

# TABLEAU

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



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ON THE COVER

DOVA professor William Pope.L's solo exhibition at the Neubauer Collegium, *My Kingdom for a Title*, includes a selection of recent works encased in medicine cabinets. Photo: *Praises*, 2020. Courtesy the artist.

*Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué, a poet and PhD student in English Language and Literature, edited An Excess of Quiet: Selected Sketches by Gustavo Ojeda, 1979–1989 (Sobercove Press, 2020), a collection of sketches by his uncle Gustavo Ojeda. The book includes this drawing, dated July 3, 1981.*

COURTESY GABRIEL OJEDA-SAGUÉ AND FRANCISCO OJEDA





## Dear Alumni and Friends,



Anne Walters Robertson

Last spring, I described the weighty times in the Division of the Humanities due to COVID-19. Looking forward to a day when we can resume our normal activities, we are asking ourselves if some of the scholarly adaptations we made for COVID-19 might be absorbed into the University's intellectual landscape. What did we learn and is it worth keeping?

I think Humanities Day 2020 can serve as a prototype for how to conduct an online signature event showcasing the important work of our faculty and making it available to a broad audience. We never seriously considered stopping this event during the pandemic; perhaps more so now than ever, the issues our presenters addressed are urgent and timely.

We were pleasantly surprised at the remarkable attendance for the online Humanities Day. With a virtual format, many people who would not otherwise have been able to attend could do so, doubling our typical registration. We welcomed visitors from 36 states and 30 countries. Alumni comprised 46 percent of our audience.

If the format of Humanities Day was unfamiliar—prerecorded lectures, text-based audience interaction—the presentations lived up to our high standard. There was even an opportunity to highlight an important national dialogue. We partnered with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to present five panelists on “Reinventing Democracy for the 21st Century,” headed by Deputy Dean **Eric Slauter**, an associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature. Drawn from multiple disciplines, the panelists discussed a recently released American Academy of Arts and Sciences report (“Our Common Purpose”), which anticipates the nation's

250th anniversary in 2026 with ideas to fortify our institutions, mend our civic culture, and empower all citizens to improve their communities.

In her thought-provoking keynote address entitled “Animals: Expanding the Humanities,” **Martha C. Nussbaum** argued both for an ethical revolution and for creative legislation to protect animals. And **Philip** and **Christine Bohlman's** performance of Viktor Ullmann's “The Chronicle of Love and Death of the Flag Bearer Christoph Rilke” reminded us that a great work of art produced under barbaric concentration camp conditions stands as a powerful testament to its creator's heroic perseverance. From these sessions, we learned that the online environment was fully capable of serving our audience for Humanities Day.

While we all look forward to the return of in-person Humanities Day, I believe that one aspect of our experience last fall—sessions that connect our speakers and in-person audiences with friends from all over the world—will remain in place. The amplified interest in Humanities Day 2020 brings to mind the expansive, humanistic tenor of the University's motto of *Crescat scientia, vita excolatur*: “Let knowledge grow from more to more, and so be human life enriched.”

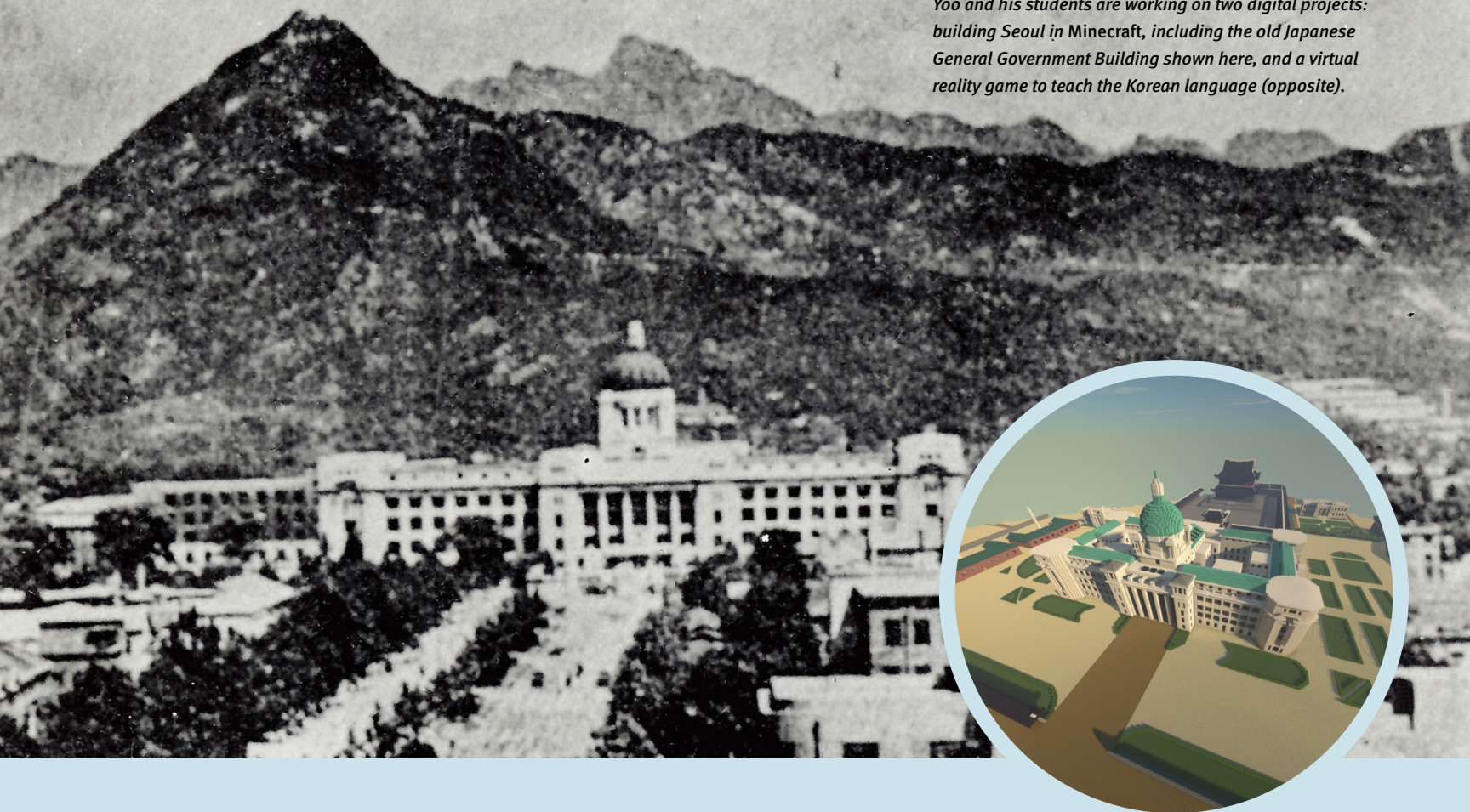
Our work is made possible by the generous support of our alumni and friends. Thank you for your commitment to the Division of the Humanities.

