# TABLEAU

THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | SPRING 2024

IN THIS ISSUE | AI | JOURNALISM | FULBRIGHT SCHOLARS

#### ALUMNA PROFILE

#### 2 CROSS-CULTURAL

Mónica Félix, AM'13, PhD'17, works to support Chicago cultural organizations.

#### IDEAS

#### 4 TWO PERSPECTIVES ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

With Malte Willer and Marc Downie.

.....

#### GRADUATE STUDENTS

#### 6 ON THE ROAD

PhD students discuss the benefits of the Fulbright Program.

#### JUNIOR FACULTY FOCUS

#### 8 ROMANCE AND REPRESENTATION

.....

Meet four assistant professors in Romance Languages and Literatures.

......

#### HUMANITIES AT WORK

#### **10 READ ALL ABOUT IT**

The scoop on journalism from a trio of alumni.

#### **ON CAMPUS**

#### **12 TIPPING POINT**

ISAC director Timothy P. Harrison, AM'91, PhD'95, on the institute's future.

#### THE COLLEGE

#### **13 DOUBLE MAJOR**

A student of physics and classics finds a path to medical research.

#### ON THE COVER

Christopher Williams's exhibition Radio / Rauhfaser / Television, which closed at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society in April, was accompanied by an adaptation of a 1970s West German radio play recorded by Williams using vintage audio equipment and broadcast on Chicago's Lumpen Radio (105.5 FM). Photograph © Christopher Williams. Courtesy the artist, David Zwirner, and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, Germany. Fireworks at Ikenohata (1881), a woodblock print by Kobayashi Kiyochika, is on display in the Smart Museum's exhibition Meiji Modern: Fifty Years of New Japan, which opened in March.



OPPOSITE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD P. GOODBODY; THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ZIC

### Dear Alumni and Friends,

Contrary to what you may read in the news, majoring in the humanities is not a death knell for gainful employment and good careers. As you already know, UChicago undergraduate students majoring in the humanities are finding jobs shortly after graduation in multiple fields, including gaming design, scriptwriting for TV and movies, and software engineering. Their first jobs build the foundation for them to enjoy prosperous, fulfilling careers.

Here's how our current undergraduates are faring. Within three months of graduating, nearly all UChicago College alumni have either received offers of employment—77 percent—or decided to pursue graduate school or other postgraduate academic opportunities—22 percent.

Nationally and internationally, our undergraduates have multiple opportunities for internships, jobs on campus, and career treks, which bring small groups of students to meet with potential employers. In the coming months, the division's career treks are expanding to include companies hiring in London, Paris, and Berlin. Through career treks and internships, students gain interviewing skills, practical job experience, and ready access to good organizations, allowing them to find jobs more easily after graduation.

Recently, we launched Humanities Advantage, a new initiative to highlight the distinctive skill sets our students develop when they double major in a humanities discipline and another area of interest. Humanities Advantage brings visibility to the 71 percent of our majors who are doubled up. I hope it brings us more.

**Oscar Taub**, AB'23, majored in Art History and Economics. At UChicago, he was orientation leader and curator of the Art in Public Spaces initiative over-



Deborah L. Nelson

seeing campus art collections. He is now an associate at Sotheby's.

**Elaine Wan**, AB'22, majored in East Asian Languages and Civilizations and Computer Science. At UChicago, she was a graphic design assistant at the Regenstein Library and spent a summer as a software engineering intern for Nordstrom. Currently, Wan is a software engineer at Microsoft.

**Nicholas Coyle**, AB'17, majored in Philosophy and Economics. While attending UChicago, he founded and was the president of Rockefeller Business Management and served as an intern in corporate finance at Dycom Industries. Now he is manager of growth at Netflix.

Finally, as you will read in this issue of *Tableau*, **Jane Tunde Kelleher**, AB'20, SM'21, built on her studies in Classics and Physics to become an MD student in a medical research program jointly run by Harvard and MIT.

Thank you for your devotion to the humanities. We hope you will spread the word that our alumni are thriving in the workplace. From the College to our master's and PhD degree programs, students are taught by our excellent faculty and strengthened through career training at UChicago. With our recent graduates launching fascinating careers, we thank you—our extraordinary alumni, donors, and advocates—for your strong support.

Orth Nos

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

Tableau (Spring 2024, Volume 25, Number 2) is published biannually by the Division of the Humanities at the University of Chicago for alumni and friends. Editor: Lucas McGranahan. Contributing Editors: Maria Carrasquilla; Jeanie Chung; Laura Demanski, AM'94; Courtney C. W. Guerra, AB'05; Joyce Kuechler; Sara Patterson; and Mary Ruth Yoe. Proofreader: Katie Byrne. Designers: Guido Mendez and Joanne Chappell. Contact: Division of the Humanities, 1115 East 58th Street, Chicago, IL 60637; tableau.uchicago.edu.

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

# Crosscultural

#### BY LUCAS MCGRANAHAN

# How a Comparative Literature PhD forged a career path supporting Chicago cultural organizations

Comparative Literature alumna **Mónica Félix**, AM'13, PhD'17, is the executive director of the Chicago Cultural Alliance. *Tableau* spoke with her about supporting small cultural nonprofits and how her humanities background informs her work.

