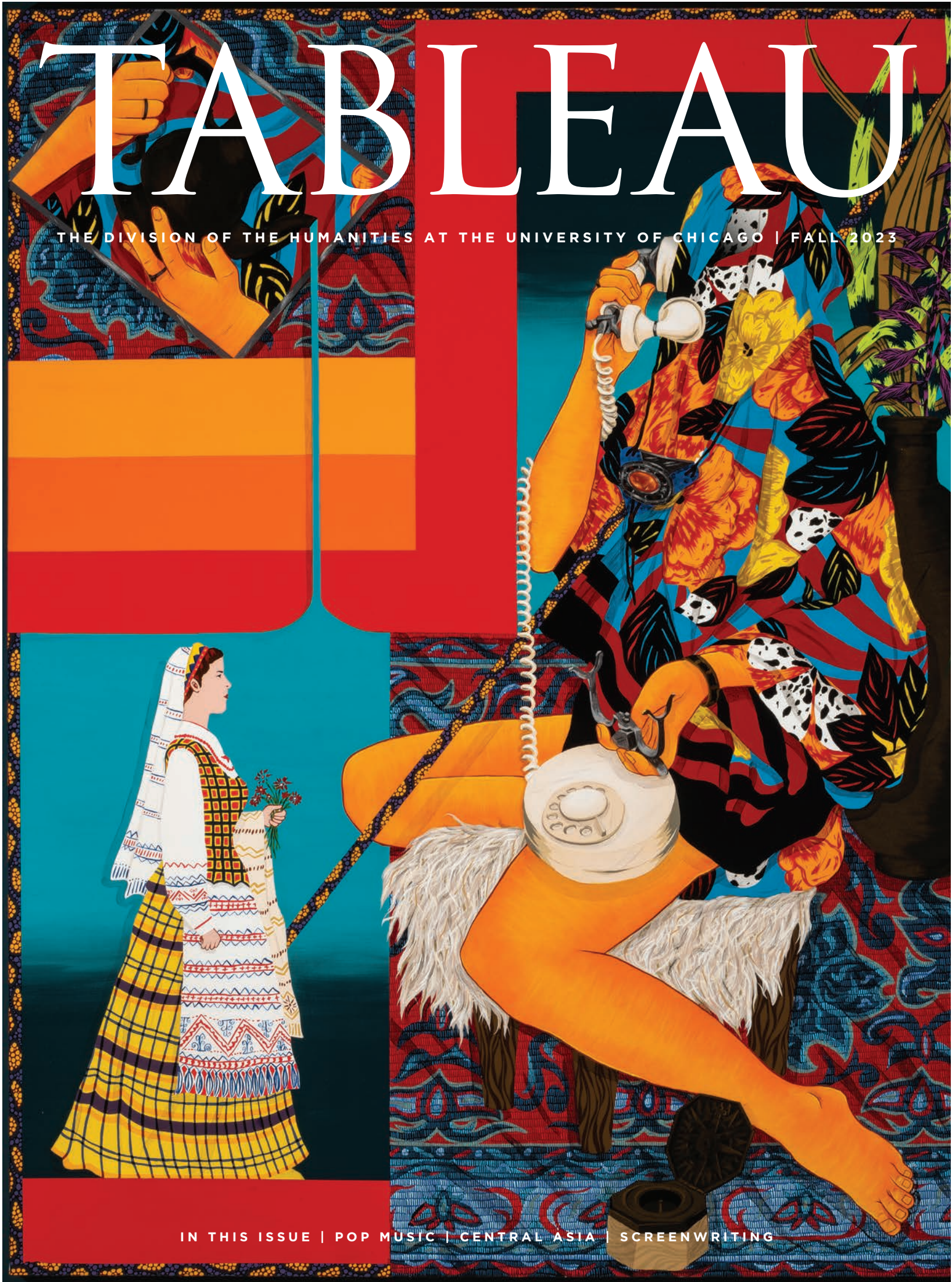


# TABLEAU

THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | FALL 2023



IN THIS ISSUE | POP MUSIC | CENTRAL ASIA | SCREENWRITING



ALUMNA PROFILE

**2 AN INTRICATE TAPESTRY**

Claire Roosien, AB'10, AM'17, PhD'19, pursues a more nuanced view of the former Soviet Union.

IDEAS

**4 TWO PERSPECTIVES ON POPULAR MUSIC**

With Paula Harper, AB'10, and Michael Bourdaghs.

GRADUATE STUDENTS

**6 LEARNING IN CONCERT**

Composition PhD students share the full range of their skills.

NEW FACULTY

**8 NEW FACULTY FALL 2023**

The division introduces nine faculty members.

HUMANITIES AT WORK

**10 PEAK TV**

Bob Daily, AM'86, discusses his career writing for television.

ON CAMPUS

**12 AN INTERVIEW WITH DEAN NELSON**

The new Humanities dean discusses her role.

FACULTY BOOKS

**13 EXCERPT: IMAGINING THE END**

Jonathan Lear considers how mourning gives meaning to life.

ON THE COVER

Calling on the Past by Amir H. Fallah is part of the Smart Museum's exhibition of the same name, which is open until February 2024. Gift of the 2018 Northern Trust Purchase Prize. Photo courtesy the Smart Museum of Art. Photography by Michael Tropea.