*Anne W. Robertson*

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



Yoo and his students are working on two digital projects: building Seoul in Minecraft, including the old Japanese General Government Building shown here, and a virtual reality game to teach the Korean language (opposite).



# (MICRO)HISTORY IN THE MAKING

BY JEANIE CHUNG

Theodore Jun Yoo, AM'97, PhD'02,  
looks at Korea up close and personal.

Born in Seoul to parents originally from North Korea, **Theodore Jun Yoo** grew up in Ethiopia after his father became a government dispatch doctor there. Now a professor of Korean language and literature at Yonsei University in Seoul, Yoo offers a distinct perspective on the history of the two Koreas.

He has published three books, all with University of California Press. His first, *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor, and Health, 1910–1945* (2008), was followed by *It's Madness: The Politics of Mental*

*Health in Colonial Korea* (2016) and, most recently, *The Koreas: The Birth of Two Nations Divided* (2020). His next book, *#Seoul*, is under contract, also with UC Press, and explores the city through time and space: “a place of crucial bearers of cultural memories and a vast archive of stories.”

Yoo, AM'97, PhD'02, talked with *Tableau* about his experiences in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, his approach to history, and his K-drama addiction.

THIS PAGE: REPUBLIC OF KOREA ARMED FORCES, CC BY-SA 2.0;  
INSET IMAGE (C) LUDENS; OPPOSITE: IMAGE (C) VRILLAR





I used to go to K-Town on Lawrence in Chicago and borrow hundreds of [Korean drama] videos.

—Theodore Jun Yoo, AM’97, PhD’02

*Your work is academic, but it also comes from a deeply personal place.*

Sometimes when I read my first book, I think, god, I was thinking about my mom when I was writing this. And *The Koreas* was not meant for academics. That’s why there are no footnotes. In many ways I was writing to my generation. A lot of us had very similar experiences, and I think it’s so important to understand the reasons our parents left Korea.

*You are in a literature department?*

I’m a historian but I got put into the lit department. I’ve been teaching all kinds of courses, but what’s really special is being able to read a lot of literary works. Fiction is fiction, but it does tell you these important stories about that particular era. When I was working on my book on mental illness, because it’s so stigmatized in Korea it became hard to find material about it. So I turned to novels. There are all kinds of sources. And I try to integrate all the stories through teaching.

I’m just hoping *The Koreas*, which goes up to 2019, compels other historians to resist saying that you need some critical distance. When I say I’m writing about the year 2000, even literary scholars will say, “Isn’t that too recent? Shouldn’t we be focusing on the ’60s and ’70s?” But South Korea is one of these weird places where restaurants don’t last for more than three months. Things just keep changing.

*You’ve said that you became interested in microhistories while at UChicago.*

I was exposed to many dense theories, which were useful in developing conceptual frameworks. But I really fell in love with microhistory and the works of Carlo Ginsburg, Jonathan Spence, Robert Darton, Clifford Geertz, E. P. Thompson, and Natalie Zemon Davis.

All my work is grounded in microhistory, but I especially used that technique in *The Koreas*. Given that most readers are so familiar with certain big names or events, I wanted to use people from the diaspora or different social classes or genders to ask “large questions in small places,” as Charles Joyner aptly puts it.

*The microhistories bring a lot of pop culture into the work. It’s funny, because you said you’ve avoided talking about things like K-dramas in any kind of critical way, despite your interest in them.*

I’m a recovering Korean drama addict—I used to watch 12 dramas a week. I used to go to K-Town on Lawrence in Chicago and borrow hundreds of videos. I would spend more time watching dramas than trying to read Foucault.

Then in Hawaii [as an assistant professor], I had an army of people, and we would translate this stuff and post it online. This was before Netflix. I used to bring more than 100 people to this small auditorium where I’d show Korean films. I became

a missionary for Korean pop culture before the whole Korean wave took off. People would always ask me: “You know so much about Korean films and dramas. Why don’t you write about them?”

I don’t want to write about that kind of stuff because that’s my form of escapism.