#### What does the Chicago Cultural Alliance do?

The mission is to support and promote Chicago centers of cultural heritage. It started as a Field Museum initiative in 1998, founded by two anthropologists whose vision was to connect the many different cultural centers and historical societies throughout the city and give them a voice. That's why we refer to ourselves as a "first voice" organization. We don't attempt to speak for anyone. We help channel the narrative that they want to present about their communities and put them in touch for knowledge and resource sharing.

At first it was a series of lectures to bring people together to get to know each other and have cultural touch points. Then it was formalized as a nonprofit with a more focused mission of sharing connections, resources, and mentorship. It started with around 20 organizations. Now we have 49 of what we call core members, which are all centers of cultural heritage, and more than 20 partner members that are supporting culture, arts, or nonprofit work in Chicago.

### *What kind of help do the member organizations need?*

You would be amazed by the range of programming that our members have. They have dances, cooking classes, movie screenings, rotating exhibits-but small budgets. These organizations follow a similar pattern. You have immigration to the city and some founder who's very enthusiastic about forming community around their group. They establish a center. It starts out as a place that maybe offers a few social services, translation services, a small collection of items relevant to the culture. And over the years it grows and blossoms as the neighborhood flourishes. But these are not people who are coming to this with a business degree or any sort of management training. Without formal training it's difficult to negotiate questions like, How do you write a grant? How do you launch a capital campaign and expand your building? How do you write a job description for a marketing manager? We help with those questions.

<text>

#### What do you focus on in your job?

It's important to be aware of the grant cycle. There's the logistics of managing a hybrid work environment, which is a new challenge that a lot of companies are facing. But the fun part of the work is working on the programming. We hold our Activating Heritage conference every year in March. It's designed to appeal to nonprofit professionals—specifically from smaller nonprofits with a cultural focus. We hold some great workshops like an introduction to launching your own oral history project, or low-cost solutions to collections management. When you arrive at the conference, you're going to meet a few friends and have a new connection on the way out. And that's really what we are about: building those connections and the sense of community.

I also stay engaged with our member organizations. For example, I went to the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture and took a class on making *šiaudinukai*, straw Christmas ornaments. Those are really the moments that stay with me and make the work worthwhile. We also just did a lot of work supporting the Filipino American Historical Society of Chicago. Their founder had passed away, the home



where their 400 boxes' worth of cultural heritage collections was being held was sold, and they had to pack everything up. So, we helped get volunteers to catalog and triage the collection.

#### What other events do you do?

Every other year we organize a festival of sorts called Journey Chicago during October. It's designed as a monthlong series of cross-cultural events. In 2022, we had 11 events with 23 collaborating institutions in 10 different neighborhoods, including one in the Chicago suburbs. The goal is to bring together cultural centers that haven't collaborated in the past to explore something between their cultures.

One of the events was called "Drums Are the Heartbeat of Our Community," which brought together the Trickster Cultural Center, who hosted a Native American drumming group, and the Chicago Japanese American Historical Society, who invited a group of traditional Taiko drummers. They were exploring the function of traditional drum-playing from very different perspectives. The Taiko drummers were an all-women group. They take classes and write down the musical form, and it's very precise and practiced. The Native American drumming is taught person to person, usually within a family or very tight-knit community. They don't write it down. And women are not allowed to participate. When we had a Q&A session afterward, it was actually the drummers themselves who had the most questions for each other, so it was a real exchange of traditions. But there was also a wider group of folks who came out from all around. We had people from Wisconsin, from the city, from the neighborhoods.

# How does your humanities background inform your work?

A lot of my education was on cross-cultural intersections. I learned how to work with original sources, whether paper or digital. It is incredibly valuable to understand that act of translation, of finding information and then presenting it to different audiences. I think it's something that a lot of alums overlook. They think, "Well, my research was on depictions of the color purple in Novalis. Who's going to hire me to do that?" They won't hire you to present that, specifically, but you're able to read and interpret. You can write a paper and then present it to different audiences. You can go ahead and study Novalis, but also add in translation theory, go to a few networking events, and join a few professional groups, so you have those contacts in your pocket in case you do decide to pursue that after graduation.

## *Could you discuss your UChicago volunteer experience?*

I started out on the University of Chicago Alumni Club board for the city of Chicago. I was on that board for, I think, three years. I was surprised to be invited to apply to the University-wide Alumni Board, but I recently joined it and just went through my first board meeting. This is the main alumni board that in many ways helps set the tone for the regional clubs. And what a powerful resource! I'm really excited about that, because one of my great passions is career training. I had to find my way through since I didn't really know what to do with a PhD. I didn't have a lot of connections, and I wasn't going to become a professor. Wouldn't it be great if someone assembled resources for humanities graduates to help make that a shorter learning period? I'm always happy to connect with people to offer whatever advice I can. That's something I'd like to bring to the Alumni Board.



You can go ahead and study Novalis, but also add in translation theory, go to a few networking events, and join a few professional groups, so you have those contacts in your pocket.