*This jar of the Meroitic period (270 BCE–300 CE), on display at the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures Museum, was recovered from a tomb at the site of Ballana in present-day Egypt. The museum's Nubian Gallery features a selection of playful ceramic designs.*

*CORRECTION: In our Spring 2023 issue, we printed an incorrect, draft version of Laurie Shannon's quotation in memory of Janel M. Mueller (1938–2022). We apologize for the error. The correct version is as follows: "Janel Mueller's keen intellect and knowledge of early modern contexts made even obscure texts electrifying for her students," Shannon says. "She then brought a tireless editorial eye to student writing in ways that indelibly exposed how thought itself really works. I was a lucky beneficiary of her robust counsel across many years. From dispensing paragraph theory at the dissertation stage, to workshopping administrative puzzles when I chaired my department at Northwestern, to wryly glossing Queen of Hearts imagery in the lobby of the British Library, Janel's keenness of mind remains indelible." To read the full story, go to [tableau.uchicago.edu/jmmueller](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/jmmueller).*





Deborah L. Nelson

## Dear Alumni and Friends,

Almost daily a story appears in major publications about how the study of the humanities is in dire straits. It is argued that rather than studying the arts, philosophy, or literature, students must sign up for practical majors that result in jobs at the end of their studies. While these conversations are not new, they have been amplified in recent years.

In the Division of the Humanities at UChicago, however, we have the statistics and accomplishments to contradict this perception. During the past 10 years student enrollment for undergraduates and graduates remains strong, with a total of 33,241 students in 2022—only 9 percent less than student enrollment in the Physical Sciences Division, which ranks first. Courses in Theater and Performance Studies and in Creative Writing are so popular that demand is almost twice as high as our capacity.

To help meet the high demand for humanities courses, the number of our tenure-track and tenured faculty members has grown during the last decade from 191 to 206. Significantly, the gender balance has become more equal, from 69 women and 122 men in 2013 to 95 women and 111 men in 2023. Finally, the number of underrepresented faculty members has nearly tripled in the past 10 years.

These are the interior facts about the Humanities Division. The extraordinary work of our faculty and students, made possible by the support of our generous donors, reflects the strength of their artistry and scholarship. Here are a few examples of their public-facing work during the past year.

Composer **Shulamit Ran's** full-scale opera *Anne Frank* debuted at Indiana University on March 3 with a large orchestra, chorus, and cast of nine principal singers. Over the years, Ran, the Andrew MacLeish Distinguished Service Professor Emerita in Music and

a Pulitzer Prize winner, has written several works with a focus on the Holocaust.

The second book by the Creative Writing Program's **Ling Ma**, *Bliss Montage* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2022), won three significant awards in rapid succession: the National Book Critics Circle fiction prize, the Story Prize, and the Windham Campbell Prize. Ma, AB'05, an assistant professor of practice in the arts, has readers ranging from teenagers to contemporary literary theorists due to her ability to construct allegorical lifeworlds from the absurdities of the contemporary social moment.

**Philip V. Bohlman**, the Ludwig Rosenberger Distinguished Service Professor in Jewish History and Music, and **Martha C. Nussbaum**, the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, received International Balzan Prizes, which honor scholars and scientists who have distinguished themselves in their fields globally. Bohlman received the first Balzan Prize in ethnomusicology, and Nussbaum was honored for her seminal and sustained contributions to a wide range of philosophical topics.

The scholars and students in the Division of the Humanities are committed to defining the most urgent problems, asking the right questions, and finding ways to address the complexity of human life. Collaborating with them to expand the reach of the humanities at the University and in the world will be the highlight of my career.

Deborah L. Nelson  
Dean, Division of the Humanities  
Helen B. and Frank L. Sulzberger Professor,  
Department of English Language and Literature

OPPOSITE: PHOTO COURTESY THE INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT CULTURES; THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ZICH

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*One subject of Roosien's research is the luxury textiles worn by Uzbek women during the Soviet period. Beginning in the 1920s, authorities in Moscow urged Uzbek women—many of whom were Muslim—to take off their veils so that they could more easily join the workforce in factories and on collective farms. Many women were rewarded for their efforts with silk and velvet, and these textiles became a new way of marking their identity as both Uzbek and Soviet. "Luxury textiles became a way they could present themselves in public that would enable them to be respectable women," Roosien says, "even though they were unveiled."*

# An intricate tapestry

BY JEANIE CHUNG

Claire Roosien pursues a more nuanced view of the former Soviet Union.

“Stuff is categorized as Russian that isn’t remotely Russian at all.”

—Claire Roosien, AB’10, AM’17, PhD’19



**Claire Roosien** has been immersed in her current area of study for nearly her entire life.

Now an assistant professor of Slavic languages and literatures at Yale, Roosien, AB’10, AM’17, PhD’19, spent her early childhood shuttling between Ohio and Pakistan, where her parents worked for various non-governmental organizations. When she was 10, her parents got jobs working for an NGO in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, and the family remained there until Roosien went to college. Since Samarkand had no English-language schools, she attended an Uzbek-language school and a Russian-language school in addition to taking online classes in English.

Growing up in the former Soviet republic, she became interested in Russian art and literature. As a double major at UChicago in Slavic Languages and Literatures and Fundamentals: Issues and Texts, she had to write two undergraduate theses. She decided to write one on Dostoevsky, but when it came time to write the second, she realized the extent to which she’d focused on “the big names of Russian literature: the ‘Tolstoyevsky,’ as they like to call it,” at the expense of some of the writers and artists of central Asia. During a class on Anton Chekhov, Roosien thought back to Abdulla Qahhor, a Soviet-era writer she’d read in Uzbek school.

“A lot of his stories are an answer, from a central Asian perspective, to Chekhov,” she says. Like Chekhov’s stories, they illuminate personal dramas, but they feature a cast of Uzbek characters rather than Russians. Roosien decided to write her second thesis on Qahhor, “and that kind of kicked me off on this whole journey.”

