

# TABLEAU

THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | FALL 2022



IN THIS ISSUE | THE EPIC | TECH | NEW FACULTY

**2 ALUMNUS PROFILE**

## Post-punk

David Grubbs, AM'91, PhD'05, on balancing academia and a music career.

---

**4 IDEAS**

## Two perspectives on the epic

With Srikanth “Chicu” Reddy and Patrice Rankine.

---

**6 NEW FACULTY**

## New faculty fall 2022

The division welcomes seven new faculty.

---

**8 HUMANITIES AT WORK**

## From dig sites to websites

Three alumni on tech careers.

---

**10 HUMANITIES IN THE WORLD**

## Ghost writer

How Isabel Lachenauer, PhD'22, became a novelist.

---

**12 MAKING MEANING IN CHINA**

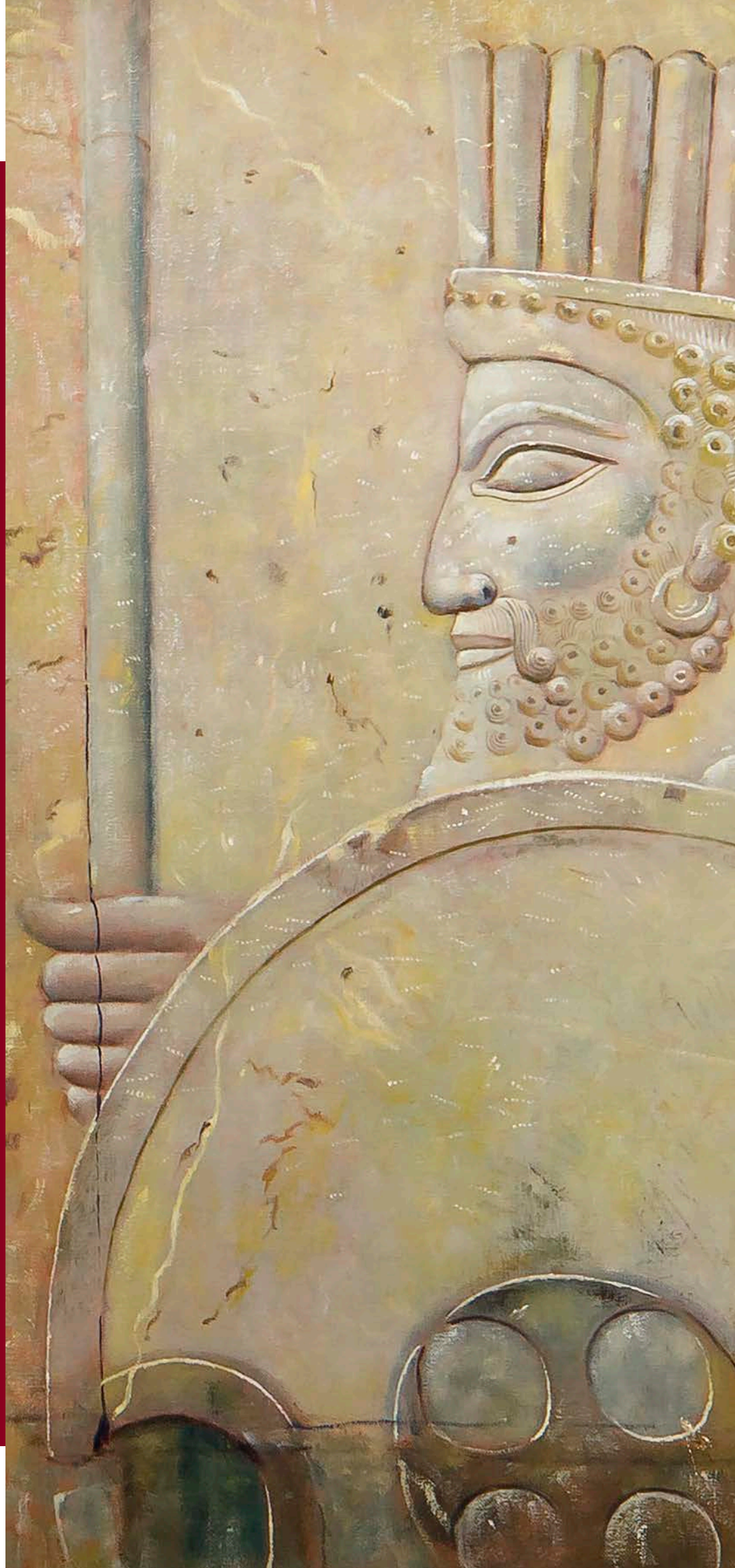
**13 TEACHING GERMAN**

*Tableau* (Fall 2022, Volume 24, Number 1) is published biannually by the Division of the Humanities at the University of Chicago for alumni and friends. Editor: Lucas McGranahan. Contributing Editors: María Carrasquilla; Jeanie Chung; Laura Demanski, AM'94; Courtney C. W. Guerra, AB'05; Joyce Kuechler; Sara Patterson; and Mary Ruth Yoe. Proofreader: Katie Byrne. Designer: Guido Mendez. Contact: Division of the Humanities, 1115 East 58th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, [tableau.uchicago.edu](mailto:tableau.uchicago.edu).

*The University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national or ethnic origin, age, status as an individual with a disability, protected veteran status, genetic information, or other protected classes under the law. For additional information, please see [equalopportunity.uchicago.edu](http://equalopportunity.uchicago.edu).*

**ON THE COVER**

*Roundup: An Entomological Endeavor for the Smart Museum of Art*, a mixed media installation by Mark Dion, was on display at the Smart Museum in the spring. Courtesy the Smart Museum of Art. Photography by Nathan Keay.