> —Mónica Félix, AM'13, PhD'17



Marc Downie and Paul Kaiser comprise OpenEnded group, whose pieces include Upending (2010), an experimental work of 3D cinema that digitally reconstructed photographic images to create a haunting, otherworldly effect.

# Two perspectives on articul intelligence

AS TOLD TO LUCAS MCGRANAHAN

A philosopher and a digital artist discuss Al's ability to communicate (or not) and its role in the creative process.



Malte Willer is an associate professor in Philosophy focusing on philosophy of language and philosophical logic. He sits on the faculty committee of the Artificial Intelligence and Language specialization within the Master of Arts in Digital Studies of Language, Culture, and History program.

You can distinguish different philosophical problems pertaining to AI. You have issues of AI ethics: What kinds of constraints do we need to impose on AI? What about AI biases? From a theoretical perspective, you can ask what it would be for a computer system to be intelligent. My area, philosophy of language, is concerned with our ability to communicate. When it comes to a large language model such as ChatGPT, the question is, "Do these things actually speak?"

Linguists and philosophers of language these days have a specific idea about how information is encoded in human communication. Semanticists, in particular, have a specific proposal for how the meanings of individual words are to be modeled using set-theoretic constructions—for the word *car*, it would be the set of objects that are cars—which are put together according to certain syntactic rules. Whatever ChatGPT is doing, it can't be doing that. For ChatGPT, the meaning of *car* is a very complex vector, represented mathematically, that determines how likely *car* is to occur as the next word in a sentence. This is a very different conception of what the meaning of a word is.

In the philosophical tradition called externalism, humans' ability to refer to the world is actually remarkably cheap. You don't really need to know much about what you're talking about to be able to talk about it. [UCLA philosopher] Tyler Burge has this example where a patient comes to the doctor's office and says, "I have arthritis in my thigh." This is clearly false because arthritis is in the joints, but the doctor can engage with this kind of statement, and the patient is clearly referring to the world in some way. Externalists are saying that you can rely on the competence of others to meaningfully refer to things in the world. And if that is right, then the real question is whether large language models can exploit processes in a linguistic community that we, as humans, have exploited all along. Suppose ChatGPT is working on Wikipedia entries. It's working on information provided by ordinary speakers. So it would be parasitic—but we're all parasites.

We can all be parasites, but there still needs to be some intention on our side. At a minimum, you need to have an intention of using the word in the same way as it is used by your linguistic community. So there is this very interesting question of whether or not large language models, or any kind of computer, could have this kind of intention. And what would that look like? How do you check?

There's a famous example from [late Harvard philosopher] Hilary Putnam. You're in a park and you see ants crawling around. The way they walk, they draw lines in the sand. It ends up that they draw something that really resembles Winston Churchill. Now, are you looking at a picture of Winston Churchill? The intuition is no, you aren't, because the ants didn't really intend to produce such a thing. Among many of us, including many computer scientists, the view is that ChatGPT is like the ants.



Marc Downie is a digital artist and an associate professor of practice in the arts in Cinema and Media Studies. His studio, OpenEndedGroup, has presented work at Lincoln Center, York Minster Cathedral, MoMA, the Hayward Gallery, ICA Boston, and many other venues.

I ended up doing AI to become a better artist. I wanted a relationship with computation that was deep and sincere and exploratory. Any fool can make a computer program that is unpredictable. The challenge is, having had the computer surprise you—with an image, a movement, a speed, or an intensity—to then say, "I'd like more of that, please," or, conversely, "That thing that you did is really boring or ugly. Don't ever do that." You build up some categories that are completely local to the piece and start building structures using these elements that you haven't planned ahead of time.

In my studio, we often find ourselves chasing and finding the same high: working hard, preparing tools and strategies, and using weird programming languages and new bits of hardware to get to a place where the computer will delight us, and we can then fold that delight back into a piece and make more of it.

We had a commission from UChicago Presents for a piece that premiered in October [*BlackLetter*, a combination of 3D cinema with a live performance of violin and dance]. We had the opportunity to put Jodi Melnick, who has had a pivotal role in the New York dance scene for decades, under the microscope. We put her in a capture scenario with five or six cameras, recorded it, analyzed it, built stereoscopic presentations of it, built depth maps of it, analyzed the motion, and allowed neural networks to respond to her shapes. It was a real thrill to make, but without AI looking over our shoulder, offering advice and suggesting frames, we'd have had no meaningful access to the material we'd captured.

Before generative AI, the term *generative* had often been reserved for works that have absolutely no reference—making beautiful patterns using nothing more than trigonometry, for example. Based on this, people like me, making computational and software pieces out of things sensed by cameras or microphones interacting with things, or visualizing things—would not be doing generative art. But that's slowly being turned on its head, because today's generative neural networks are obviously creating something out of vast knowledge. They do have a reference, but it is compressed and bound up inside them.

My studio has worked with different objects—a symphony, a stained-glass window in northern England—but dance has been one of the most stimulating and productive. Our eyes have a special relationship to depictions of human bodies, particularly when they move. There's a shift in that moment where something stops being abstract and suddenly collapses into a recognizable human shape or emotion. It puts you in really interesting places, places that oil painting or conventional film can't get to. As an artist you're looking for the thing that the audience will take with them, so that after they leave the movie theater or museum they go outside and find that the world looks just slightly different. This is a goal of perhaps all experimental film: to reanimate, re-delight the world just for a moment.