Though Roosien is too young to remember when the Soviet Union existed, she—like most Westerners—had a perception of it as uniformly totalitarian and repressive in all facets of life, including art and culture.

“That’s not an entirely false narrative,” Roosien says. “But what’s interesting about Qahhor is that

although he works within the Soviet system, he produces something of his own within the space the state creates for cultural participation.”

The Soviet Union, and the Russian Empire before it, extended well beyond Russia proper, encompassing vast swaths of land full of diverse languages and cultures. And yet the perception of these sprawling geopolitical conglomerates doesn’t always reflect their diversity. When looking through library cataloging systems, some of which date back to the Cold War era, Roosien says, “stuff is categorized as Russian that isn’t remotely Russian at all.”

As an example of a non-Russian Soviet cultural creator, Qahhor is among the figures Roosien explores in her book in progress, tentatively titled “Socialism Mediated: Culture, Propaganda, and the Public in Soviet Central Asia.” Roosien is interested in how, during that period, “people on the ground interpret socialism for a central Asian context.”

Another example is activist and collective farmer Tojixon Shodieva, an Uzbek woman whom Roosien calls “the biggest celebrity in 1930s central Asia.” Shodieva was often the face of a Soviet movement urging women in Uzbekistan, which is predominantly Muslim, to remove their veils. Roosien examines depictions of Shodieva in popular Uzbek culture, including poems and films, about her as a persona as well as a person.

The project also examines different cultural media, as well as figures such as musicians, writers, artists, and activists.

“The only way we can really understand these artifacts I work with,” she says, “is by recognizing them not just as expressions of a slogan from Stalin, but as creative products in their own right.”

UChicago proved to be the ideal institution for Roosien to dig further into central Asian studies in

her graduate work. One reason the University is “remarkably well equipped” for the field is that, while few institutions offer central Asian languages, UChicago offers Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkish, and Persian—the latter two of which are particularly important for central Asia. (Roosien is fluent in Russian and Uzbek, can read and speak enough Persian and Turkish for research, and has some reading skills in Greek and Chuvash.)

Already familiar with the Slavic department, she was also drawn to the University of Chicago’s renowned program in Soviet and Russian history. The particular focus of the University’s Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations department suited her research as well. While many similar departments at other schools focus on the Arabic world, NELC’s strength in Ottoman Turkish and Persianate studies provided an ideal base for Roosien.

“That collection of different strands that weave together in central Asian history and culture,” Roosien says, “is also present in the University of Chicago as an institution.”

A final bonus was UChicago’s library collection on central Asia. “I can probably count on one hand the number of libraries in North America that have that kind of a collection,” she says. “And I miss it a lot.”

By the time Roosien entered UChicago’s doctoral program in 2012, she knew that “a PhD in the humanities in an obscure cultural context was not likely to be a fast-track to an awesome job.”

Her graduate work—ultimately becoming a joint PhD in NELC and Russian-Soviet history—did in fact lead to a tenure-track position, but she weighed the risks. “The calculation that I made,” she says, “and that I honestly still make is [this]: Am I enjoying what I’m doing now? Am I making sacrifices that I would regret making if it didn’t work out? And I just refuse to make those sacrifices.” ■

OPPOSITE: ILLUSTRATION FROM YOKOJIN/TURMUSH, 1937; ADAPTED FROM MAX PENSON’S PHOTOGRAPH, UZBEK MADONNA, 1937; THIS PAGE: PHOTO COURTESY YALE UNIVERSITY

WATCH ROOSIEN’S LECTURE ON TOJIXON SHODIEVA

at [tableau.uchicago.edu/roosien](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/roosien).







# Two perspectives on popular music

AS TOLD TO LUCAS MCGRANAHAN

A musicologist and a scholar of Japan examine the culture of pop music from the Cold War to the digital age.

*Taylor Swift poses for a selfie with a fan. Paula Harper, AB'10, studies Swift's role in popular culture and the dynamics of online fan communities.*





**Paula Harper, AB'10**, is an assistant professor in Music. Her current book projects are “*Viral Musicking and the Rise of Noisy Platforms*” and the coedited volume “*Taylor Swift: The Star, the Songs, the Fans.*”

The notion of cultural contagion has a long history. The idea is that a contagious force is taking over the bodies of those perceived to be vulnerable and valuable in society—so oftentimes children, especially White children in this country. Viral things have an ambivalence to them. They're dangerous, but they've got some kind of appeal. People are excited about participating in virality, be it a jazz craze or the “Gangnam Style” dance.

One of my books is about the history of things going viral online. I'm looking at platforms that might not immediately intuitively register as musical platforms. What does Twitter or Reddit or Tumblr or TikTok have to do with music, with the music industry, with the way that music circulates? All these platforms are contributing to the broader musical ecosystem in some way. When I'm using the word *noisy* to describe these platforms, I'm thinking about noisiness that might not be explicitly sonic but is based on ideas of attentiveness, of tuning in and tuning out, of foreground and background.

Both the generative and toxic sides of fandom have been afforded and amplified by digital platforms. Some of the earliest internet communities are fandom communities. These have been in some ways a lovely, productive, generative space for geographically dispersed fans to find one another and to bond over shared interests. They also almost universally have instances of infighting and the development of hierarchies. So you might have a certain status in the Taylor Swift fandom if you've been to *x* number of concerts or if you got a picture with Taylor Swift. Indeed, celebrities are now encouraged to perform this accessibility—to perform parasocial relationships with their fans—in ways that can be leveraged by the fans and monetized by the star.