*Did you always want to study Korean history?*

I wrote my undergraduate senior thesis [at the University of California, Riverside] on comfort women, and that really got me interested in women’s issues. Initially I went to UChicago to study Japanese history until my adviser at the time, Tetsuo Najita, said, maybe you should think about doing Korean. And that’s when **Bruce Cumings** [the Gustavus F. and Ann M. Swift Distinguished Service Professor of History] came back to UChicago from Northwestern. So I switched fields and decided maybe I should do something on Korea.

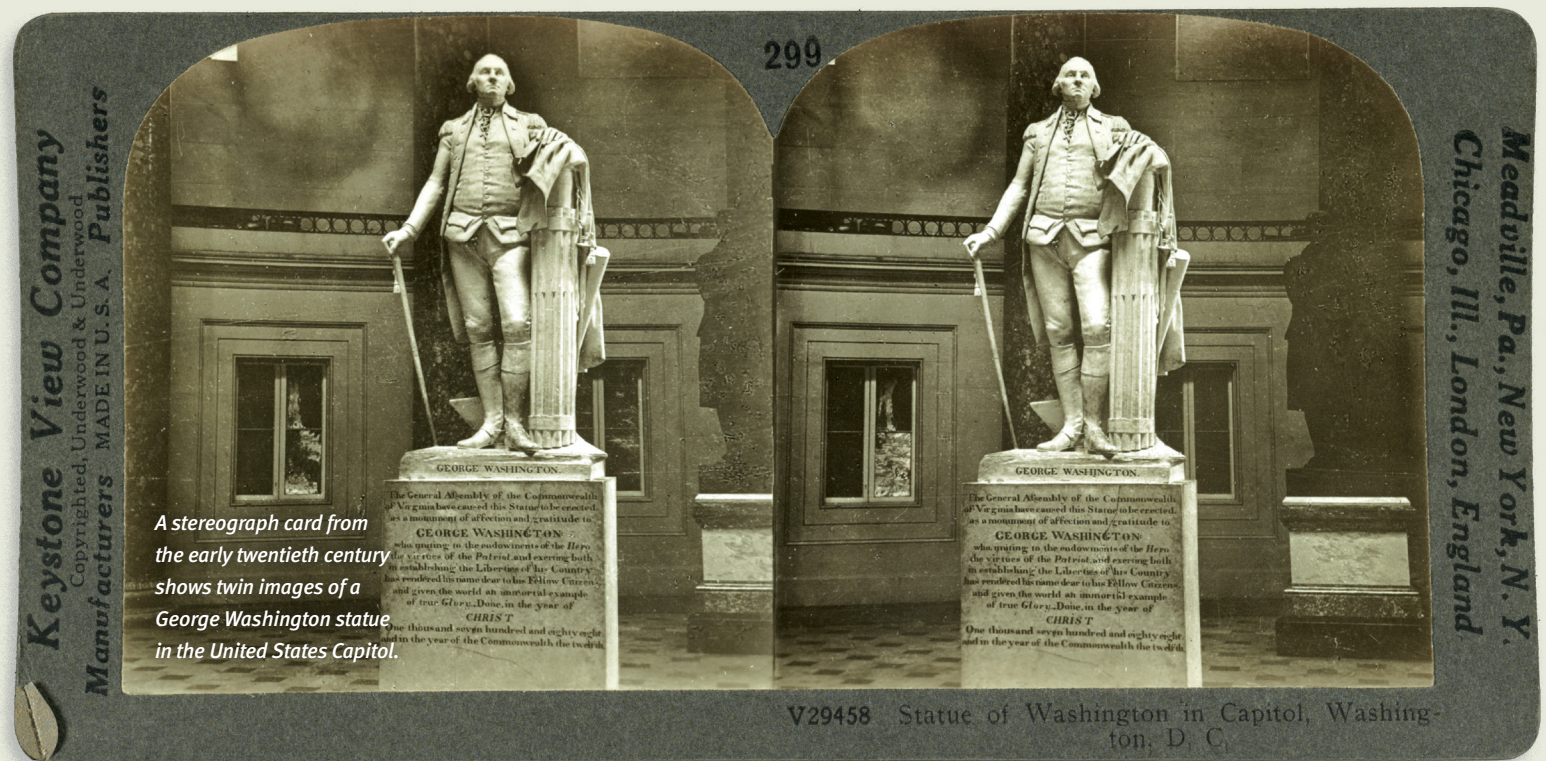
*What are your memories of UChicago?*

I was probably one of the few doing Korean history at the time. I think Japan and China were more of the powerhouses then. But to me, what was really valuable was that intellectual community I can’t replicate anywhere else. It was very interdisciplinary—I took classes in anthropology, for instance.

One of the things I ended up doing when I went to Hawaii was building a Korean dissertation workshop with a colleague from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. That’s where I was able to reconnect with a lot of the UChicago students, who were part of this three-day workshop out in the wilderness somewhere in California. That kind of UChicago thing still made me happy. I missed that. ■

WATCH A MINECRAFT VIDEO OF THE YONSEI CAMPUS DONE BY YOO’S STUDENTS at [tableau.uchicago.edu/yoo](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/yoo).





# TWO PERSPECTIVES ON A DIVIDED AMERICA

AS TOLD TO LUCAS MCGRANAHAN

How does a large and diverse country—or empire—maintain a sense of unity, and how and why does it break down? **Clifford Ando** and **Chris Kennedy** discuss problems of communication, identity, and trust.





**Clifford Ando**, the David B. and Clara E. Stern Distinguished Service Professor in Classics and History, studies the law, religion, and government of the Roman Empire.