A depiction of a relief showing Persian and Median guards (detail shown here) was included in the OI Museum's exhibition *Joseph Lindon Smith: The Persepolis Paintings*, which closed in August. The exhibition featured paintings created by Smith during the Oriental Institute's expedition to Persepolis, Iran, in the 1930s.

OPPOSITE: PHOTO COURTESY THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE; THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ZICH

## Dear Alumni and Friends,

The Humanities Division has a distinguished tradition of launching innovative programs designed to deepen our understanding of humanity's past and present while training tomorrow's teachers and scholars in the tools essential to humanistic inquiry. Last year we inaugurated the UChicago Visiting Scholar Program in Paleography and the Book thanks to the generous support of Hanna Holborn Gray, the Harry Pratt Judson Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of History and President Emeritus of the University (1978–93).

The UChicago Program in Paleography and the Book invites to campus a guest professor who specializes in areas that include manuscript history and reception, paleography, epigraphy, philology, codicology, the history of the book and readers, and the evolution of print culture. Selected by a faculty committee spanning the Humanities, the Division of the Social Sciences, and the Divinity School, the visiting professor enriches our community through teaching, public lectures, and student workshops at UChicago for one quarter each year.

The inaugural visiting scholar in Winter Quarter 2022, **Michael Suarez, SJ**—who was profiled in the spring 2022 issue of *Tableau*—is a renowned scholar of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, bibliography, and book history at the University of Virginia, where he is University Professor, professor of English, director of the Rare Book School, and honorary curator of Special Collections. Enrollment for his UChicago class, *The Printed Book in the West*, held in the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, filled up immediately; throughout the class, students learned to analyze material culture and the circumstances of book production. Suarez shared his research on February 24, 2022, at a well-attended public lecture: “The Book as Museum in Eighteenth-Century Europe.”



Anne Walters Robertson

UChicago has long been a leader in understanding the social and cultural contexts in which texts and objects are produced. With the UChicago Program in Paleography and the Book, our scholars will become leaders in examining the economic, material, and physical conditions involved in creating and interpreting cultural objects.

This program is ideal for the Humanities Division, where we believe that a thorough grasp of original sources—the languages in which they were created, the means through which they were presented, and their contexts—are indispensable tools of inquiry. Understanding the history of books in all their forms is integral to this conception of humanistic learning and research.

Such an approach encompasses manuscript studies of the Bible and its reception, papyri in ancient Mediterranean civilizations, illuminated manuscripts of the medieval era, the flowering of print (and now digital) culture, and the practices of readers. The examination of these objects enriches our comprehension of a wide range of themes, including how ideas take shape and are transmitted over time, the development and circulation of religious beliefs and practices, and the social conditions in which science develops.

We look forward to hosting future specialists in many different aspects of paleography and the book, and we remain deeply grateful to Mrs. Gray for her vision and support in helping us launch this exceptional program.

*Anne W. Robertson*

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



# POST-PUNK

*David Grubbs performs in Brussels in 2020. On the way to becoming a prolific solo musician, Grubbs played in the post-punk bands Squirrel Bait and Bastro, the more experimental Gastr del Sol, and the long-standing psychedelic rock outfit the Red Krayola.*

BY LUCAS MCGRANAHAN

## David Grubbs on balancing academia and a music career

English Language and Literature alumnus **David Grubbs**, AM'91, PhD'05, is a professor of music at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center, as well as a prolific experimental musician and multimedia collaborator. At Brooklyn College, he teaches in three MFA programs: Performance and Interactive Media Arts (PIMA), an interdisciplinary program he codirects; Sonic Arts, which focuses on composition and sound design; and Creative Writing. Grubbs's latest solo album is *Creep Mission* (Drag City, 2017), and his latest book—a long-form poetic reflection on life as a touring musician—is *Good Night the Pleasure Was Ours* (Duke University Press, 2022).

*Did you come to Chicago for grad school or music or both?*

It was a convenient combination of the two. I already had a lot of friends through the music scene. Squirrel Bait, the band I was in in high school, had played in Chicago—with the bass player's mother driving us up. And I wanted to work toward a PhD in English. I imagined myself being a college professor. I couldn't imagine in the long term being able to survive just playing music, and that's still kind of the case.

*Do you think of your academic work and your musical career as separate?*

For years I imagined them as completely separate. I never studied music in college or in graduate school. I've been a music professor now for 17 years, so there's been a fair bit of time for on-the-job training. But I really kept the two separate—and perhaps too separate, because it's been extremely rewarding to feel the two practices merging.



*Students record David Grubbs scraping a cymbal with a hammer at a workshop in Hamburg, Germany, in 2022.*

If I'd been hired into a very traditional music department ... that would've been a rough transition.

—David Grubbs, AM'91, PhD'05

My dissertation became my first book, *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording* [Duke University Press, 2014]. It's about the culture of experimental music in the 1960s and the marginal role that sound recordings played in it. John Cage's ideas were a revelation to me, and yet I was really struck by how ideological he seemed about dismissing recordings. You could ask about the culture of recordings for Cage in the 1940s and 1950s when he's first composing and producing work. It was not a culture of independent record labels or artists. It was the sale of classical music with taglines like "Own all of Beethoven's symphonies." I think that Cage's basic impulse was a moral one—this sense of "How could anyone presume to own music?" It's Cage's anarchism.