The book on Taylor Swift is pulled mostly from participants at a two-day virtual conference that I co-organized in 2021 with speakers from disciplines including literature, sociology, and musicology. There had not, at that point, been much concerted academic work around Taylor Swift, although she was at the center of cultural conversations about fandom and social media, copyright, relationships between artists and labels, gender and race, songwriting, and celebrity and branding. We advertised the conference widely, and we were interested in getting an audience of folks who were not necessarily academics.

During the final session, we said that if anyone wanted to stay on and chat, we could. We had been talking about the problem of being a female pop star and the necessity of perpetually changing one's brand. This person came on Zoom and was like, “Yeah, I've been thinking about this a lot because I am in the amateur wrestling world. I have a Taylor Swift-based wrestling persona, and so I'm constantly thinking about persona and how it is crafted and used in storytelling.” It was a magical, brain-opening moment. I had not considered Taylor Swift as the articulation point between pop music and wrestling. But now I think about it all the time. ■



**Michael Bourdaghs** is the Robert S. Ingersoll Professor in East Asian Languages and Civilizations. He is coeditor of *Sound Alignments: Popular Music in Asia's Cold Wars* (Duke University Press, 2021) and author of *Sayonara Amerika, Sayonara Nippon: A Geopolitical History of J-Pop* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

I always want to be cautious when we use the word *reflection*. Popular music certainly does reflect social feelings, social ideology, and social trends, but it also generates them. If you think about something like punk or hip-hop, popular music can range from affirmation and celebration to complete and direct condemnation of the world it's in—and oftentimes it's both.

My book [*Sayonara Amerika, Sayonara Nippon*] examines the tense relationship between the United States and Japan from 1945 into the 1990s, beginning with the defeat of Japan in World War II by the United States and the occupation of Japan. In some ways this is viewed as rescuing Japan from fascism, restoring democracy in Japan, rebuilding Japan. But it also has a strong feeling of subordination to the United States through geopolitics and popular culture. It produced a strong resistance, a strong desire to get out from under the shadow of America.

In 1960 the US-Japan Security Treaty, which essentially made Japan a junior partner in America's security strategies, came up for revision and renewal, and there was a massive popular uprising with millions of people out in the streets. There was a real fear that Japan was being dragged into World War III by the United States and its Cold War policies. US military bases in Japan were used during the Vietnam War, which the vast majority of Japanese opposed. In one manga set at that time, one of the great superheroes of Japanese culture, Tetsuwan Atomu [Astro Boy], gives up his life—temporarily, of course, because he never really dies—to protect the North Vietnamese against the colonizing American military.

The book traces tensions like these through the early postwar surge in what was called jazz music—really swing jazz—in the late 1940s, the introduction of rockabilly and early rock and roll in Japan in the 1950s, and this genre called *enka* that is portrayed as the heart and soul of Japanese culture (often compared to country and western in the United States). And it looks at how the political struggles of the 1960s morphed into a more ironic postmodern expression in the 1970s. The narrative ends in 1990 with the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble, shortly after which people started using the word *J-pop* to describe a kind of music introduced in Japan that would give birth to categories like K-pop, which became dominant a few years later.

There's a really influential Japanese rock band from the early '70s called Happy End, which at the time sold very few records. The comparison that's always made is to the Velvet Underground. Discovering them was like coming across a masterpiece that I'd somehow never seen sitting there. Their music was very conscious of its relationship to America, trying to reject and acknowledge the influence at the same time. At the end of their career, their record company paid for them to go to Los Angeles and record their last album with a group of American musicians, including the members of Little Feat. They called the album *Sayonara Amerika, Sayonara Nippon*, as in, “We're done with both.” That was irresistible as a book title. ■



A new music ensemble rehearses in the Logan Center for the Arts.



# Learning in concert

BY KELLEY TATRO

Award-winning composition PhD students share the full range of their skills.

“The students are winning everything!” said University Professor of Composition **Augusta Read Thomas** this past spring. She had recently received a lot of good news about composers—some now alumni—whom she and her colleagues have mentored at UChicago.

In late April, not long after music composition doctoral program alumni **Eun Young Lee**, PhD’11, and **Timothy Page**, PhD’18, were awarded Guggenheim Fellowships in music composition, the American Academy in Rome announced that PhD student **Baldwin Giang** was the recipient of the Samuel Barber Rome Prize, granting him “time and space to think and work” at the academy’s campus in Rome for the 2023–24 academic year. Thomas was also keen to point out that graduate students frequently add commissions to their portfolios, writing original works for new music institutions at home and around the world, from the Gaudeamus Foundation in the Netherlands to the Civic Orchestra of Chicago.

The composers had a chance to share their talents on campus on May 1, when the Chicago Center for Contemporary Composition (CCCC), directed by Thomas, sponsored a spring composers’ concert at

the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts. Several composers enrolled in the music composition PhD program—Giang; **Maria Kaoutzani**, PhD’23; **Paul Novak**, AM’22; **Yuting Tan**, PhD’23; **Kari Watson**; and **Justin Weiss**—wrote new works for two New York-based groups: Ekmeles vocal ensemble and Sandbox Percussion. Then they invited them to campus and organized their collaboration as part of the student-led event.

Speaking just before rehearsals began, Watson—who was named to the *Washington Post*’s 2023 list of 23 composers and performers to watch—emphasized how important it is to hone her vision of who she is as a composer through such projects. “If I was going to distill down some of my recent interests and also how my musical language has interacted with my academic pursuits here, this is a great piece,” she said, referring to her contribution to the concert, titled *[of desire]*.

But the long process of sharing work can also feel unreal. Though it had not been premiered, *[of desire]* won a BMI Student Composer Award in 2022. “I haven’t even heard it yet, which is crazy!” she said.