Ancient empires were and are often understood as having been constructed from disparate peoples, united and brought to a kind of unity by imperial action. But even at their height, forms of diversity persisted, and these were often described as constitutive rather than disruptive of the empire as a whole. The Roman Empire can thus shed light on a federal system like the United States, and vice versa.

In both cases, there existed local systems of law and regional cultures that were enabled by the central authority, but also pushed back against it, sometimes merely by their own existence. “That may be how they do it in Washington, but that’s not how we do it in Texas,” for example. In the Roman Empire, there were distributed areas of authority as well, whether in city-states or in provinces. The system probably commenced as an expression of the weakness of central state power, but its continued existence served as a check on central state power too. Their collaboration, including their friction, produced a kind of order and imposed a useful limit on domination.

Nevertheless, there also existed something like an overarching culture, with a set of ideals or myths. The Romans claimed a distinctive form of dress; they insisted that certain actions at law could only be performed in Latin; they spread a certain culture of spectacle. Over time, the entire empire came to celebrate a number of political rituals that notionally took place everywhere at the same time, on the same day. In this way, the extension of the empire in space, which threatened to fragment the political body, was surmounted by collapsing the distance that separated the peoples of the empire in another dimension, that of time. Distance was overcome via a conceit of simultaneity. We can’t be at the same place, but we can be at the same time.

This practice on their part sheds light on an important difference between their world and ours. Despite the gradual unification of the Roman Empire, their world remained diverse. But the potential tension between the material fact of diversity and the ideal of a national culture was never cashed out in practice. If a so-called “Roman” ritual was performed in one city in Aramaic and in another in Latin, this fact remained invisible to contemporaries. A Roman citizen in one place never stared into the Zoom screen of a Roman citizen elsewhere and said, you don’t look very Roman to me.

Today, new forms of communication technology that could unite us instead threaten to make forms of diversity that have always existed more apparent and perhaps salient than ever. Are the United States still united? Do we all think that George Washington chopped down the cherry tree? Can we understand each other when we speak? The visibility of such differences in behaviors and attitudes highlights our current crisis of knowledge: we no longer agree on facts, and we don’t even agree on mechanisms to decide what are facts. We thought we had, and shared, a culture of knowledge, born from these technologies of communication. It is profoundly concerning that these technologies have turned out instead to subvert and disjoin. ■



**Chris Kennedy**, the William H. Colvin Professor in Linguistics, studies the cognitive and social factors that enable meaning and communication. In Spring Quarter 2021 he is teaching a course on truth.

Political action is effected by linguistic interaction: we use language to describe situations and events from particular perspectives, in order to get others to form beliefs that will lead to specific courses of political action. Understanding exactly how this works can help us understand how it can enhance or disrupt unity.

Linguistic communication works because of a principle of trust. The words “Lavazza coffee is half price today only” characterize the world as being a certain way, but my saying them to you obviously doesn’t make the world that way. So how could they make you get up and go to the store? It’s because you trust that I believe those words to be true, that I have good evidence for that belief, and that I have a good reason for sharing it with you. No matter how much you love espresso, you shouldn’t make the trip if you think I’m fooling, or if you think my belief is based on wishful thinking instead of evidence, or if you think I have an ulterior motive, like getting you out of your apartment so I can steal your espresso machine.

That’s a mundane example, but the principles are no different when Donald Trump says things like “There was massive voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election.” Many people, including most legal authorities and the mainstream media, rejected such statements precisely because they lacked trust: it’s unclear whether Trump believed this claim, there certainly was no evidence to support it, and his reasons for saying it appeared to be less about ensuring election integrity than about staying in power. But we also know that many people accepted such statements, and so took the principle of trust to be satisfied: that Trump believed what he said, that he had evidence, that his reasons were not self-serving. These two positions are incompatible: trusting Trump means distrusting the mainstream media and the legal authorities who ruled against him, and vice versa.

The framework of trust that underwrites communication is not built “on the fly,” but is constructed and maintained over time, through our communicative interactions. Accepting claims about voter fraud reinforces a framework of trust that promotes acceptance not just of similar claims but also of unrelated claims by apparently like-minded people. It likewise leads to greater rejection of claims that are incompatible with this framework of trust, or made by differently minded people. And so on. Social media has exacerbated this problem, both because it enables us to say more things to more people with less connection to evidence than ever before, and because it promotes separation into like-minded groups of “friends” and “followers.” Eventually our frameworks of trust and belief have diverged so much that we can barely communicate at all. And if we can’t have a substantive conversation about whether the public health benefits of mask-wearing outweigh the costs in loss of personal liberty, or whether the benefits of investing in clean energy outweigh the costs of reducing fossil fuel use and production, then we will find it ever more difficult to make meaningful policy decisions about these issues. ■

ANDO DISCUSSES ANOTHER WAY DEMOCRACY CAN BREAK DOWN at [tableau.uchicago.edu/ando](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/ando).



# SIDE BY SIDE

BY SUSIE ALLEN, AB'09

How two PhD alumni approached  
their career search as a couple

*Chandani Patel,  
PhD'15, and Brady  
Smith, AM'09,  
PhD'15, with their  
daughter, Aashna*





The academic job market is stressful for everyone, but especially couples seeking elusive dual-career placements. **Chandani Patel**, PhD'15, and **Brady Smith**, AM'09, PhD'15, had a particularly complex case of the “two-body problem.” Though they were in different departments (English Language and Literature and Comparative Literature, respectively), they worked in the same area, African literature. “Our plan the whole time was, we’re both going to apply to the same jobs and double our odds of one of us getting it,” Patel says.