#### BY KELLEY TATRO

PhD students discuss the professional and personal benefits of the Fulbright Program.

During her Fulbright Scholarship, Erin Atwell, AM'17, attended prayers, Koranic recitation classes, and study circles at Al-Azhar Mosque to learn how Muslims cultivate taqwa (godfearingness).

"It's life-changing," says **Jennifer Jenson**, a Germanic Studies PhD student, of her experience as a Fulbright scholar in Germany from September 2022 to September 2023.

The Fulbright Program, described by the US Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs as "the flagship international academic exchange program sponsored by the US government," seeks to encourage "mutual understanding between the United States and other countries." Recipients of Fulbright support such as recent college graduates, graduate students, professors, and education professionals—conduct research, share their specialized knowledge, or teach English abroad. From 2019 to 2023, 90 UChicago students, including 15 Humanities graduate students or graduate alumni, accepted Fulbright grants. And five UChicago Humanities PhD students, Jenson among them, went abroad on a Fulbright grant in 2022 alone.

"Professionally, my research goals changed in ways that were very productive," says Jenson, who also won the 2021 Gutekunst Prize of the Friends of Goethe New York, an award given to outstanding young translators of German literature into English. Inspired by conversations with fellow scholars at the Free University of Berlin—as well as her serendipitous attendance at a multimedia dance event titled Knitting-she reoriented her dissertation toward the influence of textile production on German artists and writers in the 1970s and 1980s. She explains that the ability to engage with local culture by going to museums and performances gave her "a different understanding of the people I interacted with, a different understanding of the historical context and what people's values were."

In addition to the professional benefits, she says, "personally, spending a year abroad—in a country that I already cared about deeply—allowed me to have an even more intimate relationship with people. This all facilitated an intercultural exchange that's so important in the modern world."

"I loved my time abroad," Jenson says, "and would do it over and over again."

**Erin Atwell**, AM'17, a PhD student in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and Anthropology with a

master's degree from the Divinity School, also appreciated the emphasis on the interpersonal element of her research, which traces the concept of taqwa (godfearingness) through classical Islamic texts into modern-day Muslim practices. Interacting with fellow scholars in Egypt was an important way for her to gain insight into how local people interpret taqwa in textual sources as well as how they invoke it in their everyday, contemporary experience. Fulbright contacts in the country helped her gain research clearance from the state and facilitated her conversations with Islamic studies scholars. She joined religious activities at Al-Azhar Mosque, known colloquially as the Muslim Vatican for its historical importance to Sunni Muslim learning. And at other religious institutions, she attended book groups and cinema clubs that encourage tagwa as an antidote to atheism and religious-based violence, which are perceived as a "dual extremism" threatening Egyptian society today.

Atwell received faculty accommodations and access to the campus and library of the American University in Cairo, which was particularly meaningful because she brought along her three-year-old daughter. Watching her child engage with other children and with local food traditions was another layer of the cultural exchange she valued.

"The personal impact that doing research in another place provides is often invisible. Something that was quite beautiful about the Fulbright," she says, was that its goal to promote cultural exchange is "rendered explicit" rather than imagined as a tangential benefit to a researcher working abroad.

For **Anthony Stott**, a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature and East Asian Languages and Civilizations, traveling to Japan allowed for unique firsthand dialogue with important figures in his field of study while also encouraging him to continue an extracurricular pursuit he'd begun during the pandemic: taking lessons in Noh, the traditional Japanese dance-drama genre. In his application for the award, he had proposed Noh lessons specifically to bolster the cultural-exchange piece of his project, which focused on scouring libraries and used bookshops for issues of *Critical Space* (a Japanese journal published



Jennifer Jenson



Erin Atwell, AM'17



Anthony Stott

from 1991 to 2002), visiting architectural sites, and interviewing sources. He also worked with a mentor at Waseda University in Tokyo.

Like Jenson, Stott benefited from a fortuitous turn of events that made one encounter especially memorable. He explains that few Japanese scholars have written about cultural criticism in the late twentieth century, so firsthand discussions with critics themselves are vital—the kind of window onto the subject that you can't get by "flipping through a lot of used periodicals."

In one case, the timing of the exchange was particularly good. He had set up an interview with Kojin Karatani, one of *Critical Space*'s coeditors and its most frequent contributor, just before it was announced that Karatani had won the Berggruen Prize, a million-dollar award given annually to someone whose ideas "have provided wisdom and selfunderstanding in a rapidly changing world." Nevertheless, Stott believes that *Critical Space* has been underrecognized for its importance to Japanese criticism, and he appreciated the chance to ask about the philosopher's memories of the publication and the shifts in his thinking during its run.