There's something very tactile about sound. You have to be literally with each other to feel that.

—Paul Novak, AM'22

Because contemporary composition encompasses so many sonic possibilities and presentation styles, composers in training value few learning opportunities more than working with performers. By teaming up with expert musicians, composers learn how best to ensure the full realization of the music they imagine.

Student-led events also help composers learn to navigate the behind-the-scenes tasks of the creative life. Novak—also named to the *Washington Post's* list of 23—says, “The other side is the organizational and logistic. We have a budget, but the whole point is that the students organize everything, and it gives us a huge amount of freedom.”

The University's PhD composition program is designed to give students doses of creative freedom within a larger support structure, providing them with regular opportunities to exercise their musical and logistical acumen. While the CCC houses the resident Grossman Ensemble—a “supergroup” of new music specialists from the Chicago area—graduate students are also tasked with inviting visiting artists for student-led collaborations, usually twice each year. The May 1 concert had been twice delayed because of COVID, however, resulting in extra logistical maneuvering—and a feeling of poignance when they finally got to make it happen.

Novak's piece *dream catalog* dealt specifically with his pandemic experience. The text is based on imagery from dreams he'd had in its early days, which he had assembled into a list. “I love list poems. It's one of my favorite formal devices where you have this restraint built into the structure, but it gives you an opportunity to just go off in these kind of crazy directions.”

He was also mindful of the joy of collaborating in person after so much time making do with virtual meetings. “There's something very tactile about sound. You have to be literally with each other to feel that.”

The atmosphere at the May 1 concert was intimate, with the composers carrying out the last of their responsibilities for the student-led event: doing their best to ensure that the audience felt something, too. By highlighting the musical choices they'd made in

their pieces and facilitating the event's thoughtful unfolding, the composers followed through on their brief.

Giang, who had been designated as the lead coordinator among the six composers, acted as emcee, opening the concert with a warm welcome before playing a video about his own musical contribution, *our chinatown, their chinatown*. Over a map inked with concentric boxes, Giang explained how he constructed part of the music through locations, the vocalists intoning place names that would conjure diverse associations in the minds of listeners.

The rest of the composers followed suit, playing brief videos that not only offered insights into their process but also diverted the audience's attention from the percussionists' setup between pieces. The videos also helped the audience make connections between the relatively short works on the program, in which each composer's distinctive craftsmanship was on full display through the individual choices they'd made about handling the same musical materials.

Generally, vocalists and percussionists might be imagined to inhabit opposite ends of a spectrum, with singers delivering flowing lines and resonant timbres as percussionists forge passages through crisp sounds and silences. The task of blending voices and percussion had given the composers an interesting compositional challenge. Each composer met it by orchestrating the ensembles' forces differently, using subsets of each group and placing performers at different locations in the room. Though some use electronic sounds in their other work, this concert was all acoustic, with many of the pieces favoring a wide range of resonant or bell-like percussion instruments to complement the vocalists' reverberant sounds.

Music department faculty members were there to support the students, along with many of their friends and peers. To close, Giang encouraged the whole audience to stick around, with conversation primed to continue a few blocks away at Jimmy's Woodlawn Tap. Their work done for the night, the composers prepared to celebrate a long-awaited collaborative learning experience. ■



*Baldwin Giang (top) and Kari Watson (bottom).*







# New faculty fall 2023

BY COURTNEY C. W. GUERRA, AB'05

*New Humanities faculty members prepare for the year. Back row (start left): Jacobé Huet, A. E. Stevenson, and Robyn Schiff. Front row (start left): Katherine Buse, Mikayla Kelley, Thomas Pendlebury, Mehrnoush Soroush, and Melissa Baese-Berk.*



The Division of the Humanities introduces nine faculty members.

**Melissa Baese-Berk**, associate professor in Linguistics, is a phonology expert who studies the way we understand, produce, and learn spoken language, with an emphasis on second-language acquisition. Her current projects examine communication between health-care providers and aging patients, as well as the relationship between perception (listening) and production (speaking) among learners of second languages. She was previously a linguistics professor and an associate dean at the University of Oregon. Among her several research and teaching awards, she is the first person in the UO's history to win simultaneous awards for distinguished teaching and for undergraduate teaching. Her PhD in linguistics is from Northwestern, where she also received a certificate in cognitive science, and her BA—with concentrations in linguistics as well as in violin performance—is from Boston University.

**Katherine Buse** joins the Cinema and Media Studies faculty as assistant professor following a postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute on the Formation of Knowledge. Her PhD, from the University of California, Davis, is in English with an emphasis in science and technology studies. She also holds an MPhil in criticism and culture from the University of Cambridge, an MA in science fiction studies from the University of Liverpool, and a BA in English from Duke University. Her current book project, "Speculative Planetology: Science, Culture, and the Building of Model Worlds," explores how science fiction might help us understand climate science and climate futures.

**Mari Eastman**, assistant professor in Visual Arts, is a painter who also works in installation and collage. Her paintings attempt to find a confluence between pop culture and fine art by borrowing imagery from advertisements, media, decorative art, and the art history canon. Eastman received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and her BA from Smith College; she also studied at the Chautauqua School of Art. In addition to her previous faculty position at SAIC, she has taught at the University of Southern California, Otis College of Art and Design, and UCLA. She has exhibited her work extensively since 1997, most recently at Goldfinch in Chicago and the Green Gallery in Milwaukee.