It worked: she got offered a tenure-track position. But Smith had a postdoctoral fellowship in Chicago, and Patel was newly pregnant. The idea of spending the entire pregnancy living apart was too much. Patel turned down the job and decided to look for a nonacademic position. Soon after, so did Smith.

Today, Smith teaches at Avenues: The World School, a pre-K through grade 12 school in Manhattan, and Patel is director for global diversity education at New York University. Both say their jobs draw on their graduate research—just in a different way than they expected.

Here, Smith and Patel tell *Tableau* how they approached their careers and what they learned along the way.

*Because you had the same goals, I imagine you had to start thinking about your job search pretty early. What do you remember about those conversations?*

**Smith:** Around 2012, when we were talking about getting married, we started to realize that our career track was probably going to be a little bit different than we thought. We were helped along by the fact that we started graduate school in 2008 and the assumptions everyone had about what a PhD student’s career would look like blew up. There was a massive contraction in tenure-track positions.

**Patel:** At the time, UChicagoGRAD was starting to do more career coaching for nonacademic jobs, so we had the sense that there were more possibilities out there. We weren’t yet ready to start exploring them, but we knew we were going to have to be nimble and start preparing for other possibilities.

We were not only in the same field; we had the same dissertation committee.

—Chandani Patel, PhD'15

*Who did you look to for advice?*

**Patel:** I don’t think there was anyone else in exactly the same situation. We were not only in the same field; we had the same dissertation committee. It made it tricky.

**Smith:** We were lucky in that our adviser had been in a similar situation—she married someone in the same field. There were also a lot of junior faculty in English who had experienced the job market recently, and they were super supportive of the idea that, even though you’re a grad student, you also have a whole life. Scholarship is not the be-all and end-all.

*How do you feel your graduate work prepared you for what you do now?*

**Smith:** One of the things I really like about Avenues is that it’s a school that begins with a question: What would it mean to be a world school? Teachers come here because they’re really interested in that concept. Having an inquiry-based background helps me work in a place where everything is open ended and experimental.

**Patel:** So much of the conversation right now is, how can we be more inclusive? How do we think beyond White heteronormative frameworks? How do we think about decolonizing the curriculum? My training in postcolonial studies factors into the ways that I think about that work. It also helps me ask what different possible worlds we can imagine. We both studied literature and those are the kinds of questions that the humanities allows us to ask.

*You wrote about your job search experience for Inside Higher Ed in 2017. Were you nervous to talk publicly about leaving the traditional academic career path?*

**Patel:** Things are a little different now, but at the time there weren’t that many people talking openly about the very personal decisions they were making. So for us, it was important to put it out there so that other folks understood that there is a choice about taking a tenure-track position. You don’t have to say yes.

*What helped you as you navigated your path in and out of academia?*

**Patel:** One thing that was really helpful for both of us was that we had opportunities to work part-time. We both worked at the Chicago Center for Teaching, in different roles. If you don’t have the opportunity to pursue anything outside of the work of an academic, then you don’t have a sense of other possibilities. I do think, across different industries, there is a need for folks who have PhDs in the humanities. It’s not that people should no longer get PhDs in the humanities, but rather that we need to think differently about the value of a PhD in humanities. There does need to be support for that, though, and we were very fortunate in that UChicagoGRAD did that work.

**Smith:** I have good memories of academia. I get nostalgic reading footnotes. I miss aspects of that work, even though I enjoy what I do now. But I think it’s important that people recognize that if you can manage a PhD program, you have an enormous amount of skills that go beyond what you see right in front of you. ■

FIND THE COUPLE’S INSIDE HIGHER ED ARTICLE at [tableau.uchicago.edu/patel-smith](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/patel-smith).



# OUTSIDE THE BOXES

BY JEANIE CHUNG

Junior faculty  
in Comparative  
Literature cross  
borders, stand  
at the vanguard.



*Based on the novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Akira Kurosawa's The Idiot (1951) was one of the works Olga Solovieva examined in her study of Russian influences on the Japanese filmmaker.*

UChicago claims one of the oldest comp lit programs in the United States. When the discipline began, it was grounded in European theory and mainly applied to European texts.

As comp lit moves toward a more global perspective, UChicago's junior faculty members are leading the way in "thinking beyond the obvious connections," says department chair **Mark Payne**.

As an undergraduate at Rutgers, **Hoda El Shakry** became interested in how Qur'anic pedagogy like the lessons she had growing up in Cairo—rooted in rote recitation and memorization—can shape literary sensibilities and reading practices across modern fiction from the region. Her book *The Literary*

*Qur'an: Narrative Ethics in the Maghreb* (Fordham University Press, 2019) examined the literary influence of the Qur'an and Islamic philosophy on twentieth-century Arabic and Francophone novels from the northwest African countries known as the Maghreb (Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco). In 2020, *The Literary Qur'an* received the Modern Language Association's Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for Comparative Literature Studies, a remarkable honor for an early-career scholar.

She's now at work on a book, tentatively titled "Printed Matter(s)," that builds on *The Literary Qur'an* to look at twentieth-century journals from the Maghreb written in Arabic and French, as well as bilingual cultural journals. Other projects on the horizon include a study of speculative fiction

and science fiction from the Middle East and North Africa. Now especially, says El Shakry, who came to UChicago in 2019, "speculative fiction can be a generative tool for learning to imagine other futures and ways of being in the world."

Her early work in Russian literature and Soviet studies, combined with an interest in Central Asia and the Caucasus sparked by an Azeri language class, eventually drew **Leah Feldman** to consider the impact of the formation and collapse of the Soviet empire on right-wing nationalisms.