Atwell, Jenson, and Stott all recommend the Fulbright Program to others who may be looking to experience life outside the US, even if they have studied abroad before. Atwell and Jenson both describe how wonderful it was to have a network of supportive Fulbright connections on the ground, ready to help them navigate challenges of any stripe. Stott says his 14-month-long Fulbright experience also contributed to a greater sense of ease in everyday life in Tokyo after a previous period of language study in Japan. "The familiarity got me," he explains. "At a university, it can be hard to know about events taking place out in the world at large," but during his period of Fulbright study, he felt better informed about events happening around him and more comfortable exploring them.

Jenson revealed one final benefit from her experience as a Fulbright scholar: "When I arrived back in Chicago, she says, "I felt a deep sense of home and it was really lovely."



# Romance and representation

BY CHANDLER A. CALDERON

Junior faculty in Romance Languages and Literatures trace empires and ideologies.

Spanning from the medieval to the contemporary and from the Americas to North Africa, Iberia, and France—the scholarship of the Romance Languages and Literatures junior faculty is "grounded in close attention to literary and cultural objects," notes department chair **Alison James**, "while engaging with interdisciplinary fields of broad humanistic significance, including environmental criticism, gender and sexuality studies, theater and performance studies, and postcolonial studies." *Tableau* spoke with four of the department's assistant professors about their work.

#### **MEDIEVAL MACHINATIONS**

"Through technology you can unlock a potential that you could not access naturally," says **Noel Blanco Mourelle**, a specialist in medieval and early modern lberia. He shares his subjects' fascination with "technology that seems slightly crazy."

Blanco Mourelle's first book project centers on fourteenth-century theologian and philosopher

Ramón Llull's ambition to create a universal language that could "prove to people of other faiths that Christianity was logical," he says. The Art, as Llull called his ambitious work, went beyond a philosophical treatise. It was a whole system relying on "wheels and machines and diagrams," including a wheel featuring concentric circles of parchment pinned in the center so they could spin freely. Letters that stood for words were written around the circles, and as one turned the circles, aligning the letters in different ways, the corresponding words would "create what he felt were perfect arguments," Blanco Mourelle explains.

He also studies how others modified Llull's work over the centuries. One educator turned Llull's wheels into tools to teach Latin grammar to the daughters of King Philip II of Spain in the sixteenth century.

Blanco Mourelle notes that a challenge when researching and teaching this material is the enmeshing of religion and science in medieval Europe, when goals of conversion often underpinned scientific thinking. For instance, Llull lived on the island of Majorca, today part of Spain, which had gone through a period of Islamic rule in prior centuries. "You don't want to transform this into a completely secular story," Blanco Mourelle says. "It's a complicated thing to unpack."

#### THE LIMITS OF NATURE

Research topics like waste and menstruation might surprise a newcomer to early modern French literature, but **Pauline Goul** explains that they follow quite naturally from the era she studies. In the sixteenth century, authors like Rabelais and Montaigne were preoccupied with excess and bodily functions; as she says, "I end up working on these texts that just have no shame about these things." And she wondered what those excesses might have to do with environmental concerns.

Goul's first book project grew out of a broad consideration of waste and sustainability in this period of colonial conquest and extraction. She acknowledges

Pauline Goul is interested in how the literature—and maps—of the early modern period show how Europeans began depicting the world in terms of resources to be extracted and exploited. that "sustainability" in the way we understand it today was not a concern back then. Yet at that moment, when maps reflected a view of the New World as "resources that could be exploited," Goul explains, early modern authors laid the groundwork for our modern use of the term by beginning to ask questions that preoccupy us today: "What are excessive appetites? Can we go on in this way forever, or are there limits?"

Recently she has also worked on the connection between women and nature in early modern French literature. One text she examines is an agricultural treatise that describes certain plants used to regulate menstruation or terminate pregnancies. At a time when there was much anxiety about the "inscrutability of the female body," Goul says, women's engagement with nature opened up space for bodily autonomy, sexuality, and intimacy among women.

#### **DECOLONIZING LITERATURE**

A specialist in francophone North African literature, **Khalid Lyamlahy** studies the generation of Moroccan writers who began their careers with the journal *Souffles*. He says the publication, founded in 1966, was a forum for debating postindependence questions: "How do we decolonize our culture? How do we build a new cultural identity that is free from both colonialism and from the traditional patriarchal structures of society?" *Souffles* contributors also grappled with whether and how they could "still write in French, the language of the former colonizer," he adds.

Lyamlahy focuses on how three authors associated with *Souffles*—Abdellatif Laâbi, poet and editor in chief of the journal; sociologist, writer, and critic Abdelkébir Khatibi; and Amazigh poet Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine—incorporate subversive and nostalgic modes in their writing.

A creative writer himself, Lyamlahy has published two novels. The first, *Un roman étranger* (A foreign novel) (Présence Africaine, 2017), draws upon his own frustration navigating bureaucracy as an immigrant to France. The second, *Évocation d'un mémorial à Venise* (Evocation of a memorial in Venice) (Présence Africaine, 2023), which received special mention from the jury of the prestigious *Prix des cinq continents de la Francophonie* in March, is an attempt to process the tragic death of a Gambian refugee who drowned in Venice's Grand Canal in 2017 with bystanders watching him—even insulting him. Writing novels and book reviews is important to Lyamlahy, he says, because it "allows you to be in conversation with a broader audience." He has also translated literature, publishing an Arabic edition of Senegalese author Felwine Sarr's *Habiter le monde: Essai de politique relationnelle* (Inhabit the world: Essay of relational politics) in 2022 (Kulte Editions). Though he has ventured into self-translation, publishing short excerpts in English from his first novel, Lyamlahy has no further plans to translate his own writing: "It's far better when someone else translates your work, because it gives the work the opportunity to come out as something new."