My love of recordings has everything to do with growing up in Louisville, Kentucky, where I wasn't able to see a lot of the live music that I was most interested in. I was really involved in making things. I started playing in punk bands at the same time that I started editing a fanzine. The material culture of recordings and how they circulated among teenagers was extraordinarily exciting to me. People in the hardcore punk scene in the 1980s were self-releasing records. They were designing the sleeves. It was never only about the music.

*Your last three books comprise a trilogy of prose poems reflecting on music and performance. What brought about this shift?*

My friend Ben Lerner, a poet who at that time was writing his first novel, had encouraged me to write a book of poetry. Also, poetry was primarily what I studied at Chicago—the major field of my comprehensive exam was twentieth-century American poetry. And in 2002 or 2003, I started doing performance works with the poet Susan Howe. I thought, Maybe I'm not too old to try my hand at this.

I had also been thinking about articulating ideas about musical practice that were rooted in my own experience. And I wanted to write something fictional. The first of the three books is *Now That the Audience Is Assembled* [Duke University Press, 2018], which is a description of a fictional concert of improvised music. I enjoyed writing it, and the two subsequent books, like no other writing that I've done before. ■

I'm really fortunate with the position that I have. I was hired at Brooklyn College as part of a new Performance and Interactive Media Arts graduate program as the music and sound person but with the thought that I would be conversant in contemporary art, performance, theater, etcetera. Coming into teaching in an explicitly interdisciplinary position really worked. If I'd been hired into a very traditional music department or a traditional conservatory, that would've been a rough transition.

*What is teaching like for you?*

I primarily teach graduate courses. There are usually 10 or fewer people in my seminars. Today I'm giving feedback on final MFA thesis essays—essays accompanying capstone performances in the PIMA program. I'm able to work very closely with students and mentor them. The program is interesting in that all of the student work is done collaboratively. So the final thesis performances are collaborative groups of usually two to four people.

As a teacher, I always try to draw on the example of Miriam Hansen [1949–2011; formerly the Ferdinand Schevill Distinguished Service Professor in the Humanities, Cinema and Media Studies, and English Language and Literature]. I was very interested in writing about the culture of sound recordings on the basis of readings that we had done in her seminars from Adorno and Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer. In addition to being a brilliant

scholar, she was such a great teacher in having you walk through these very difficult theoretical texts paragraph by paragraph. I was so accustomed, particularly in my undergraduate days, to people shooting from the hip. I graduated from college in 1989, when poststructuralism could be used as a kind of cudgel for some people to dominate the discussions. Miriam Hansen would not stand for that. She was so rigorous and thorough, but also generous and generative and super interested in close group readings of the texts. That's something I think about frequently in my own teaching.

*What else stands out to you from your UChicago experience?*

Working as an editorial assistant at *Critical Inquiry*. I'd taken a couple of classes with [longtime *Critical Inquiry* editor] **W. J. T. Mitchell**, and he wound up being one of my dissertation advisers. The job was primarily proofreading but also fact-checking sources. I would frequently take the cart from the office to the library and check out 50 or 60 books—that would be all of the footnotes in an essay by Hortense Spillers or Derrida or you name it—and go through and check every quotation and every source. Just reading those essays very closely, discussing them in the office—what an amazing job.

*You examine the culture of music recordings in your dissertation. What interests you about this theme?*

READ MORE ABOUT GRUBBS'S PUNK ROOTS AND ARTISTIC COLLABORATIONS at [tableau.uchicago.edu/grubbs](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/grubbs).



# TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE EPIC

*The genre of literary epic stretches well beyond Homer and works such as the Odyssey.*

AS TOLD TO JEANIE CHUNG

When we think of the epic poem, we think of battles and heroes—almost always men—on ships. But what constitutes a literary epic? How do you write, or teach, an epic? A classicist and a poet offer their takes on the genre.



**Srikanth “Chicu” Reddy** is a professor in English Language and Literature and Creative Writing. His book *Underworld Lit* (Wave Books, 2020) is a long narrative poem cast partly in the form of lecture notes for an imaginary course in the humanities.

I feel like my inadequacies are epic. So I’d always intended to write an epic in the least heroic possible way, which was part of the fun and the challenge and the excitement of writing a book that was framed by my reading and teaching of epics in the Readings in World Literature College Core course.

I started writing *Underworld Lit* in 2012, right after my last book came out [*Voyager*, University of California Press, 2011], and a few years after I had a cancer diagnosis and my daughter was born. Life and death, right on top of each other.

What ended up happening was I wrote an epic turned inside out. At the center of so many of the epic poems that we read in that class, there is a descent to the underworld, where the world that characters thought they inhabited turns out not to be the world they thought it was. They get sucked into this black hole: the world of the dead. With this book, it’s all underworld, because I felt sucked into a bit of an underworld at that point in the middle of my life. The underworlds of all these epic traditions became my world.

Even though it was really challenging and overwhelming to parent a small child through my treatment, in some ways that child—my daughter, Mira—became a figure who led me out of that dark place, in a way that lots of epics’ descents to the underworld involve being guided (though usually not by a three-year-old who’s just learning language).

When I was first writing the book, some people were advising me to try to sell it as a novel. In some ways novels replaced epics, but I don’t know if people even read novels today. Today it’d be long-form television. We have a TV show called *The Vikings*. *Game of Thrones* is an epic. You could say that epic begins with poetry, then moves into the novel, and then into film and television and digital.