Her first book, *On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus* (Cornell University Press, 2018), examines Russian and Azeri poetics and prose to rethink the intellectual history of anticolonial thought in the revolutionary



1920s as well as the role of Muslim communism in shaping the Soviet empire.

Feldman, who came to UChicago in 2015, is working on a book examining the collapse of the Soviet empire from the vantage point of performance art and video art. That project dovetails with two others: a study of the rise of the global right, and a collaboration through UChicago's Richard and Mary L. Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry with the Berlin-based artists' collective Slavs and Tatars. The collaboration will result in a cotaught class and children's book, both considering radical reading strategies to challenge an imperialist, heteronormative Soviet legacy.

After finishing her book *Christ's Subversive Body: Practices of Religious Rhetoric in Culture and Politics* (Northwestern University Press, 2017), which examined politically or culturally subversive uses of the body of Christ from the fourth century to contemporary times, **Olga Solovieva** dedicated her scholarship to East/West comparison, seeking to overcome "the bad binary of the East and West which has haunted our scholarship until recently."

Her coedited volume *Japan's Russia: Challenging the East-West Paradigm* (Cambria Press, 2021) grew out of a conference by the same name she organized at UChicago in 2018. The book advances the field of Russo-Japanese studies in the English-speaking world.

She has also completed a manuscript, "The Russian Kurosawa: Transnational Cinema or the Art of Speaking Differently," which shows how the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa addresses sensitive topics in postwar Japan via nineteenth-century Russian sources.

A counterpart to the Kurosawa book, her current book project, "Thomas Mann's Russia," studies Mann's political writings and development from an antidemocratic to prodemocratic stance through his engagement with nineteenth-century Russian literature.

The work of **Anna Elena Torres**, who arrived at UChicago in 2018, is almost by definition outside borders, focusing on anarchism, refugee literature, translation studies, and labor movements.

She is currently completing a book: *Horizons Blossom, Borders Vanish: Anarchism and Yiddish Literature* (Yale University Press). Focusing on

Ashkenazi anarchist movements in Europe, North America, and the Middle East from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, the book examines questions of mobility and deportation that include "not just the moment of travel but also stillness and detention." Its archives range from Soviet modernist poetry to handwritten multilingual newspapers produced in the Ellis Island prison.

*Freedom's Fullness: Histories of Jewish Anarchism* (University of Illinois Press, forthcoming), her coedited book with labor historian Kenyon Zimmer, includes an anthology of English translations of historical sources. She is also coediting a special issue of the Yiddish studies journal *In geveb* on the poet, philosopher, and art critic Debora Vogel.

Torres also writes about the colonial educations of children from Puerto Rico and other US colonies at the residential Carlisle Indian Industrial School in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Drawing on his undergraduate study of Romance literatures and his master's education in theology at Harvard, **Kris Trujillo** has always been struck by how modern theorists of gender and sexuality deploy the language and tropes of Christian mystics like Hadewijch and John of the Cross. The "astonishing frequency" of this phenomenon ultimately led him to focus on the Christian mystical tradition, modern citations of the medieval, Latinx literature, and queer theory.

Trujillo, who joined the department in 2019, has three projects in progress. One is a study of theory in the Middle Ages. The second focuses on queer citations of medieval and early modern Christianity during the AIDS pandemic. A third, smaller project offers a genealogy of ecstasy from early Christianity to queer theory.

"What I'm really interested in is thinking about what it means to theorize, especially what it means to theorize within community," he says.

Solovieva points out that throughout history, many writers, artists, and intellectuals "didn't know or care about the boundaries of academic departments." Traversing boundaries—academic, national, linguistic—is the express purpose of the field of comparative literature. Having come to the field from a wide range of entry points, the current group of assistant professors are poised to take it in new directions. ■



*The Comparative Literature junior faculty, in the order introduced*



# DIASPORA AND DESCENT

BY CARRIE GOLUS, AB'91, AM'93

Jazmin Graves, AM'15, studies the religious songs of Afrodescendants in India.

*During her first summer in India, Jazmin Graves visited the dargah (tomb-shrine) of Bava Gor, a space dedicated to an African saint celebrated in Sidi music and dance.*

**Jazmin Graves, AM'15**, a doctoral candidate in South Asian Languages and Civilizations, focuses on the Sidis of western India, whose ancestors came from East Africa over the centuries as merchants, sailors, soldiers, saints, and enslaved captives. In her dissertation, “Songs to the African Saints in India,” Graves combines ethnographic and archival research with analysis of Sidi devotional songs. This year she is a Thurgood Marshall Predoctoral Fellow in African and African American Studies at Dartmouth College; next year she will teach in the African American and African Diaspora Studies Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

## *How did you get interested in India?*

In middle school, my best friend was Indian American, and she taught me some Hindi phrases. I was just hooked. I found myself at the public library with Rupert Snell’s *Teach Yourself Hindi*. That turned out to be the course book I used at Columbia as an undergrad.

I had planned to do my PhD research on Indian Sufi literature from the sixteenth century. But when I was studying for my oral exams, I came across a footnote. It explained that one of the regional kingdoms in premodern India that patronized the composition of Sufi romance poetry may

have been founded by an African military slave. That was remarkable to me.

In the summer of 2016, when I was in India studying Urdu, I found myself at the shrine of Bava Gor, the primary patron saint of the Sidis, African Indians living in the state of Gujarat and the city of Mumbai. The Sidis who were maintaining the shrine connected with me on the basis of our shared African heritage. So that was the beginning of my new dissertation plan.