#### **BEYOND MINSTRELSY**

When people hear the word "blackface," they may think of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tradition of minstrelsy in the United States. But blackface is "all over the Americas," says **Danielle Roper**, Neubauer Family Assistant Professor in Latin American Literature. "Racial caricature is something that representations of Blackness in popular culture are constantly mediating." Roper is interested in all the places blackface performance crops up today, whether in a dance group's depiction of slavery at an Andean fiesta in Peru, in Jamaican popular theater, or in a Spanish-language television show in Miami.

The existing framework of the US minstrel show is inadequate for understanding such diverse forms of racial impersonation, Roper says, and there are limits to thinking about blackface within any one nation. She explains that blackface is "a shared phenomenon that comes out of a history of slavery," and if scholars consider its practice across cultures, "we might better be able to wrestle with what it is that blackface enables people to do. Blackface performance is a way of fixing or reiterating dynamics of racial power in a contemporary moment that's defined by change, as these countries transition from discourses of color blindness to ones of multiculturalism." She suggests that blackface performance operates in relation to myths of racial democracy-nationalist discourses that deem the "race problem" foreign to the nation.

Roper also does curatorial work related to visual interpretations of the legacy of slavery. Recently she curated the virtual exhibition *Visualizing/Performing Blackness in the Afterlives of Slavery: A Caribbean Archive*—part of a digital initiative created by UChicago's Working Group on Slavery and Visual Culture—which features contemporary Black artists from the Caribbean. Roper says the exhibition asks, "How do Black artists today wrestle with visual idioms from slavery in a particular moment that is defined by racial reckoning?"



Through technology you can unlock a potential that you could not access naturally. —Noel Blanco Mourelle



Khalid Lyamlahy



Danielle Roper



Ben Steverman, AB'99, AM'99, enjoys the challenge of explaining complex financial terms and products to readers without using jargon.

# Read all about it

#### BY JEANIE CHUNG

The scoop on journalism from a trio of Humanities alumni Kealey Boyd, AB'01, AM'10, is a Denver-based writer and art critic. Zeba Khan, AB'03, AM'03, is deputy editorial page editor at the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the recipient of a 2023 UChicago Alumni Award. Ben Steverman, AB'99, AM'99, a feature writer at *Bloomberg News*, is currently a Knight-Wallace Fellow at the University of Michigan. The three shared their thoughts on the journalism field and the benefits of a humanistic education.

#### How did you get here?

**Steverman:** When I was an undergrad, I thought that I wanted to do either publishing or journalism. I started out in publishing, did a couple short stints at publishing places, realized it wasn't for me, and went back to grad school at Northwestern and got a master's degree in journalism.

I covered local government, first in the western suburbs of Chicago, then for the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*. When I moved to New York City in 2006, I started covering business, because that's the job I could get. It was never my intention to be a business journalist. But that was the eve of the financial crisis: this incredible, complex, amazing story to cover as a stock market reporter and then moving into personal finance and covering the financial fallout of that disaster.

**#Bloombe** 

Bloomberg

**Khan:** I definitely did not have a traditional path into journalism, but I don't think it's an accident that I ended up in Opinion, because it's where you unabashedly advocate for your ideas.

Coming from a grassroots-activist kind of family, I was taught to speak out and organize for the ideas and causes I believe in. That upbringing led me to launch Muslim-Americans for Obama during the 2008 I would crash any workshop on campus, even when uninvited. ... I suppose Chicago taught me not to wait for an invitation.



—Kealey Boyd, AB'01, AM'10

presidential campaign to get out the vote in Muslim communities at a time when that population was not as civically engaged. From that experience, I was introduced to an organization called the Op-Ed Project, which taught me how to craft my ideas into powerful arguments-taking my advocacy from grassroots organizing to the page.



AB'03, AM'03

I began writing op-eds in earnest and working with the Op-Ed Project to train others from historically marginalized communities to do the same. Eventually, I was fortunate enough to be selected as a John S. Knight Journalism Fellow at Stanford, which led to the position I have today.

Boyd: I graduated from the College with an Econ degree. I worked on Wall Street as an investment banker, then as a structured-product salesperson. I got burnt out right before the crash and had already started applying for graduate school. When I was done with my art history degree, I moved to Denver, where my husband was working.

For somebody who studied Yuan dynasty ink painting, it was not a great job market. I did lots of odd jobs. I taught as an adjunct everywhere. I did administrative work for the Denver Art Museum. I did museum education at the Clyfford Still Museum. I was chatting with other teachers about the lack of arts reporting and criticism in Denver. And I thought, Rather than throw stones, why don't I throw in my hat? In 2015 Hyperallergic, a national art publication, accepted my first-ever pitch and I was hooked. I have been a freelancer since, publishing with the Los Angeles Times, the Art Newspaper, Art Papers, and others.

