when film studies was becoming a discipline that one could pursue here. I came in 1992. I studied with [late UChicago film professor] Miriam Hansen and [Professor Emeritus in Art History and Cinema and Media Studies] **Tom Gunning**, as they were forming what was then the Committee on Cinema and Media Studies. With the formalizing of cinema studies at the University, we were deeply immersed in questions of the relationship between cinema and modernity—to look at films not just as individual works of art but as works of culture that are deeply connected to social and political histories.

I remember vividly Miriam's opening lecture to her Methods and Issues in Cinema Studies course. She reminded us that we were studying film at the University of Chicago, right next to the site of the World's Fair of 1893. This was where Eadweard Muybridge presented his Zoopraxographical Hall, the first building dedicated to screening moving pictures. That grounding of cinema history in place and public life is key to the work I'm doing at the Academy Museum. ■

READ ABOUT STEWART'S WORK ON SILENT AND AMATEUR FILM at [tableau.uchicago.edu/stewart](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/stewart).

# HUMANIST AT LAW

How an English degree prepared Jacki Cooper Melmed, AM'94, for a career in law and politics.



**Jacki Cooper Melmed, AM'94**, is chief legal counsel to Colorado Governor Jared Polis, a role she also held under the former governor, now a US Senator representing Colorado, John Hickenlooper. Melmed previously represented clients in matters involving employment law, election disputes, land use, and intellectual property issues.

Melmed says her time at the University “had a profound effect on how I think and how I view the world. I’m a better thinker and writer because of those years.”

*How did you decide to go to law school?*

I had the good fortune of being friends with a law professor at the University of Colorado in Boulder—who is now our attorney general—and I spent a lot of time talking to him about it. He had an idea that the way I think and write and the analytical skills that I’d developed as a graduate student would translate fairly easily to law school.

And I hate saying this, but it’s true: after the University of Chicago, law school wasn’t that hard. I don’t mean to diminish in any way the difficulty of law school, but I was just so well prepared because of the rigorous analytical training.

*What is the best part of your work?*

In general, my team’s core responsibilities are to vet and interview all judicial candidates in the state, work on all of the governor’s clemency decisions, and look at every executive order and every piece of legislation before it’s signed by the governor. Being a part of the judicial appointment process is very rewarding. Seeing public policy

get done and implemented in ways that have a direct benefit to our state is incredible. We have very progressive environmental policy in Colorado, and we have a wonderful business climate at the same time. We’re a growing and exciting state to be in, and part of that is because of the great work of these two governors.

*I would imagine your work has been especially interesting and thorny during the pandemic.*

We had to work out the governor’s emergency powers in a way that we have not been called on to do in at least a century. Trying to figure out exactly how far the governor’s powers extended and how to be judicious in the way they were used, but also to meet the demands of the pandemic emergency, was just incredibly hard.

I think we have an administration that was very careful and responsible. The governor did not want to take over state government. That wasn’t his goal. His goal was to respond appropriately to the pandemic and then get back to normal as quickly as possible. So, it’s been a whirlwind.

*What advice would you give to someone unsure how to use their humanities degree?*

Think about your skills as skills. It’s very easy to be cynical and say, “my degree is useless.” It’s not, because you’re developing thinking skills, writing skills, your critical faculties—and the sharper they are, the better you are. Have faith that the work you’ve put in to develop your critical thinking skills will help, and you can take those with you everywhere.—Susie Allen, AB'09

READ AN EXPANDED VERSION OF THIS STORY at [tableau.uchicago.edu/melmed](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/melmed).



# HOW TO WIN AT “TAMIL SCRABBLE”

*The Hindu god of death, Yama (left), confers with his assistant, Chitrakupta, and others about the fate of a wayward Brahmin in a depiction of a sixteenth-century Tamil story that scholars can explore with the help of DDSA.*

## Improvements drive scholars—and tabletop gamers—to the Digital Dictionaries of South Asia.

The Digital Dictionaries of South Asia (DDSA), an online reference resource currently representing 28 languages spoken by more than 1.9 billion people in South Asia and the Middle East, is undergoing a three-year expansion funded by the US Department of Education in 2020. From Assamese to Pali to Urdu, DDSA is a free—and increasingly popular—tool for scholars, diplomats, businesspeople, and casual users worldwide.

According to DDSA director **James Nye**, the Library’s former bibliographer for Southern Asia, the expansion will bring at least eight new dictionaries, more flexible search queries, recordings of pronunciations by native speakers, and an improved mobile experience. Nye has been instrumental in garnering resources for the UChicago-based project, including multiple rounds of funding since its creation as a partnership between the University of Chicago, Columbia University, and a South Asia studies consortium in North Carolina in 1999.

Although these upgrades are still in progress, DDSA has already seen a 20 percent increase in traffic—from about 7 million annual searches

just before the expansion to about 8.7 million today—with more and more queries now coming from phones. Nye credits the increase largely to improved responsive design and to the availability of mobile apps for iOS and Android, including offline access using locally saved versions of the dictionaries.

“My goal as the developer is to make these dictionaries as accessible as possible to as wide an audience as possible,” says programmer **Charles Cooney**, AM’97, PhD’04 (Comparative Literature), noting that more than half of DDSA’s users are in South Asia, with many lacking access to a desktop or laptop computer or even a stable internet connection. Cooney, also a developer for the longstanding French-language digital resource ARTFL, says his background in classics and French poetry has attuned him to the great value of reference works.

Sanskrit scholar **Gary Tubb**, the Anupama and Guru Ramakrishnan Professor and chair of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, says that language students in SALC now rely heavily on digital dictionaries and that DDSA was a crucial

resource for SALC PhD students who couldn’t return to campus during the pandemic, including some who were stuck outside of the country.

Others use the dictionaries during family game night. The creators of the word puzzle game Sorkalam—described by Indian newspapers as “Tamil’s answer to Scrabble”—have favorably reviewed DDSA’s Tamil lexicon app, saying they recommend it to their players to resolve word challenges.

DDSA is a backbone for other learning resources, says **Tyler Williams**, an assistant professor in SALC who is creating a web-based interactive fiction game for learning the Hindi language that uses DDSA’s data. Tubb is also building on DDSA to develop a new digital resource for Prakrit, a group of ancient vernacular Indian languages not covered by the current round of federal funding. (A faculty grant from the Committee on Southern Asian Studies is funding the Prakrit project.)

“The creation of digital dictionaries for South Asian languages,” Williams says, “is changing research, pedagogy, and learning in ways that we are only beginning to understand.”—L. M.



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*We are carefully monitoring the coronavirus (COVID-19) situation in locations where the University has scheduled events and programs. Information will be made available should any changes become necessary.*