**Jacobé Huet** is an assistant professor of modern architectural history in Art History, joining UChicago from a faculty position at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York. She is currently completing the manuscript for her first book, which revisits the white cube as a fundamental motif of architec-

tural modernism. While historians and theorists have consistently associated white and cubical modernist designs with machine-age aesthetics, Huet reframes this formula as emerging from European architects' extensive visits to Greek island villages and North African medinas. In conjunction with her investigation of these architects' appropriation of Mediterranean vernacular, Huet examines how various Mediterranean figures who were engaged in vernacular discourses forcefully responded to the modernist usurpation of their architectural heritage. Her BA is from the Sorbonne, and she earned an MA in art history from Williams College in addition to a PhD in history and theory of architecture from Harvard.

**Mikayla Kelley** joins Philosophy as an assistant professor specializing in philosophy of action and formal epistemology. She received a PhD in philosophy from Stanford and an MA in mathematics from University of California, Berkeley; her BA—also in mathematics—is from University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is interested in fundamental questions about the nature of action, including the relationship between intentional action and knowledge and the centrality of intentional action to ethical life. She is also pursuing a research program in formal epistemology that seeks to generalize accuracy-first epistemology, which takes accuracy to be the fundamental source of epistemic value.

**Thomas Pendlebury** is an assistant professor in Philosophy who was previously on the faculty at the University of Pittsburgh. His research focuses on Kant's attempts to understand human beings as rational animals—beings with reason who nevertheless are bound by their natural constitution—and, in particular, on Kant's conception of the relationship between our intellectual and our sensible capacities. Pendlebury's PhD and master's in philosophy are from Harvard; he was also a visiting doctoral fellow at the University of Leipzig's Research Center for Analytic German Idealism as well as a graduate exchange scholar in philosophy at University of California, Berkeley. He received a BA with highest honors from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with a secondary major in linguistics.

**Robyn Schiff**, professor in English Language and Literature and the Program in Creative Writing, holds an MFA in poetry from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She also received an MA in medieval studies from the University of Bristol and a BA in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence College. She joins UChicago from the faculty at Emory University and previously taught at Iowa, Northwestern, and the University of Oregon. Schiff has published four poetry collections: *Worth* (2002) and *Revolver* (2008) with



**Mari Eastman**

University of Iowa Press; *A Woman of Property* (Penguin, 2016), which was a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and was on the year's "Best Books of Poetry" list of both the *New Yorker* and the *Chicago Tribune*; and *Information Desk: An Epic*, which was published by Penguin this past summer. *Information Desk* is a book-length poem that draws on her experiences fielding questions for the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a young adult.

**Mehrnoush Soroush** is an assistant professor of landscape archaeology in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures and serves as the director of the Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes (CAMEL) Lab. She previously taught at the University of Akron and was a fellow in Harvard's Department of Anthropology and Center for Geographic Analysis. Her PhD and MPhil are from New York University's Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, and she holds a master's degree in architecture from the University of Tehran as well as a diploma in mathematics and physics from the National Organization for Development of Exceptional Talents in Ahwaz, Iran. Her research uses archaeological fieldwork, remote sensing, and textual analysis to study the intersection between urban and water history in the Ancient Near East, particularly the extent to which the resilience of ancient cities was tied to their ability to adapt to environmental changes and sociopolitical developments through new hydraulic strategies and technologies.

**A. E. Stevenson**, AB'15, returns to UChicago as an assistant professor in Cinema and Media Studies. Her PhD and MA in cinema and media studies are from UCLA, and she received her bachelor's degree in the Department of Art History. She was previously an assistant professor of Black feminist studies at the University of Southern California. Her current book project, "Sites of Fabulation: Scenes of a Black Online Social Life," looks at TikTok, Instagram, and Vine to consider how Black women and girls have shaped the culture, syntax, and visual language of the internet since 2013, arguing that their contributions have been foundational to contemporary online aesthetics despite the tendency toward Black erasure in discussions of digital media. ■







20<sup>th</sup>  
TELEVISION

Bob Daily's screenwriting résumé includes ABC's reboot of *The Wonder Years*, created by Saladin K. Patterson (right).



# Peak TV

BY SUSIE ALLEN, AB'09

Bob Daily, AM'86, discusses his career writing for television.

When **Bob Daily**, AM'86, began writing for television in the late 1990s, he didn't know he was arriving at the dawn of what some have called “peak TV,” a period when the medium began to enjoy newfound prestige and popularity. In fact, he worried the opposite might be true: “At any time in Hollywood, people think they just missed out on the golden era,” Daily says.

Golden era or not, Daily knew right away he was where he wanted to be. Daily's first job in television was not the height of glamour; he wrote several episodes of the short-lived UPN series *Hitz*, starring comedian Andrew Dice Clay. “Even though I knew the show was doomed to failure, I was grateful for the job, and I loved the experience,” he says. “I remember the thrill of being on the floor when we filmed my first episode and hearing actors bring it to life.”

Before long, Daily graduated from *Hitz* to a bona fide hit—*Frasier*—where he spent five years as a writer

and producer. He's gone on to write for and produce shows including *Desperate Housewives*, *The Odd Couple*, and *Superior Donuts*, which he cocreated; today, he's a writer and executive producer for ABC's reboot of the beloved hit show *The Wonder Years*.

It was not the path Daily imagined for himself when he arrived at UChicago to study English. At the time, his goal was to become an academic and teach at a school like his alma mater, Carleton College. Though he's grateful for the experience, “I very quickly realized that grad school and I were not a great match.” When a professor described Daily's writing as “too conversational,” he took it as a sign.