#### How does your UChicago education help you as a journalist?

Khan: UChicago didn't teach me what to think; it taught me how. I took a course, Methodologies on the Study of the Middle East, with John Woods [now Professor Emeritus of Iranian and Central Asian History in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations]. One of the books we read was The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon. We analyzed the author, the time period he was writing in, what was going on in his society, and how all that influenced him. It was a fascinating exercise. The practice of looking at a subject from multiple angles has stayed with me and continues to contribute to my work to this day.

Boyd: I learned that there's you, and then there's the work-and to separate them. Sometimes I receive feedback or rejection from editors that maybe other writers would deem as mean, and I just never take it that way.

Also, I would crash any workshop on campus, even when uninvited. I went to the East Asian art workshop that was run by the Art History department-I think Katherine Tsiang [PhD'96] ran it at the time. I just loved it and built a lot of lasting relationships that I still keep today. I suppose Chicago taught me not to wait for an invitation.

Steverman: I write about the economy. I write a lot about inequality. I write a lot about technical policy

questions. The hard thing is to dive into those details and come back out and be able to explain them to a regular person. I really think my humanities education helps me ask, every day: Why does this matter? What's important here?

One of my specialties is the sort of "scoop of ideas": finding a perspective on a subject that no one else has brought to that subject before. There's a new way of thinking about tax policy and the racial wealth gap, for example, in the work of Dorothy Brown, who I profiled for Bloomberg Businessweek. Or there are new ways of measuring wealth inequality. I really attribute that curiosity to my years at the University of Chicago and all those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels that I read in Hyde Park.

#### Any advice for aspiring journalists?

Steverman: There was a time when media organizations offered lots of entry-level jobs to generalists. Many of those jobs at newspapers and magazines have disappeared, but there are still opportunities for people who bring something unique. Try to leverage your strengths and then deepen knowledge that might be valuable. If you can publish one good article on a topic like artificial intelligence or climate change, or even something far more specific or offbeat, editors are likely to seek you out for other assignments or jobs.

Khan: Don't wait for permission to write, podcast, or produce. Explore different mediums on your own and see what you're excited by. Gather experience and create a portfolio so when that opportunity comes, you're ready. If it means getting a job just to pay the bills while you hone your craft for a bit, so be it.

Boyd: I look for holes in the national arts conversations and aim to provide a different perspective that is often informed by leaning into the local. They say to write what you know, but that doesn't have to be the personal. Observe what is happening in your community and let that instigate your research.



Timothy P. Harrison, AM'91, PhD'95, returned to UChicago last fall to direct the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures

# pping oint

BY SARA PATTERSON

### New ISAC director Timothy P. Harrison, AM'91, PhD'95, on how the "contemporary and the ancient past connect and intertwine"

Until Timothy P. Harrison, AM'91, PhD'95, became the director of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures. West Asia and North Africa (ISAC) on September 1. 2023, the last time he'd sat in the director's office was when he successfully defended his dissertation. a study of Bronze Age human adaptation to the arid highlands of central Jordan. That day-July 14, 1995was one of the hottest on record for Chicago. Even though the room was air conditioned, Harrison says, he remembers sweating profusely.

Twenty-eight years later, he returns to the hot seat to face different challenges. "ISAC is at a tipping point," says Harrison, also a professor in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. "Some people do not understand the relevance of archaeology for today's problems. We need to participate in larger conversations about global issues such as climate change, conflicts in the Middle East, the destruction and reconstruction of cultural artifacts."

While contemplating ISAC's larger role in the world, Harrison spoke with Tableau about his belief in the essential scholarship of the humanities at UChicago, his step back from spearheading multifaceted research projects, and his fascination with the rise of early civilizations in the ancient Middle East.

#### After working at the University of Toronto for 27 years, why did you want to return to ISAC at UChicago?

I loved my years at the University of Toronto and was not looking to leave my position. However, I was approached to consider the position of director at ISAC and professor in Near Eastern Languages and

Civilizations. As the conversation evolved over many visits, those extended discussions drew me to ISAC and UChicago.

I am excited to be here because of the great energy and enthusiasm. It's an ideal time to be at ISAC. For the first year, I am focused on wrapping my head around the museum and engaging with what's happening now. After this initial deep dive into ISAC, I plan also to teach courses in the archaeology of the Eastern Mediterranean.

#### Will you still be doing fieldwork in this position at ISAC?

At the University of Toronto, I was directing three complex, collaborative research projects in Syria, Iraq, and southeastern Turkey during my annual months of fieldwork. In my current role, unfortunately, I can no longer be the front person on these projects. I must figure out ways to step back while still facilitating this work. I would, however, like to continue being involved with field research. It is hard to let it go completely.

#### Why did you become interested in the rise of civilizations in the ancient Middle East?

One of my mentors was Douglas L. Esse [AM'77, PhD'82], who focused on the rise of complex societies in the city-states of the ancient Middle East. He sparked my interest in the small-scale complex societies of the southern Levant-areas in modern Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, and Syria. Sadly, Esse died in his early 40s, while I was in my doctoral program.