That large scale, for me, was always there in epic: generations, relationships, society—which are not things that we think about much when we think of a lyric poem like a sonnet. So as a writer, it felt like an opportunity to explore *everything*. But that’s also a challenge, because the epic can feel like an overstuffed piece of furniture that you just sink into and can’t quite get comfortable in. In some ways, I still feel that way about this book—I’m not sure where I sit in it. But it was fun to do.

One thing we try to do in Readings in World Literature is to think about the epic as the expression of a culture or a people. I never really thought of the academy as a people because it’s so diverse. But it’s also a very specific group of people. So if there’s “a people” who I hope would feel addressed in my epic, it wouldn’t necessarily be college professors so much as our students, who are the future of many different peoples. ■

**Patrice Rankine** is a professor in Classics. He studies ancient Greco-Roman works and their afterlife, particularly as they pertain to literature, theater, and the history and performance of race.

When I was in graduate school and found very few other people of color around, I became really interested in where else people of color—Black people in particular—had engaged with the classics. And I found in Ralph Ellison a deep engagement with classics and the classical tradition, not only in his novel *Invisible Man*, but also in the way he talks about myth and epic. Ellison became interested in how, as he puts it, epic and myth could enlarge everyday life—could give us insight into what it meant to be a human being living in a particular time and place. Novels were, for him, the modern genre for epic action, where everyday heroes are made.

He looked to the Russian novelists for inspiration. He looked to Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and began to find ways of crafting this kind of heroism in the American context. So he makes his character in *Invisible Man* an Everyman—he doesn’t even have a name—and yet he is distilled in such a way that he becomes larger than life. Ellison riffs on mythological tropes as if they were chords in a musical motif. And he takes pieces of the *Odyssey*, and he weaves them into his narrative of this invisible man, making the epic his own story.

One writer who interrogates the idea of epic as a European tradition is Wole Soyinka. He says that when we think about epic and tragedy, we say: “Tragedy begins in the sixth century BCE on the outskirts of Athens. It’s a Western tradition. Philosophy is a Western tradition.” Soyinka says, wait a minute. We had ritual and dance in the Yoruba tradition that told similar stories, for example, well into the past. The only difference is the Western ritual traditions were written down. Ellison, Soyinka, Toni Morrison, and other writers demystify this Western material.

Epic is often considered a masculine genre, but Jane Harrison and others around the same time as Ellison—the middle of the twentieth century—began to ask questions about what it means to be a woman on such a journey. There’s a shift to, for example, myths of Demeter, myths of Persephone. Right here in Chicago we have Gwendolyn Brooks writing an “Anniad” that sets her hero as a kind of Persephone in the middle of an urban center.

Whether it’s in crafting a collective ethos of a group or a people or a nation, epic is seen as a kind of cultural artifact. People talk about writing the great American novel in the mid-twentieth century—that’s an attempt to craft a collective story that readers across the country could identify with and find meaning in. And that’s where I think film sometimes works today. Its epic pretense is why a film like *Black Panther* has such resonance for the country as a whole, but particularly for African Americans.

I’m working on a book on American theater, and one thing I’ve been thinking about is how we lack a collective epic in the United States now. We’re still trying to come to terms with an American epic that unites us. What would that do for us? Because myth is not only a thing in the past, but a creative process that works in the present toward the future. ■

**WATCH REDDY READ FROM UNDERWORLD LIT AT PRESIDENT ALIVISATOS’S INAUGURATION** at [tableau.uchicago.edu/reddy](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/reddy).


 A photograph of three new faculty members standing in front of a stone building entrance. On the left, a man with glasses and a patterned shirt leans against a stone pillar. In the center, a woman in a grey blazer and light blue jeans stands with one foot on a step. On the right, a woman in a plaid shirt and blue skirt stands smiling. The background features ornate stone architecture and a wooden door.
 

# NEW FACULTY FALL 2022

BY COURTNEY C. W. GUERRA, AB'05

This year the Division of the Humanities welcomes seven new faculty members across seven departments: one full professor, five assistant professors, and one provost's postdoctoral fellow.

**Ania Aizman**, AB'08, assistant professor in Slavic Languages and Literatures, returns to UChicago from the University of Michigan, where she completed a three-year term as a postdoctoral fellow with the rank of assistant professor. She concentrated in comparative literature as an undergraduate in the College, and her PhD—also in comparative literature—is from Harvard. Her current book project, “Anarchist Currents in Russian Culture from Tolstoy to Pussy Riot,” traces the history of anarchism from

the violence of the late nineteenth century, through its suppression under Soviet Communism, to its modern-day reemergence in Russia and around the globe. Drawing on archival materials, texts, performances, and interviews, Aizman contends that the arts provide a site for anarchists to communicate among themselves and reach new audiences under repressive regimes.

Assistant professor in Romance Languages and Literatures **Pauline Goul** examines ecological tropes in early modern French literature and culture—which anticipate contemporary preoccupations with sustainability—in her first book project, “Ecologies of Waste: The New World, the Environ-

ment, and Literature in Renaissance France.” After completing her BA at the Sorbonne and her PhD in Romance studies at Cornell, she held a visiting appointment at Vassar College before joining the faculty at the George Washington University. She is also the coeditor of *Early Modern Écologies* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020). Her current research project, tentatively titled “The Mothering of Nature: Witches, Farmers’ Wives, and the Female Savage,” will trace the idea of Mother Nature—of coding the earth as feminine—through pagan rituals, botanical medicine, fairy tales, and other French cultural materials from the Renaissance through the seventeenth century.