After several years as an entertainment journalist in Chicago—his work ranged from profiling David Mamet to covering an Elvis impersonator convention—Daily was persuaded by friends to move to Los Angeles and take a shot at screenwriting. For a reporter, the freedom



# “I remember the thrill of being on the floor when we filmed my first episode and hearing actors bring it to life.”

—Bob Daily, AM’86

to dispense with the truth was enticing. “I thought it would be fun to write and not have to do the research—to just make it all up,” he says. “So, I started pointing myself toward fiction.”

Writing for television felt like a natural transition. He’d fallen in love with the medium as a child by watching nightly reruns of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* on WGN. “It was really funny but grounded, which is something I’ve always aspired to in comedy,” Daily says. “That was probably my biggest influence as a kid.”

Daily had no formal screenwriting training, so before moving to LA he gave himself a crash course. The first season of *Frasier* had just come out on VHS; Daily would watch each episode, pen and legal pad in hand, outlining the story structure. “I sat in my apartment in Wrigleyville and taught myself how to write a half-hour comedy,” he says.

Getting hired on *Frasier* was a full-circle moment for Daily, although it was not without its anxieties. Learning to pitch jokes in a room full of legends—the very people whose work he had studied—took time. “I came home pretty much every day and said to my wife, ‘I think I’m going to get fired,’” he says.

After his first episode was filmed, he could finally exhale. “I’ve written that episode of *Frasier* and no one can ever take that away from me. It will always be on my IMDb page. Always,” he remembers thinking. “If I have to go back to Chicago with my tail between my legs in failure, I can at least be in a bar somewhere telling people I wrote an episode of *Frasier*.” That thought was soon followed by another: “I want this to go on forever.”

Of course, in television, nothing does. Daily has learned to weather the highs and lows of pickups and cancellations. Before *Frasier* he worked on a show that ended after two episodes (not a record, he says, but close). In 2018, CBS canceled *Superior Donuts* after two seasons. “There’s a bar near the CBS Radford studios, and every time I drive by it, I think ‘That’s the bar where we went after *this* show was canceled, and after *that* show was canceled,’” he says. Often what’s

saddest is the thought of parting ways with other writers: “There’s a real foxhole mentality in a writers’ room, and you get really close.”

Still, Daily feels fortunate for the relative stability of his career. In network television, where he got his start, seasons are long, and a successful show can lead to several years of steady work—as well as the opportunity to learn how to produce and lead a series.

The streaming era, in which 8- or 10-episode seasons are the norm and the writers’ room disbands within weeks, has changed all that. “I feel bad for writers coming into the industry now. ... It’s more of a gig economy than it used to be,” Daily says. “And because of that writers are just not getting the opportunity to learn, to get a 360-degree view of the job.”

Writers have recently fought back against what they say are other unfair conditions—and even technological threats—in their current work environment. The Writers Guild of America strike, which kicked off in May and resulted in a tentative agreement in late September, has been focused on increasing the residuals owed to writers from streaming media and limiting the role of AI in screenwriting.

The upside of the streaming boom, though, has been a willingness to take a chance on new shows and creators. “A streamer can afford to be a little more niche, which can lead to more interesting ideas,” Daily says. “It’s a great thing for writers not to feel like ‘I have to turn this into 100 episodes, or 200 episodes.’ It expands the scope of storytelling.”

Because he knows the challenges new writers face, Daily has tried to support them however he can. He’s served as a visiting screenwriter-in-residence at Carleton, spoken at UChicago’s GRADUCon career conference, and mentored—and occasionally hired—students from both institutions. “Because I was self-trained, I didn’t have anyone to pave the way for me. It feels great to be able to do that for other people,” he says. “One of the most fun things you can possibly do in the entertainment business is to give people their first job.” ■



Daily gives notes to Lauren Graham and other actors in the CBS sitcom *The Odd Couple*.

PHOTOS COURTESY BOB DAILY

HEAR MORE FROM DAILY ABOUT HIS SCREENWRITING

CAREER at [tableau.uchicago.edu/daily](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/daily).





# An interview with Dean Nelson



BY SARA PATTERSON

## The new dean of the Humanities Division discusses her role.

On July 1, **Deborah L. Nelson**, the Helen B. and Frank L. Sulzberger Professor of English, became dean of the Division of the Humanities. She has spent her entire career at the University of Chicago, arriving in 1996. Nelson has served as chair of English Language and Literature, deputy provost for graduate education, and director of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality. Her thought-provoking book *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil* (University of Chicago Press, 2017) won the Modern Language Association's James Russell Lowell Prize for Best Book of 2017 and the Gordon J. Laing Award in 2019 for the most distinguished contribution to the University of Chicago Press by a UChicago faculty member.

### *How do you think being dean will differ from being chair of the English Department?*

Obviously, the scale is quite different, and I will be much more engaged with alumni and donors. What excites me is working across the division to help build ambitious research and teaching projects.

I would also like to nurture the relationship between the arts and the humanities, which is uniquely

intense at the University of Chicago. Our arts programs are led by groundbreaking faculty who have propelled interest in art-making among the undergraduates. For English and Creative Writing, the dialogue between scholars and practitioners has elevated both.

### *What are a few things that you have learned from your colleagues and students at UChicago?*

You cannot go wrong with UChicago colleagues and students. Every day faculty members and students become more interesting, exciting, and collaborative.

My colleagues have been tremendous mentors by reading and commenting on books in progress. Even more important, they have helped me to do the kind of scholarship I want to do and have not tried to change me. After I received tenure at UChicago, I formed a group with my new peers to work on our second books. It's tough for most academics to write their second book. The first book often comes from their dissertation topic. I was fortunate because my second book, *Tough Enough*, seemed to resonate after the failure of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign and found a wide audience.