My dissertation addressed whether these smaller cultures were integrated into larger states and into Egypt and Mesopotamia. Through analysis of empirical datasets, I found they were profoundly different and complex. Within these small city-states, alliances and groups were fluid and dynamic. It became clear that the commonly held view of many scholars, including my dissertation advisers-first Esse, and after Esse's passing, McGuire Gibson [AM'64, PhD'68, Professor Emeritus of Mesopotamian Archaeology]that they replicated larger states, only on a smaller scale, was not true.

In much the same way, my students have now begun to challenge theories and understandings about the ancient Middle East that I once espoused, which has been quite gratifying. Extensive fieldwork allows teachers and students to develop new approaches and methodologies, even showing how the contemporary and ancient past connect and intertwine.



# Double major

#### BY CARRIE GOLUS, AB'91, AM'93

### A student of physics and classics—finds a path to medical research.

As an undergraduate, **Jane Tunde Kelleher**, AB'20, SM'21, did not plan on attending medical school. "I imagined that I would pursue a scientific research career," she says. But while doing research in medical physics and medical device development, she had the chance to work with patients—and she realized she felt passionate about patient care. Kelleher is now a medical student in a program jointly run by Harvard Medical School and MIT.

It seems like an unusual path for someone who double majored in Physics and Classical Studies, but the Division of the Humanities has recently launched the Humanities Advantage initiative to create more stories like Kelleher's. The purpose of the initiative is to encourage College students pursuing nonhumanistic studies to add a humanities major that deepens their exposure to ideas, interpretive frameworks, and critical thinking.

Kelleher spoke with *Tableau*, explaining how her studies in the humanities enriched her thinking and prepared her for medical school (setting aside anything she learned about the four humors).

#### Do classical studies and physics overlap at all?

Ah! I love this question. Classical studies and physics dovetail beautifully. Both prompt us to consider the natural structure of the universe and our place in it—physics quantitatively, and classical studies more philosophically and socially.

I wrote my Classical Studies thesis on Lucretius's *De rerum natura* (On the nature of things), an epic poem on Epicurean principles including clinamen [an unpredictable "swerving" of atoms], a physical argument against determinism. At the same time, I was learning

about the mathematical descriptions of curved spacetime in my General Relativity and Cosmology class. That was a cool synergy in my coursework.

### *Was it unusual to combine a hard science major with a humanities major?*

Most of my Classical Studies peers were pursuing other studies in the humanities. To be honest, I was always a little jealous I didn't get to take Greek and Philosophy classes with them. But my professors in both departments were always supportive of my dual interests.

#### Which major is your true love?

Don't make me choose—although if I had to, it would be Physics. But I can't imagine having only studied one or the other.

## Did anything from Classics prove useful in medical school?

People always told me Latin would come in handy for anatomy—and I suppose that was true. But more importantly, my Classical Studies background helped to ground my medical research and studies in the human experience of medicine. Given my work on device therapies, I am especially interested in how life-sustaining implants such as heart pumps affect patients' sense of self, and what we as health care researchers and future clinicians can do to improve their experience.

#### What advice would you give to a student considering a double major in humanities and something in a very different course of study?

Identify the components of each field that really excite you; there is likely an overlap. The common ground that I found in physics and classical studies enhanced my work in both fields and helped lead me to medicine.

Enjoy both the duality and the differences. It is awesome when the humanities and sciences intersect, but it is also a pleasure to read poetry or study art history after a long day in the lab.  $\blacksquare$ 



# Enjoy both the duality and the differences.

—Jane Tunde Kelleher, AB'20, SM'21

HEAR FROM A CREATIVE WRITING AND BIOLOGY MAJOR at tableau.uchicago.edu/tong.



1115 East 58th Street, Chicago, IL 60637



Follow the division on Facebook, X, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Visit humanities.uchicago.edu to connect. Non-Profit Org. U.S. Postage P A I D Chicago, IL Permit #4176

#### Support the humanities! You can have an impact on

## humanistic research at UChicago.

Together, we can build on our strong humanistic traditions and move forward confidently to address the evolving landscape of human experience. You can make a difference for our faculty and students. Please support the scholarship you read about in *Tableau*!



tableau.uchicago.edu/donate

#### Mark your calendar 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 the development of a book for publication with the University of Chicago Press. In spring of 2025, the lectures will be given by acclaimed opera and theater director Yuval Sharon. Look out for dates and more information soon at **berlinfamilylectures.uchicago.edu**.

#### Paleography and the Book Visiting Scholar Program

For the past three 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 the University of Cambridge is discussing the history of the book in Japan in a free public lecture on May 16 at the David Rubenstein Forum in Chicago. For recordings of Paleography and the Book lectures, visit **paleographyandthebook.uchicago.edu**.

# Humanities Day 2024 SAVE THE DATE: SATURDAY, OCTOBER 26



Mark your calendars for **UChicago's annual Humanities Day** celebration featuring faculty members from the Division of the Humanities. Renowned ethnomusicologist Philip V. Bohlman is this year's keynote speaker. All events—lectures, tours, and exhibits—are free and open to the public. Registration opens in mid-August.

Visit humanitiesday.uchicago.edu for program updates.