*New Humanities faculty members prepare for the year. Left: Mohit Manohar, Paula Harper, and Ania Aizman. Right (top to bottom): Pauline Goul, Mee-Ju Ro, Cecilia Palombo, and Anthony Kaldellis.*



**Paula Harper**, AB'10, a scholar of popular music, music videos, and digital sound cultures, is assistant professor in Music. Her bachelor's degree from UChicago is in music and English, her MA in music history is from the University of Washington, and she holds a PhD in historical musicology from Columbia University. She returns to campus following a faculty appointment at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and a postdoctoral fellowship at Washington University in St. Louis. Her publications include articles on Rebecca Black's "Friday" and Beyoncé, and her book manuscript, "Viral Musicking and the Rise of Noisy Platforms," is about the sonic components of audiovisual content and how participation in social media helps normalize conditions of pervasive advertising, data collection, and surveillance. Her other research project concerns the history of Western art music and its engagement with contemporary digital technologies. She is also coediting a book of scholarship on Taylor Swift.

Professor in Classics **Anthony Kaldellis** studies how the ideas, themes, and practices of the classical period influenced later eras, particularly in late antiquity and Byzantium. He was previously on the faculty of the Ohio State University. His PhD in history is from the University of Michigan, where he also received his BA in philosophy and history. He is the author of numerous monographs, articles, translations, and other publications, including *Byzantium Unbound* (Arc Humanities Press, 2019), *Romaland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (Harvard University Press, 2019), and *A Cabinet of Byzantine Curiosities: Strange Tales and Surprising Facts from History's Most Orthodox Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2017). In addition to his interest in the living history of classical monuments, literature, and politics, his research examines how modern ideas about antiquity were established in the nineteenth century and persist today. He also hosts a podcast, *Byzantium & Friends*, which aims to educate the curious public about Byzantine studies through conversational interviews with fellow experts.

**Mohit Manohar** joins the faculty in Art History as a provost's postdoctoral fellow—a tenure-track position that transitions to an assistant

professorship—following a Mellon fellowship at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. A scholar of the art and architecture of premodern South Asia, he specializes in South Asian sultanates and the temple architecture of Deccan India. His current book project, "Refracted Cities," analyzes the architectural links in the late medieval period between Delhi and the Deccan city

of Daulatabad. A future project, "Ecological Urbanism in Medieval Delhi," studies the city of Firuzabad in Delhi alongside a Persian manuscript describing its construction and cultural life. He holds a PhD in the history of art from Yale and a bachelor's degree in art history and creative writing from Princeton. In addition to his scholarly writing, he publishes fiction and has received several awards for his short stories.

Assistant professor in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations **Cecilia Palombo** uses documents and material culture to explore the social and political histories of the early Islamicate Middle East, as well as the convergence between Islamic studies and late antique studies. Her dissertation and current book project investigate the relationship between religious and political structures and how non-Muslim religious officials helped develop and implement Islamic governmental practices. She was previously a postdoctoral fellow at Leiden University in the Netherlands, where she was part of the team at *Embedding Conquest*, a collaborative research project using documentary sources to provide a bottom-up view of the Islamic empire. She received her PhD in Near Eastern studies from Princeton, her MPhil in Islamic studies and history from Oxford, and her BA in historical and religious studies from Sapienza University of Rome.

**Mee-Ju Ro**, a scholar of Asian, Asian American, and transpacific literature, is assistant professor in English Language and Literature. In her dissertation, "Entangled Testimonies: Technologies of Subjectivity in Asian American Women's Writing"—which she is currently adapting into a book—she studies confessional texts narrated by women who are grappling with the dislocation of migration and histories of violence. These include contemporary novels and the testimonies of "comfort women" compelled into sexual servitude during World War II. Her other research projects are an examination of Instagram and other social media platforms, particularly in relation to anti-Asian racism during the pandemic, and an analysis of the bestselling feminist novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. She holds a PhD in English from Cornell, an MA in English from the University of Toronto, and an honors BA in English from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. ■

READ AN EXPANDED VERSION OF THIS STORY at [tableau.uchicago.edu/newfaculty2022](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/newfaculty2022).

OPPOSITE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ZICH; THIS PAGE: PHOTOS (TOP TO BOTTOM) COURTESY PAULINE GOUL, MEE-JU RO, CECILIA PALOMBO, AND ANTHONY KALDELLIS



# FROM DIG SITES TO WEBSITES

BY SUSIE ALLEN, AB'09

Three alumni wield humanistic tools in the tech industry.

For **Heather Rivera, AM'05**; **Jonathan Kim, AB'21, AM'21**; and **“Cherry” Yue Ying, AB'21, AM'21**, humanistic training has been an asset to their technology careers, providing all three with skills and perspectives that set them apart.

**Heather Rivera, AM'05**

Vice president of strategy, corporate development, and partnerships at Instacart

When Heather Rivera told her boss that she was planning to leave a promising career in banking to pursue a master's degree in the humanities, “he looked at me like I had four heads.”

But she was sure of her choice. “The common thread throughout all of my experiences, which remains today, is learning,” Rivera says. “The way I made my career decisions was really based

on where I felt like I was going to learn.”

And Rivera felt a pull toward art history, which she'd discovered during her senior year at the University of Virginia and wanted to understand more deeply. UChicago's Master of Arts Program in the Humanities (MAPH), which offered both breadth and depth, was a perfect match.

A grant from the Karla Scherer Foundation made the decision to go back to school less daunting. The support from **Karla Scherer, AM'99**—who, like Rivera, had a career in business before earning a humanities degree—“is a great example of women leaders opening the door for other women to become leaders.”