I am always learning from UChicago students—both graduate and undergraduate. It is such a privilege to read their new research and realize new discoveries through their work. In this way, my own scholarship is constantly being expanded.

### *What do you think makes UChicago a distinctive place to conduct research and teach?*

Students and faculty share a passion for ideas, which makes it lively and engaging. The biggest problem is being crushed by all you want to do. There is way too much going on, so you must pace yourself.

I have worked collaboratively with several faculty members, including historian **Jim Sparrow**, sociologist **Kristen Schilt**, and political scientist **Cathy Cohen**. UChicago offers so many opportunities for intellectual collaboration. We also have strong support such as research leaves, access to the great UChicago library, and funds to travel. It is so important for my work to go to original archives to find the best materials for research. All my best ideas come in the archive.

### *What are you reading for fun?*

The last book that I read was *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murakami.

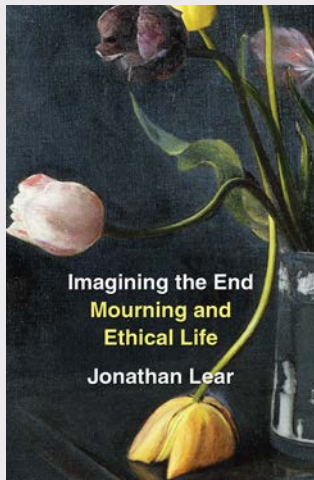
Does listening count? When I drive my son and daughter to school and activities, I listen to audiobooks on many topics. Recently, I listened to the complete works of Jane Austen. Every sentence in her work is perfect. I really understood that better with my ear than with my eye. ■

READ AN EXPANDED VERSION OF THIS STORY

at [tableau.uchicago.edu/nelson](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/nelson).







# Excerpt: *Imagining the End*

BY JONATHAN LEAR

*In his book Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life (Harvard University Press, 2022), Jonathan Lear, the John U. Nef Distinguished Service Professor in the Committee on Social Thought and Philosophy, considers how mourning gives meaning to life. This excerpt, first published in The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, begins the second chapter, "Transience and Hope: A Return to Freud in a Time of Pandemic."*

One day, when I was six years old, I got in the back seat with my sister, and our parents drove us to visit our grandparents. When we arrived, there was a party going on. Lots of grown-ups dressed up. My Grandma Jenny came over, bent down, and told me that her father, my great-grandfather, had gone off on a long trip. I barely knew who he was, and I had no idea why she was telling me this. A moment later, an older cousin walked over and said, "He's dead." This is the moment I realized adults lie to children.

Why do they do this? Well, "they" don't all. There have been cultural shifts, and my sense is that these days, adults try to be more honest with children. Still, this moment is worthy of attention. My grandmother was not a reflective person, and I suspect she acted from an ingrained habit that expressed a cultural norm. Officially, the norm was to protect children—in this case, from a knowledge that would be too much for them at their age. But what knowledge is that? If my grandmother had said, "He died," I doubt I would have learned much. What I did learn a moment later when my cousin spilled the beans was that the topic of death was treated by adults as dangerous, taboo, forbidden to children.

I am not here interested in my grandmother's psychology but rather in a shared cultural imaginary of which she availed herself. In acting as though there is some "adult knowledge" from which one needs to protect the children, one tacitly reassures oneself that one has something—namely, the knowledge that is not to be passed on. But what knowledge is that? The cultural norm of protecting the children serves to protect *the adults* from recognizing that in this painful and important moment in life, they understand little or nothing.

Being an adult, so understood, thus involves *playing* the role of adult. It also allows gratifications of childhood play. When my grandmother said her father had gone on a long trip, I now wonder whether she was expressing *her* fantasy—that in playing the adult, she was, at the same time, able to return to something from childhood. Perhaps her parents had told *her* that a grandparent had gone on a long trip. The fantasy may have been passed through the generations—the very words passing from adult to child—without anyone particularly noticing. Perhaps my grandmother was inviting me to join her in play—a transitional space of cultural experience in which we tacitly understand that the question of whether he is *really* on a long trip is not to be asked. Ironically, it was a child—my older cousin—who destroyed the play space with the intrusion of reality: "He's dead."

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*Jonathan Lear (2021) "Transience and Hope: A Return to Freud in a Time of Pandemic," The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 102:1 © 2016 Institute of Psychoanalysis, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com>, on behalf of Institute of Psychoanalysis. ■*

HEAR LEAR DISCUSS HIS BOOK ON THE *BIG BRAINS*

PODCAST at [tableau.uchicago.edu/lear](http://tableau.uchicago.edu/lear).





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### Berlin Family Lectures

The Randy L. and Melvin R. Berlin Family Lectures bring to campus individuals who are making fundamental contributions to the arts, humanities, and humanistic social sciences for an extended series of annual lectures and development of a book for publication with the University of Chicago Press. In 2024, novelist and essayist Yiyun Li from Princeton University will deliver three lectures on April 16, 23, and 30, which are free and open to the public, at the David Rubenstein Forum in Chicago. For more information, contact [humanities@uchicago.edu](mailto:humanities@uchicago.edu).

### UChicago Paleography and the Book Visiting Scholars Program

For the past two years, visiting scholars have taught a course to UChicago students and educated the general public for one quarter annually about manuscript history and reception, paleography, epigraphy, philology, or the evolution of print. The course is taught in the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center. In 2024, scholar of Japan Peter Kornicki from Cambridge University will discuss the history of the book in Japan in a free public lecture on May 16 at the David Rubenstein Forum in Chicago. For more information, contact [humanities@uchicago.edu](mailto:humanities@uchicago.edu).

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