## *A former slave founded a kingdom?*

Slavery in India at this time was very different from





”The shrine was filled with frankincense smoke, so thick that you couldn’t see.  
—Jazmin Graves, AM’15

our picture of American chattel slavery. It was not limited to Africans—in fact, Africans were rare. If you procured an African to work in your household, it showed your status.

Africans enslaved in India often occupied elite statuses. They were generals and elite military figures who defended regional kingdoms. They held a lot of political power, as strange as that sounds.

#### *What was it like inside the shrine?*

I was standing outside with a friend from the Urdu program, really hesitant about going in. All of a sudden, a black rooster came out of nowhere. It locked eyes with me and started chasing me and pecking me, until my friend took my hand and brought me inside to get away from it. The shrine was filled with frankincense smoke, so thick that you couldn’t see. Some people were in the throes of spirit possession. It was a shocking scene.

Later the shrine keeper spoke with me and gave me some chai. I asked him, “Why did that rooster single me out?” He said the spirits of the African Sufi saints were ushering me in. He showed me the faces of the Sidis in the shrine and said, “Look at the face of your sister. You’re home.”

That was my first summer in India, and I had experienced a lot of attention as a Black woman. Everywhere I went, I was stared at. People would take photographs of me. Little kids would laugh at me, laugh at my hair. So to find a space in India where there were other Afrodescendants, who received me

warmly and acknowledged my physical features as a source of pride—that was definitely healing.

#### *“Afrodescendant” seems like a really useful term.*

I borrow that terminology from Sheila Walker, who made the documentary *Familiar Faces/Unexpected Places: A Global African Diaspora* [2018]. It encapsulates the fact that we are people of African ancestry, but our national identities are defined by the places of our birth.

#### *If there are Afrodescendants in India, why were people so curious about you?*

The Sidi community is very marginalized. When I did my field research in Ahmedabad for my dissertation, some of the citizens were shocked to learn there was an African heritage community just a few kilometers away. Sidis tend to remain among themselves—maybe to protect themselves from the things that I experienced.

#### *Were you able to build connections with the Sidi community?*

Absolutely. I built close friendships and was informally adopted by an elder in the community. By virtue of my being an Afrodescendant woman, I was invited to participate in rituals usually reserved for Sidi women. That gave me a lens on

religious life that hadn’t been explored in academic literature, prior to my research.

With ethnographic research, it’s important for scholars to be sensitive to the needs and expectations of the communities where they work. Many Sidis have told me, “Researchers have come and gone, but we never see what they produce about us. They’re rarely interested in what we need as a community. They build big careers off researching us, but we remain where we are.”

#### *But you took a different approach.*

In the footsteps of one of my dissertation committee members, Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy (UCLA), and my mentor, Beheroze Shroff (UC Irvine), I made efforts to support the Sidi community’s needs as they supported my research project.

The Sidi people I was interviewing told me they needed money for their children’s education. So I worked with two young men from the community, who took me door to door to every household to collect data on the number of children and their school fees. I’m hoping to raise donations to support this community-led initiative.

#### *What was the biggest surprise of your fieldwork?*

That a sense of family and community can be found abroad. Even in a place where you’re out of place, you can still belong. ■



*Q Station, a historical quarantine site in Sydney, Australia, is open to visitors.*

# INTO QUARANTINE

Two alumni tackle the history and architecture of locked-down spaces.

In 2009, two Art History alumni, **Geoff Manaugh** and **Nicola Twilley**, both AM'01, heard about a quarantine station in Sydney that had been converted into a hotel. For over 150 years, the complex housed newly arrived immigrants suspected of harboring contagious diseases—the final leg of their long journey to Australia.

Manaugh, an architecture writer who was teaching in Sydney at the time, and Twilley, a journalist, were intrigued by the contrast between the hotel's utilitarian past and luxurious present. They spent their seventh wedding anniversary at what is now known as Q Station, an experience that prompted a decade-long exploration of quarantine, culminating in their book, *Until Proven Safe* (MCD, July 2021). (The book's original title, *The Coming Quarantine*, had to be discarded when the quarantine, well, came.)

*Until Proven Safe: The History and Future of Quarantine* charts the rise of this early public health measure, which was first formalized in the fourteenth century, and its inevitable future. "The response to COVID-19 is not going to be our only quarantine," Twilley says. Zoonoses, diseases that spread from nonhuman animals to human ones, are becoming more common as the human

population grows and spreads, and the built environment will need to respond.

The concept of quarantine has remained remarkably consistent over time, the authors say. Durations and settings have changed, with the stone lazarettos of the Renaissance giving way to modern hospital isolation units, but the essential idea of a buffer between the worlds of the infected and the healthy has not. (The concept also has complements in nature; honeybees, for instance, often self-isolate by not returning to the hive if infected.)

Yet the complexity of the modern city calls for new iterations of quarantine. It's possible that cities will develop "pandemic modes"—closing down streets to allow pedestrian distancing, making crosswalk buttons touchless, and so on—that they can toggle on and off as needed. "Thinking about the city as this kind of flexible instrument for dealing with disaster would be really useful in a medical context," Manaugh says.

A more extreme version of a quarantine-ready future would involve "the transformation of our homes and apartments and offices into medical diagnostic equipment that we inhabit," Manaugh explains, where smart home devices can detect whether you sound sick and summon medical

assistance, or even forcibly curtail your activities by locking you inside.