While Rivera ultimately decided against a career in academia, her experience at UChicago taught her to trust herself. “It built up my confidence that I could ramp up quickly on any subject,”

*Jonathan Kim, AB'21, AM'21 (left)—shown interning for an archeological dig at Tell Keisan, Israel, in summer 2018—studied classical texts as an undergraduate and master's student at UChicago. Today he draws on his humanities background to inform his work as a software engineer.*

she says, “because if you can read through Heidegger and have some sense of what he’s talking about, you can do most anything.”

The curiosity and broad base of knowledge she gained through the MAPH helped fuel Rivera’s nearly 15-year career at Google, where she rose from a strategic partner manager for Google Checkout to vice president and global head of product partnerships for YouTube. Today, she’s helping to build the corporate strategy function and bolster the corporate development and partnerships teams at Instacart, the leading online grocery platform in North America.

Often Rivera’s work has involved acting as a translator between the engineering and business sides of a company—a capability she traces back to her humanities training, which taught her to debate, think critically, and see multiple sides of a given issue. “Those are not necessarily skills I had honed up to that point,” she says. “And they have served me well, in business and in life.”



While Rivera didn’t originally envision a career in technology, she’s stayed for the ability to work on projects with wide influence. “Tech scales across boundaries, whether it’s geographical boundaries or socioeconomic boundaries and more,” she says. “The impact you can have is outsized.”

And there’s certainly a place for humanists in it all. “Even if you don’t have formal engineering training,” she notes, “you can absolutely add value. People who bring good listening skills, critical thinking, and questioning are so vital to any discussion.”

### **Jonathan Kim, AB'21, AM'21**

Software engineer, McMaster-Carr

As a classics major in the College, Jonathan Kim would often think about how to translate Latin in the most direct and elegant way possible, finding ways to capture both the ideas and the language. Today, as a software engineer for the industrial distributor McMaster-Carr, he finds himself asking much the same question: “Is there a more efficient way to express the idea that you have in your code?”

The leap from the wisdom of the ancients to the technology of the present might seem big, but for Kim the two have always been related. Early in his UChicago coursework, he learned that “contrary to the popular imagination, classics has a very rich history in the digital humanities. It’s really at the forefront of a lot of technological innovations in academia.” For his thesis in Digital Studies of Language, Culture, and History—a master’s program founded in 2017—Kim used natural language processing to analyze Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*, thought to be the only ancient Roman novel to survive in its entirety.

That project helped Kim demonstrate his programming chops to prospective employers—and allowed him to show how his humanities background might be relevant to their work. Today, “I’m excited to be working with data that’s very different from the sort of data that I worked with in college,” he says. “I really enjoy using programming to help people make easier and better decisions about the work they do.”

Despite the change in subject matter, Kim often draws on his academic background. Pursuing a humanities degree, he says, “was really helpful, because it taught me to look at problems holistically and from different perspectives, and to see how they relate to what you already know”—an especially useful skill set in a profession that relies on constant problem-solving.

Humanists eyeing careers as coders shouldn’t worry that they’ll stick out, Kim says. In his department, surprisingly few people have degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. His colleagues don’t see his path as odd or unusual. In fact, “they’re more interested in why I chose to be a classics major. Their perceptions are, ‘Oh, that’s really cool.’”



### **“Cherry” Yue Ying, AB'21, AM'21**

Financial analyst, Google

When she enrolled at UChicago, Cherry Ying thought she would probably end up working in finance like her parents. But a conference at Google early in her college career set her on a new course.

“I bonded with Googlers right away,” Ying says. “What they value is similar to what I value: contributing to society and making an impact.” The summer after her third year in the College, Ying did an internship at Google that further cemented her sense that it was the right company for her.

In the meantime, alongside her economics coursework, she took classes on video game design, app design, HTML, JavaScript, and CSS—ultimately finding herself with a minor in media arts and design and a master’s in digital studies. “I was just taking classes that I was interested in,” Ying says. “And it turned out they were all under this one minor.”

The combination of Ying’s technical, financial, and analytic skills suits her role as a financial analyst, which involves forecasting revenues, tracking expenses, and strategic financial planning. “The digital studies program is very much about applying technology to different fields,” she says. “That’s exactly what I’m doing now—I’m applying the technology and the tools that I learned in my courses to solve all these big ambiguous questions that we face at Google.”

Although working in tech wasn’t her original plan, Ying now sees herself staying in the industry. “There’s so much innovation,” she says. “We get to invent new things, and that’s exciting to me.” ■

# GHOST WRITER

BY CARRIE GOLUS, AB'91, AM'93

As a graduate student,  
Isabel Lachenauer, PhD'22,  
drafted five novels.  
Now she has one in print.

*Isabel Lachenauer, aka Isabel Cañas, published the horror novel The Hacienda (Berkley, 2022) while earning a PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.*

I sometimes feel like a fraud  
as a horror writer,  
because I'm afraid of  
literally everything.

—Isabel Lachenauer, PhD'22



“It began because I am afraid of the dark,” **Isabel Lachenauer**, PhD’22, writes in the author’s note to her debut novel, *The Hacienda* (Berkley, 2022), a thriller described by the publisher as “*Mexican Gothic* meets *Rebecca*.” Lachenauer, who is Mexican American and publishes under the pen name Isabel Cañas, lived in nine houses as a child—all different, a few terrifying: “As my family settled into its eighth house,” she writes, “I found the sensation of being watched unbearable.”

