



ROMS Newsletter - Spring/Summer 2022

“Creative and life-applicable” is how students in Professor Juan Carlos González Espitia’s Hispanic poetry course describe their class project, making and selling T-shirts emblazoned with evocative verses to benefit a local nonprofit. The same could be said for much of the work going on in Romance Studies. Below we explore just a few examples of teaching and research that creatively engage with lives beyond the university, from an Italian class’s contributions to a community art project (now on view at Wilson Library) to Professor Laura Demsey’s work with French-speaking communities in the U.S.

Sometimes, our students only truly appreciate the “life-applicability” of their studies after graduation, as the alumni stories featured here illustrate. In Romance Studies, we are constantly looking for new ways to help our students imagine and realize fulfilling lives post-graduation. Alumni play an important part in this endeavor. This spring, we had the pleasure of welcoming back Richard Lupton (Spanish B.A. ’66 and M.A. ’70) along with a Kenan-Flagler graduate (Javier Guillermo, EMBA ’21) to talk with undergraduate students about the advantages of bilingualism for business careers. In conjunction with the Carolina Conference on Romance Studies, we also hosted alumni of our graduate programs for a “home-coming” of sorts and a panel that explored the diverse professional paths open to the creative thinkers, teachers, and collaborators we train in our Ph.D. programs. I am so grateful for the generosity of Romance Studies alumni who share their time and expertise in these ways.

As another cohort of Romance Studies students turn their tassels and leave campus for the wider world, I invite all our alumni to keep in touch with the department. My colleagues and I would love to hear how your education in French, Italian, Portuguese, or Spanish remains vibrant and “applicable” in your lives.

Ellen Welch, Department Chair

Recent Highlights



- Dr. Letitia Guran, Teaching Assistant Professor of Romanian, has received a National Endowment for the Humanities Award to support her project, “Walking on a Tightrope of Words: Langston Hughes’s Re-writings on Race in the Soviet Union and the U.S.”
- Professor [Serenella Iovino](#) has been appointed to a term on the Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA) Advisory Committee.
- Meagan Kitsinian was the first recipient of the Joel Walz Fellowship for Study Abroad to support her participation in the UNC in Montpellier program in Spring 2022.
- Sixty-six undergraduate majors in Romance Studies programs will graduate this May. The in-person Commencement celebration will feature remarks by undergraduate award winners Meghan Elizabeth Foster (Camões Prize for Excellence in Portuguese), Kelsey Megan Rappe (Jacques Hardré Award for Excellence in French), Markus Anthony Clark (Kimberly Kyser Award

for Excellence in Italian Studies), and Oscar Alejandro Lasserra (Sterling A. Stoudemire Award for Excellence in Spanish). Congratulations to all our graduates!

Poetry is Alive (and Kicking) in T-shirts Designed by SPAN 381 Class

Carli Cone, Regan Curtis, Jenny Ewing, and Kenan Sayers share their experience in Professor [Juan Carlos González Espitia](#)'s innovative literature course

The title of our fall 2021 semester Spanish class, “La muerte viva de la poesía hispánica,” translates to “the living death of Hispanic poetry.” We discussed how poetry’s role in society is constantly dying and being reborn into different roles. In lieu of a formal final examination, we decided to create and sell recycled, sustainable T-shirts that portrayed meaningful verses from some of the poems we explored during the semester. Our goal was to bolster poetry’s role in society and promote widespread exposure to its themes and lessons through a popular consumer product.

Through this project, we shared the outcomes of our class conversations with our community.

Poetry is more than a literary form. It is a way to share different perspectives. It gives a voice to the voiceless. It preserves history. It furthers social movements. Oftentimes, it is easy to forget that poetry is more than dissected Shakespeare’s sonnets, and that it serves a purpose beyond the library or the final examination. Through this project, we wanted to remind people outside the classroom that poetry is a powerful tool accessible to everyone.



**"¿PERO QUÉ HACE
LA PALABRA
SIN EL ALIENTO DE
LA NATURALEZA?"**

- Elicura Chihuailaf



1 - Design for one of the T-shirts created by the SPAN 381 poetry class, featuring a fragment of the poem "El agua de la vida" by Mapuche poet Elicura Chihuailaf.

Poetry is more than a literary form. It is a way to share different perspectives. It gives a voice to the voiceless. It preserves history. It furthers social movements. Oftentimes, it is easy to forget that poetry is more than dissected Shakespeare's sonnets, and that it serves a purpose beyond the library or the final examination. Through this project, we wanted to remind people outside the classroom that poetry is a powerful tool accessible to everyone. Right now, someone may be wearing one of our T-shirts and someone may be reading it in a street or a store aisle. Perhaps they are seeing for the first time a verse by Yanakuna poet Wiñay Mallki about the fight for the land of indigenous people, or they are revisiting the words of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca about that kind of love that must remain secret.

The money generated from these T-shirt sales was donated to *Semillas de Unidad* [Seeds of Unity], a student-founded organization that strives to foster and support a bilingual community throughout North Carolina. Through mentoring, tutoring, and fundraising, UNC students are able to create interpersonal relationships with the local Latinx community. This organization was founded by students who had majors and minors in Spanish. Our class project, and the collaboration it facilitated with *Semillas de Unidad*, is a testament to the passion and drive our class learned about and our engagement with Spanish and Latin American languages and cultures. We were able to make a tangible impact on our community, donating \$315 to *Semillas de Unidad* at the end of the semester. This project furthered some of the very same concepts about society and change proposed in the poems we read in class.

We feel that this project was far more creative and life-applicable than any traditional paper-and-pencil final exam. We learned collaboration, communication, and organization skills. We put to work our knowledge of the language by creating new translations of these poems. We used our skills from other

programs for the practical purposes of creating a website and designing the T-shirts. And especially, we saw in action the power that poetry and art have to mobilize and unite people.

An Unprecedented Experience in a First-Year Seminar

This Fall, undergraduate students in Assistant Professor [Maggie Fritz-Morkin](#)'s seminar on "Contagion and Culture: Lessons from Italy" contributed to a public art and poetry project. R.K. Faulk's [UNPRECEDENTED](#) project invites participants to produce a "blackout poem" by altering a page from a copy of Giovanni Boccaccio's Black Plague-era story collection, the *Decameron*. Professor Fritz-Morkin's students collaborated on the project after studying this classic work of Italian literature in their course. Student Mollie Joyner ('23) comments on her experience:

Oftentimes we see texts, especially those printed, as sacred and as a must-be-preserved art form. Yet, the very idea behind the UNPRECEDENTED project was to completely forsake this idea by destroying an old, classic text with the intention of creating a new form of contemporary poetry and, consequently, art. This rebellious, creative, and bold idea was one I couldn't help but fall in love with from the start. In fact, these themes served as a perfect foundation for my poem to branch into and expand upon another project's themes, known as The Riot Grrrl movement -- a punk movement beginning in the 90s that continues to grow to this day that encourages freedom, confidence, assertiveness, and fierceness against all odds for women via art (i.e. music, "zines," etc.).

Examples of the students' blackout poems are on view at Wilson Library.



2 - Example of a blackout poem in the UNPRECEDENTED project. (Photo courtesy of Wilson Library.)

Meet Professor Laura Demsey

Teaching Associate Professor [Laura Demsey](#) joined the ROMS faculty in Fall 2021. An expert in French Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition, she earned her Ph.D. from Indiana University, Bloomington.



How did you start studying French?

I first started to study French in middle school. I chose French both because my parents had taken it when they were in school, and because everyone I knew was going to choose Spanish, and I wanted to be different! Little did I know at 12 years old that that decision would shape my life so much, and I'm obviously very happy to have made that choice. It's connected me to the wonderful world of Francophonie, and to the incredible colleagues and students I have had the opportunity to work with.

How would you describe your area(s) of expertise?

I specialize in a few areas across linguistics and related fields: language contact — especially between French and English in North America— second language acquisition, and language pedagogy. I am most interested in the interaction of French and English in various types of bilinguals, so that is the main

thread that connects all of my scholarly interests. In addition to research, teaching students about language, culture, linguistics, pedagogy, and professional development comprise an equally important part of who I am professionally.

Your current research focuses on the French spoken in New England. Most Americans might be unaware that that French-speaking communities currently exist in that part of the country. What would you want more people to know about the role of French in the U.S.?

Yes, my most recent project is on the influence of English on the grammar of the French spoken in New England, specifically New Hampshire and Maine. The participants in my study are native French speakers born and raised in the United States, who are mostly descended from Quebec immigrants who came between about 1840 and 1910 during a mass immigration from Canada. It has been a fascinating and joyful experience to work with these French speakers who have helped maintain their New England dialect over multiple generations. Most people are not aware of these communities at all, so it has been a pleasure to share their story with others. I think Americans recognize the importance of studying French more readily when they become aware of how geographically close they are to large francophone communities such as those in New England.

How does your work on language change and language diversity influence the way you teach French?

I bring North American French into the classroom through cultural lessons, music videos, vocabulary, etc. as often as I can, but on a broader level, I bring variation into my classroom as often as possible. I let my students know starting from the first semester that there is more than one “correct” way to say something—touching on the idea of “correct” as a relative concept—but that it depends on formality, geographic location, older vs. newer language, etc. This is something I hope students bring with them to the way they think about their native language as well. I hope to help them realize that language variation and change are natural and can be exciting, especially when we see it happening before our eyes!

Alumni Spotlights

Meet Abby Seitz (B.A. '21)



I came to Carolina thinking that I was incapable of learning languages, and I graduated as an Italian major. This speaks not to my abilities, but to the dedication, support, and enthusiasm of the outstanding professors in the ROMS department. I am forever grateful to [Dr. Amy Chambliss](#), and the entire Italian program, for their unwavering support and constant encouragement during my undergraduate years. If not for them, I may have never pursued Italian and wouldn't have realized, nor come close to realizing, my potential.

Learning a language is challenging, but it opens up a whole new world of opportunities and possibilities. It reveals new ways of thinking and understanding and creates the opportunity to connect with a more diverse range of people and build community. I experienced this when I studied abroad in Florence, Italy during my junior year.

When I arrived in Italy, I was very timid and nervous to use my Italian because I wasn't sure of my abilities, and everyone there spoke nearly fluent English. The few times that I did try to communicate in Italian, I completely froze up resulting in many of the locals laughing at me. This was definitely demoralizing, but instead of giving up, I sought out new ways to immerse myself in the language and improve.

First, I joined an Italian Tennis Club in which only two people spoke English. Naturally, I had to communicate exclusively in Italian, and while this was extremely difficult at first, slowly, slowly (or *piano piano* as the Italians so often said to me) I improved.

I continued to find other ways to expand my exposure to Italian culture by befriending local chefs who taught me special culinary techniques, by spending time with elderly Italians in the countryside to learn about their lifestyles, and by frequenting hidden gems with locals. Out of these experiences, and the patience and generosity of those in Italy who were willing to share their lives and stories with me, I was able to gain a better understanding of Italian culture and language.

This experience left me with an even bigger passion for the Italian language and culture than I had had before. My dream is to combine my love of the Italian culture and language with my appetite for food studies and return to Italy to study gastronomy and food sustainability. In the meantime, I am working as a pastry cook in one of the country's most acclaimed restaurants, Canoe, while simultaneously working toward my long-term aspiration of becoming a dietician.

The UNC Italian program fundamentally changed my life's path as it allowed me to experience self-growth, build my self-confidence, and exposed me to an entirely new culture and community that I now seek out.

Meet Helen Rolf (B.A. '14)



As an undergraduate at UNC, I enrolled in Portuguese to fulfill a second language requirement for the International Studies major. Although I later changed my majors to psychology and Germanic languages, I had fallen in love with the Portuguese language and the Romance Studies department at UNC. My experiences in Portuguese inspired me to study abroad at Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RIO) in Brazil for my entire junior year of undergrad. Some of my favorite memories of living in Rio include teaching English to Brazilian elementary school students in Vidigal, a pacified favela near my home; playing volleyball on Ipanema beach in the mornings before school; and dancing *forró* with friends. Although I traveled extensively throughout Brazil, many of my favorite weekends were spent in Rio exploring the city and hanging out on Ipanema beaches. Living in Rio strengthened my love of Portuguese and Brazilian culture and inspired my desire to one day live and work abroad.

When I returned to Chapel Hill for my senior year, I had a new appreciation for my Portuguese classes and professors. My favorite class was *Lusophone African Literature* with Professor [Richard Vernon](#). His

class was my first exposure to the Lusophone diaspora outside of Brazil or Portugal. The class involved analysis of primary and secondary literary sources, art, and films, which added an interpretive dimension to the subject matter.

I graduated from UNC in 2014 with B.A.'s in German and Psychology and a minor in Portuguese. After graduation, I worked for Oracle as a technology account manager in Boston for a year and then received a promotion and moved to corporate headquarters in San Francisco. After working in the technology industry for five years I decided to pursue a career path more meaningful to me in the healthcare industry.

I will graduate from UNC in spring 2023 with a Master's of Science in Public Health and Master's of Business Administration. I received a FLAS Fellowship with the Institute for the Studies of the Americas, which has enabled me to pursue Portuguese academically at the graduate level. My first year of graduate school I completed an independent study on the effects of government rhetoric on SARS-CoV-2 in Brazil and Argentina. My career interests include global health policy, pharmaceuticals and biotech, and improving access to healthcare on a global scale. The summer of 2021 I will be an intern at a global biopharmaceutical company that has offices in Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon. I am excited to continue to study Portuguese and one day I would like to live and work abroad in the Lusophone world. The Romance Studies department and especially the Portuguese program at UNC have enabled me to achieve these dreams through 12 years of support and providing opportunities for me to excel professionally and linguistically.

Alumni Make the Difference



3 - Spanish program alumnus Richard Lupton meets UNC undergraduates to discuss the advantages of bilingualism for business careers. (Photo by Cassie Diltz.)



4 - Romance Studies graduate program alumni share professional advice at the Carolina Conference. From right: Alessia Martini, Tessa Gurney, Anna Bernard, Gina Mangravite (moderator), and Thomas Philips (on Zoom). (Photo by Sandra García Gutiérrez.)



5 - Graduate students, professors, and alumni of the graduate program meet and mingle the evening before the Carolina Conference. (Photo by Shavon Carey-Hicks.)

ROMS Researchers Explore Fear and Horror across the Romance Language-Speaking World

Ph.D. candidate [Sandra García Gutiérrez](#) shares her scholarly fascination with the spooky and unsettling



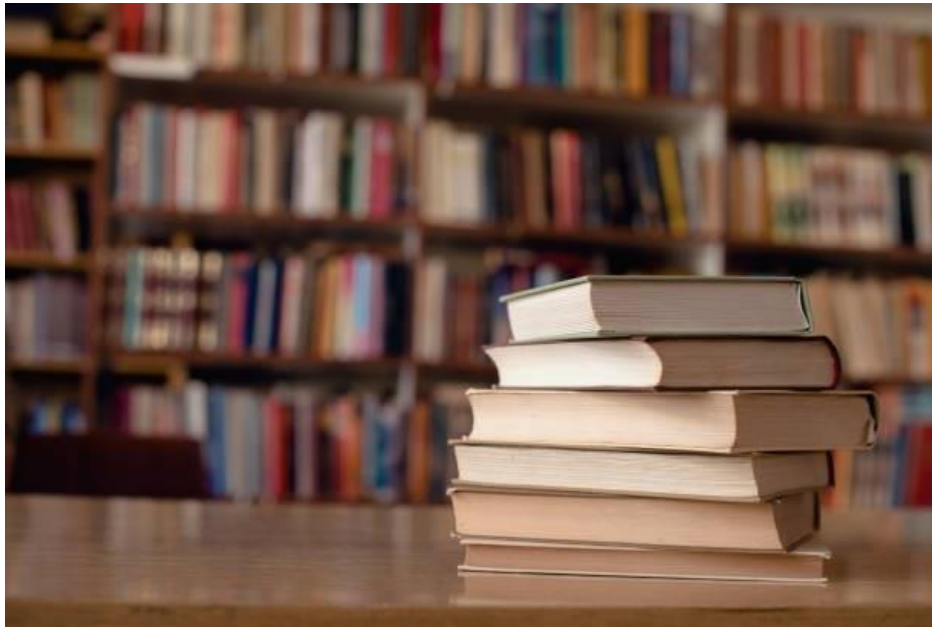
6 - Photo by Sonsoles Ortiz de Urbina.

In Fall 2021, Teaching Assistant Professor [Chloe Hill](#), post-doctoral fellows Marco Malvestio and [Sean Singh Matharoo](#) and I began discussing the overlaps between our individual research projects. We started to think about how our research engages with social anxieties and fears. After several coffees and informal meetings, we decided to organize the Fear and Horror Series in the Romance World. This series seeks to explore narratives of fear and horror in French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese language traditions. The starting point for the series was a roundtable in which the four of us explored how we understand fear and horror in literature and film in dialogue with other disciplines such as cultural studies, women's and gender studies, and ecocriticism. On February 24, we held the virtual roundtable on narratives in multilingual dialogue moderated by Associate Professor [Irene Gomez-Castellano](#). Thanks to the audience' participation, we engaged in a dynamic conversation about how the treatment of fear is particularly timely (especially after the MeToo movement claims, Covid pandemic, Apocalyptic scenarios).

The next event in the series is an event on Spanish Gothic to be held on Wednesday, April 13, between 4 and 6 pm. Miriam López Santos (Universidad de León) will give the talk, "Nuevas miradas para nuevas lectoras: del gótico clásico español al gótico posmoderno mexicano," in which she will examine how the Gothic is a transcultural label that addresses female social anxieties and creates a global community of readers. In this event, I will also give the talk "La moda femenina y el gótico: el vestido goticuqui en la narrativa erlesiana" in which I will explore the relationship between Gothic and Fashion in the short stories of the Spanish writer, Patricia Esteban Erlés (Zaragoza, 1972). Miriam López Santos and I will dialogue about how our research negotiates fear and probes the feminist claims of the 21st century.

We will resume the events for this series in Fall 2022. Sean Singh Matharoo will give a talk on French-language horror literature and media and political philosophy on Thursday, August 25. A month later, Marco Malvestio will invite Enrico Cesaretti (University of Virginia) to come to UNC Chapel Hill to talk about Italian Gothic and Ecocriticism. On Thursday, October 20, Chloe M. Hill will give a talk on Speculative Fiction from the Portuguese-Speaking World. Fear and horror are more contemporary than ever, and our series offers us an opportunity to share and connect our research with the present.

Graduate Student Publications 2021-2022



Booker, Sarah, translator. *Jawbone*, by Mónica Ojeda, published with Coffee House Press (February 2022): <https://coffeehousepress.org/collections/fiction/products/jawbone>

---. *New and Selected Stories* by Cristina Rivera Garza, published with Dorothy Books (April 2022): <https://dorothyproject.com/book/new-and-selected-stories/>

Pierce, Angela. "La resiliencia en la creación de una identidad femenina en *Diario de amor* (1928) y *Obras literarias, dramáticas y poéticas* (1869-1871) de Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda." *Siglo diecinueve*. vol. 28, 2022, pp. 53-78

López-Chen, Francisco. ["Se hace camino al andar: La transgresión continuada del mundo chino en *Verde Shanghai* \(2011\) de Cristina Rivera Garza."](#) *Revista de Literatura Mexicana Contemporánea*, vol. 80, 2021, pp. 23-35.

---. ["Plasticity as Globality and Authenticity: The Re-represented Chinese Brazilians in *Cidade de Plástico*/ 荡寇/蕩寇/*Plastic City* \(2008\)."](#) *Latin American Literary Review*, vol. 48, no. 97, 2021, pp. 3-9.

Graduate Student Awards

Graduate Student Research Support Awards

Royster Society Dissertation Completion Fellowship—Sandra García Gutiérrez

Graduate School Dissertation Completion Fellowship—Gina Mangravite

Graduate School Summer Research Fellowship—Giuseppina Gemboni

Armida Marconi Falvo Award for Italian Studies—Claudia Lombardo

Buchan Summer Award for Iberian & Latin American Studies—Kyle McQuillan

Isabella Payne Cooper Research Travel Award for Italian Studies—Lorenzo d'Agostino

Dana B. Drake Research Travel Award for Iberian & Latin American Studies—Elena Peña-Argüeso

Druscilla French Summer Award—Sandra García Gutiérrez

Jacques Hardré Summer Award for French & Francophone Studies—Alex Goldych, Maria Hyrcza, Jordan Bessette

Jennings Summer Award for Iberian & Latin American Studies—Jhonn Guerra Banda

Kimberly Kyser Graduate Summer Award for Italian Studies—Daniele Meregalli

McCulloch Research Travel Award for French & Francophone Studies—Azza Ben Youssef

VanderWolk Summer Award for French and Francophone Studies—Aubrey Lewis

Graduate Student Teaching Awards

Jacques Hardré Award for Excellence in Teaching French—Charlotte Castellano

Dana B. Drake Award for Excellence in Teaching Italian—Giorgia Bordoni

Dana B. Drake Award for Excellence in Teaching Spanish—Sarah Booker