Yet the fear (and, for many of us, current reality) of being trapped indoors also heightens the appeal of the outdoors. Manaugh and Twilley felt this power themselves; the Los Angeles residents talked through large portions of *Until Proven Safe* while hiking over the spring and summer. Humans are anomalous in the animal kingdom for spending "90 percent of our time indoors," says Twilley. "It's just really bizarre." She views the prospect of more time spent in nature as a hopeful effect of the new age of pandemics.

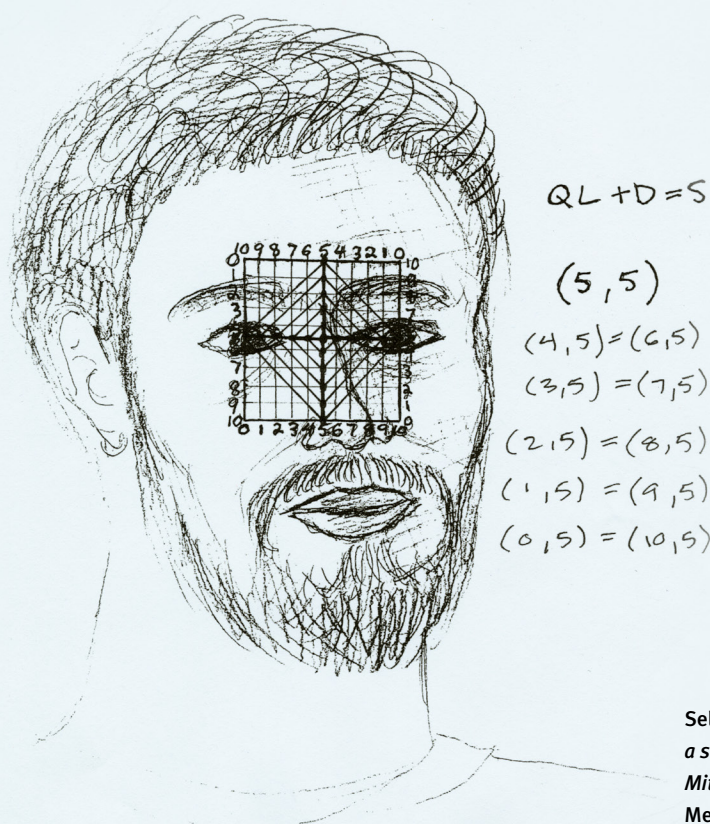
Despite—or because of—having written a book about quarantine in quarantine, the couple remains invigorated by the topic. Quarantine is "a way of managing uncertainty," Twilley observes, "and that is probably what has made it such a good topic to think about from a variety of angles."

Manaugh finds something profound and metaphorically rich about the idea of quarantine as the place where doubt gives way to answers—infected or not infected—and truth simply needs sufficient time, he says, "to articulate itself." In quarantine, as in life, we are all patiently waiting for revelation.—S.A. ■

THE COAUTHORS DISCUSS MORE at [tableau.uchicago.edu/quarantine](https://tableau.uchicago.edu/quarantine).



# EXCERPT: *MENTAL TRAVELER*



Self-Portrait with Grid,  
a sketch by Gabriel  
Mitchell, appears in  
*Mental Traveler*.

probably triggered by overwork and the stress of passing for “healthy” and “normal.” End of story.

But as anyone who has lived with mental illness knows, typical cases are also deeply singular and individual. Everyone goes crazy in their own way, and every family has its own way of dealing with their disturbed son or daughter, brother or sister, father or mother. Every derangement is a response to an arrangement, a de-arrangement of social and institutional circumstances. Although mental illness often results in isolation from family and society, it never happens alone. Some families are shattered; some become stronger. Some victims surrender and disappear into their symptoms, living out their days in quiet suffering. Others fight back with every means at their disposal. This is the story of someone who fought back and attempted to see his own madness with complete lucidity, and to see through it to something beyond. It is also the story of a family that helped him survive schizophrenia for twenty years and is now determined that his life will endure beyond his suicide. As Gabe once put it, “People are always changing. Even beyond the grave, they are changing.”

I have tried to see *through* Gabe’s madness, to see beyond the medical labels and stereotypes and apprehend the concrete individual who himself attempted to look back at madness from the inside with art and work and skill. Of course, I think my son was very special, and I know that I share this view with every parent who has lost a child. But specialness is both typical and specific, ordinary and singular. My aim here is to specify and commemorate the unrepeatable life of my son, to tell the story of his struggle and to make you see him clearly right up to the moment of his departure and beyond. If this story helps others who are blessed with a beloved “mental traveler,” so much the better.

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BY W. J. T. MITCHELL

Tableau presents a selection from *Mental Traveler: A Father, A Son, and a Journey through Schizophrenia* (University of Chicago Press, 2020) by **W. J. T. Mitchell**, the Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor in English Language and Literature and Art History.

There are two kinds of books: the ones you want to write, and the ones you have to write. I have written quite a few of the first kind, but this is not one of them. It is a memoir of the life and death of my son, Gabriel Mitchell, who struggled with schizophrenia for twenty years until his suicide at

age thirty-eight. It is not a book I wanted to write, or ever expected that I would write, until the fatal day of June 24, 2012.

In many ways, Gabe was a typical case of schizophrenia. First onset of symptoms—depression, anger, delusions, hallucinations—around age nineteen. Dropping out of college and into the mental health system, hospitalization, medications, therapies, halfway houses. A decade spent battling addiction to alcohol and drugs, and enduring the stigma that comes with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Part-time employment as a grocery clerk. An early death at thirty-eight,

READ MORE ABOUT MITCHELL’S BOOK at [mag.uchicago.edu/arts-humanities/travelogue](http://mag.uchicago.edu/arts-humanities/travelogue).



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