She drew on those uncomfortable feelings to create *The Hacienda*, set in 1823, two years after the Mexican War of Independence. Impoverished and bereaved after the death of her father, protagonist Beatriz accepts a marriage proposal from a widower, ignoring the rumors about the death of his first wife. At his country estate, Beatriz discovers her sister-in-law won’t enter the house at night, the cook burns incense and marks the kitchen doorway with mysterious symbols—and everywhere Beatriz goes, she feels watched.

“I sometimes feel like a fraud as a horror writer,” Lachenauer says in a phone interview, “because I’m afraid of literally everything. I definitely wiggled myself out as I was writing this book.” When her husband had to leave on a business trip, she slept with the lights on. The book gave her agent nightmares too.

Yet Lachenauer “clearly knows the genre, alternately deploying and subverting haunted house tropes,” according to a *Publishers Weekly* review. “The result is a brilliant contribution to the new wave of postcolonial Gothics.” The *Washington Post* was similarly enthusiastic: “This is not just a stay-up-all-night, sleep-with-the-lights-on kind of read. It’s also a nuanced, thoughtful exploration of power, religion, and conquest in a postwar Mexico.”

The historical period of *The Hacienda* has fascinated Lachenauer for years, although it is not anywhere close—geographically

or chronologically—to her area of academic research. She’s an Ottomanist. Her dissertation centers on emotions and gender in Old Anatolian Turkish popular literature and romance. The main text she works on is “a piece of popular literature that, for laypeople’s sake, I liken to King Arthur and his knights.” The text features a woman warrior, romance, and magic, and “the way it is told is, frankly, riveting.”

Homeschooled as a child, Lachenauer journaled obsessively and wrote *Lord of the Rings* fan fiction that evolved into original fiction in her early teens. She stopped creative writing during college at the University of St Andrews but picked it up again as a master’s student in advanced Arabic at the University of Edinburgh. “I’m very passionate about my subjects of study,” Lachenauer says. At UChicago, these subjects included Ottoman Turkish, Persian, and the early and late medieval history of the Middle East. “But part of me always knew I wanted to be a full-time writer.”

*The Hacienda* is Lachenauer’s debut novel, but not her first. She completed five manuscripts while a doctoral student in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. During the academic year, she focused on outlining. In the summers, when she had more flexibility, she wrote—even as she spent some summers in Turkey on intensive language programs: “I trained myself to write as fast and as cleanly as I could.”

In 2017 she found an agent through a pitch contest. But her first two manuscripts—both fantasy novels written for young adults—failed to sell. One came close: Lachenauer was invited to revise and resubmit, a process that took six months, but the

publisher ultimately passed. She was devastated, especially since the news arrived during her honeymoon in Mexico City. “I love writing fantasy fiction,” she says. “But I thought, I’ve failed twice now. I need to pivot.”

Lachenauer began writing out *The Hacienda* in Autumn Quarter of the fifth year of her program. That spring, the pandemic hit. Trapped in a tiny studio apartment in Brooklyn, she drafted the remainder of the book in two weeks, working at the kitchen table while overhearing her new husband’s Zoom calls. “It was like a fever dream,” Lachenauer says. “That early period of lockdown had a huge impact. It’s a book about being trapped in a house.”

In comparison, her current project (not yet announced by the publisher) has been much harder going: “an odyssey,” Lachenauer calls it. Like *The Hacienda*, the story focuses on nineteenth-century Mexican history and includes “a romance subplot and a supernatural horror subplot,” she says. “It’s set in south Texas, which at the time was a part of Mexico, and where my family has lived for the last 200 years.”

Lachenauer has attempted to write fiction that builds on her graduate work—“My adviser has asked at least four times,” she says—with mixed results. She started writing a novella set in sixteenth-century Istanbul, a period of Ottoman history that she enjoys teaching, and proudly sent it to her agent. “I thought it was immensely clever,” she says. “I spent seven years of my life—a biblical amount of time—acquiring this knowledge; and you now will learn it, dear reader.” Her agent’s reaction: “A little dense.”

But she did publish the short story “A Land of Saints and Monsters,” set in late medieval Anatolia, in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, an online magazine for literary adventure fantasy. “Basically, I took my dissertation,” she says, “and threw some vampires in it.” ■



# SHOWING EMOTION

From written punctuation to online comments, a scholar of modern China studies the signs.

**Jiarui Sun**, a graduate student in East Asian Languages and Civilizations, is thinking about exclamation points and animated rabbit videos.

In the 1920s, the exclamation point was integrated into the Chinese writing system as part of the New Culture Movement’s effort to make written text more accessible. Historically, written Chinese had relied on grammatical structures like phrases at the end of the sentence to convey tone.

Almost a hundred years later, an animated Chinese webcomic titled (in English) *Year Hare Affair* appeared online. Literally translated as “those stories of that rabbit that happened in those years,” the series tells the history of modern China using animals—rabbits represent Chinese people—from a pro-China viewpoint. As viewers streamed it on their devices, they could

comment live; their comments scrolled across the screen in real time, a phenomenon called *danmu* in Mandarin.

The two events seem unrelated, but Sun sees exclamation points and *danmu* as similar forms of paralinguistic communication. She says they do not have literal meaning but are “understood as conveying feelings—and I’m interested in how that feeling gets conveyed and shared.”

Sun grew up in Wenzhou, China, and studied Chinese language and literature at Zhejiang University before coming to the United States for graduate school. A digital native (like most of her generation), she became particularly interested in nationalistic sentiment expressed on the internet.

Though online nationalism is not unique to China, its rapid development and ubiquity there

cause concern about its impact on Chinese citizens. What interests Sun isn’t necessarily what people say about their political beliefs; she doesn’t consider her research to be about politics in the sense of “particular bureaucratic systems.” She’s more interested in doing “digital ethnographic work” on *how* internet users express their beliefs. “I really do observations and look at how interactions happen.”

For example, in a paper presented in 2021 at the Michigan Graduate Student Conference in Linguistic Anthropology, Sun examined the way the densely overlaid *danmu* in *Year Hare Affair* create feelings of patriotic “sentimental belonging and pride” that some might describe as nationalistic.

“Using cartoon animals to illustrate a narrative of modern Chinese history endorsed by the party-state,” Sun writes in the paper’s abstract, the series has been “framed by mass media as a ‘pioneer for cute patriotism’ popular among young viewers.” She examines how the design of the animation and live-comment function motivate viewers to comment, allowing them to help create the viewing experience.

Sun notes that *danmu* can lead people—reporters, casual observers, or even media scholars—to believe “that everyone in China is cheerleading for the state,” when in reality Chinese citizens have much more mundane concerns most of the time.

Because of the casual nature of social media, in China as in the United States, Sun says that when people post, “they don’t consider it so close to their identity. Certain kinds of categorical terms, like ‘nationalists,’ lose their analytical significance and end up little more than a dismissive label.”

Although Sun has not yet settled on her dissertation topic, she is interested in continuing to pursue questions of semiotics and ethnography. She chose UChicago largely because she wanted to bring an interdisciplinary perspective to questions of expression and interpretation, what she calls “a qualitative, more fine-grained approach to really look at the process by which people interact with digital media—or any other kind of media.” —J. C.

SEE A YEAR HARE AFFAIR VIDEO at [tableau.uchicago.edu/sun](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/sun).

# THERE'S A GERMAN WORD FOR THAT



Maeve Hooper on collaboration and a communicative approach to language instruction

**Maeve Hooper**, AM'14, PhD'18, has dedicated herself to teaching the German language and to mentoring other language teachers. As a PhD candidate, Hooper received the Wayne C. Booth Graduate Student Prize for Excellence in Teaching; today an assistant senior instructional professor, she has been awarded course development grants from the University's Language Pedagogy Innovation Initiative on three occasions. *Tableau* spoke with Hooper about her role as director of the University's German language program, her experience in graduate school, and how mashing together words in German captures nuances of the human psyche.

*What are your responsibilities as director of the German language program?*

I wear many hats. I usually teach at the introductory and intermediate levels. That means I come into contact with most of the undergraduates who go through our program. Outside of class, I meet with them, advise them on questions of placement—where they belong in our program—study abroad, and applying for grants. Working with our graduate students is a really rewarding part of my job. When they begin teaching in our program, I meet with them weekly to discuss lesson plans and talk about the curriculum, and also to workshop any issues that are coming up in their classes. And then I work closely with our instructional faculty. I'm very proud to be part of such a collaborative and collegial team of instructors in German, as well as the instructors in Norwegian and Yiddish, who are part of our department.

*What is the department's teaching philosophy?*

We operate on something of a flipped classroom model. Students study and practice at home so that they can come to class prepared to ask questions—but also so that they can use language in

more communicative ways such as interviewing partners, or doing what we call information gap activities, where students have different sets of information and genuinely need to rely on each other to complete a task. “Communicative” here means a genuine exchange of communication rather than the artificial activities you see in older approaches to second-language pedagogy.

*What's the best way to become fluent in a language?*

Go abroad. The most effective way to move from an intermediate level to the advanced level is being exposed to the language every day and having to use it in a variety of situations.

*What was it like to be a graduate student at UChicago?*

What really drew me to the department was the sense of community and collaboration—within the department and also across other departments—and then also the department's approach to pedagogical development. Unlike many other programs, graduate students in our department are the primary instructor in the classroom right from the beginning. That appealed to me—the chance to develop my own lesson plans and activities every day, to develop my own teaching style and methodology.

*Do you have a favorite German word?*

I just finished teaching German 103, and I started every class with a compound word, which the students found really amusing. I like the term *Fernweh*. *Weh* means “an ache or pain,” and *fern* means “far away.” So while the word *Heimweh* means “homesick”—a longing to be home—*Fernweh* is the opposite. You're at home and you have a longing to be abroad, to be elsewhere. I think a lot of us in the pandemic are feeling acute *Fernweh*.—L. M.

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

1115 East 58th Street, Chicago, IL 60637



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**CHICAGO**

**DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES**

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Chicago, IL  
Permit #4176

Follow the division on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Visit [humanities.uchicago.edu](https://humanities.uchicago.edu) to connect.

**CELEBRATING HUMANITIES DAY  
VIRTUALLY AND IN-PERSON**



**HUMANITIES DAY 2022**  
**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 15**

Join us in person or virtually as we celebrate Humanities Day, commemorating the power of art, literature, philosophy, music, linguistics, and languages. Each year, Humanities Day presents the public with a snapshot of leading humanities research at the University of Chicago. Explore topics including Renaissance Florence, the greatest lyric in the English language, the war among Russian media, how Muslims disposed of books, and much more from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**This event is free and open to the public.**

**REGISTER TODAY AT  
[HUMANITIESDAY.UCHICAGO.EDU](https://humanitiesday.uchicago.edu)**



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**CHICAGO**

**DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES**