Greetings from Dey Hall! This semester, it seems ever more important to highlight the positive work, celebrations, and successes happening in our community. Below, you will learn about an innovative dissertation project, catch up with two alums of our graduate program, meet a new faculty member, discover our offerings in Romanian, and see a host of other departmental activities. Scroll down for more...

Recent Highlights
Dr. Laura Alicinio¹ joins ROMS this year as a Marie Skłodowska Curie post-doctoral fellow. Along with Dr. Oswaldo Estrada² and Dr. Luis Fernando Beneduzi of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Dr. Alcinio is pioneering an exchange between UNC and Venice focused on Latin American Studies, supported by the Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility Programme (ICM) 2023-2026.

ROMS hosted a workshop this September on Anticolonial and Antiracist Approaches to Language Instruction led by Dr. L.J. Randolph (BA UNC-ROMS, Ed.D. UNC), pictured here with Director of the Spanish Language Program, Dr. Tacia Kohl³.

¹https://romancestudies.unc.edu/post-doc/laura-alcino/
²https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/oswaldo-estrada/
³https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/anastacia-kohl/
Graduate students Alex Goldych⁴ and Aubrey Lewis⁵ hosted the Albertine Cinémathèque film festival this Fall. Here, Dr. Ji-Yeon Jo (department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies) introduces the film Retour à Séoul (Return to Seoul).

PhD Student Sarah Blanton on Researching Migrant Workers' Stories

Sarah Blanton⁶ is a Ph.D. candidate in the Iberian and Latin American literatures and cultures program and a recent recipient of a Summer Research Award from UNC’s Graduate School. Her dissertation, tentatively titled “Materiality of Labor, Literacies, and Resistance in Contemporary US/MX Transnational Narratives,” explores the invisibilized experiences of Spanish-speaking farmworkers through a variety of textual and material forms of storytelling.

What drew you to study cultural production by farmworker communities?

In 2019, my husband and I purchased a farm in the rolling hills of rural North Carolina near the Virginia border. Having just left a high school teaching job that I loved to begin this new adventure, my focus at the time was on reclaiming the old farm. The first summer after the move I found myself getting to know my neighbors and community members who had lived in Caswell County for many generations, and then I’d interact with Spanish-speaking community members at local stores and see them laboring in the fields in the grueling heat. I recall that around this time of year, in October or November, most of the Spanish-speaking community I encountered completely disappeared at the same time the tobacco crops were harvested; this changed the whole rural landscape and experience for me and brought up a lot of questions. I began researching immigration and labor economies in the rural Southeast, beginning with the social sciences and then seeking out related poetry, short stories, and art with the simple purpose of understanding my agricultural community.
better. The more I researched, the more artifacts I began to find (even on my own farm) that spoke as material remainders of these often hidden or repressed labor legacies and economies. That said, I found that there was a general lack of resources that broached the kinds of questions that I wanted to understand, so I returned to the graduate program in 2020 to formally explore these questions in the doctoral program.

Your dissertation stands out for its diverse corpus of materials, including not only novels and historical records but also songs, games, art objects, and plowed fields. Tell us about one of these unexpected “narratives” and how it tells you about the lives of farmworker communities.

Prior to beginning this project, I narrowly considered narratives to be made up of written alphabetic text, such as short stories, poems, and novels. Over the course of developing this project, however, new strategies of reading opened up that were inspired by local practices of farmworkers on the ground. This kind of reading “against the grain” got me thinking about narrativity more broadly; the idea took root that a text itself can be beyond the alphabetic, taking on memory, narrative, rhythm, and story. While a farmworker may not be able to sign their name with alphabetic letters, they likely have a symbol that identifies them. What does this symbol they make on the dotted line convey? What kinds of histories, knowledge, and experiences?

Lately I’ve been honing in on the role of music in the farmworker community, and particularly the history and function of the corrido. Music in general is a fundamental and generative catalyst of expression and collective memory in farmworker narratives, and I encourage any ROMS student or grad to tune into La Ley 101.1 FM to enjoy a regional Mexican radio station right here in the Piedmont! Mexican corridos and música norteña are fascinating for their migratory themes, and corridos in particular are fundamentally migratory; infused with a strong narrative component, they’re intended to share news and preserve memory and they’re passed along by oral tradition. I’ve found that these musical traditions maintain these historic functions in today’s farmworker communities, especially as they reveal a farmworker’s connection to land and the complexity of belonging.

How are you hoping to contribute to your field of study and/or public understanding through your project?

This project begs the question of how and why farmworkers are systematically erased or hidden, with the ultimate goal of opening up a space for a more nuanced understanding of some of the complexities of these laborers’ worlds. Farmworkers come largely from Mexico on temporary visas and leave their families, lives, and sense of belonging behind to labor in a sector that most US citizens would not even consider pursuing. It’s grueling, high-risk work that takes a massive toll on the body, and, in addition to that, H2A farmworkers also negotiate isolation, language barriers, and other bureaucratic and social contingencies. Although the US completely depends on this system to function so that food remains on the shelves at local grocery stores, farmworkers are barely remarked or understood within rural or urban communities. I hope that this project sheds some light on these invisibilized communities, poses questions to consider, and provides some context with which to discuss these complex and exploitative environments so that farmworkers and the communities in which they live may become better integrated and understood.
How would you describe your areas of expertise?

I work primarily on Marcel Proust, a French novelist who wrote one giant novel, À la recherche du temps perdu [In Search of Lost Time], which was published between 1913 and 1927. I focus on what we imagine as we read Proust: how he describes people and places, emotions and sensations, and space and time, and how we as readers grapple with the challenges of his complex descriptions. Currently, I’m working on science and technology in Proust, particularly his writings about airplanes, and the ways in which Proust’s portrayal of non-intuitive temporalities influenced contemporary science fiction writers such as Kim Stanley Robinson.

What drew you to Proust as your research focus?

It was a bit of a winding path that led me to Proust. As an undergraduate, I planned to do a PhD in English literature and specialize in English Romanticism. When I began my studies in French at UNC, I came in intending to study francophonie. But once I started reading Proust, I couldn’t bring myself to stop. His writing worked on my brain in ways I didn’t—and don’t—fully understand, and even after many re-reads the Recherche still feels new to me each time I jump back in. I think Proust’s novel still has much to teach us about the way literature affects our cognition.

What activities or projects on the horizon are you most excited about?

UAB has a Proust archive, and I’m really excited to work more with that resource. I’ll be working on translations of our Proust letters into English and finding ways to incorporate the archive into the classes I teach here. It’s very meaningful for me to be at a university with such a strong institutional commitment to Proust Studies. In March, I’ll be traveling to Paris to participate in a colloquium in honor of the hundredth anniversary of the publication of one of the volumes of the Recherche. It’s a fantastic opportunity to commemorate the anniversary and to share my work with other Proustians.

How did you originally decide to pursue a PhD in French & Francophone Studies?
When I did my BA, I planned to study English literature in graduate school and chose French as a minor to help my grad school applications. Once I studied abroad, though, I wanted more, and I added French as a second major and applied to do the Teaching Assistant Program in France after graduation. I still planned to do an English PhD, but I couldn’t bring myself to put French on the back-burner. One day something clicked and I realized I could pursue my love of French and my love of literature at the same time. A year later, I started in UNC’s French and Francophone Studies program.

**Do you have any advice for current students at UNC (grad or undergrad)?**

As someone who teaches and researches in a second language, one conviction I have is that studying a foreign language makes us better at taking risks. When you walk into a class and start to learn a new language, that’s scary and it takes courage to keep showing up. My advice is to leverage that practice of taking risks to take more: study or teach abroad, make connections with people you find interesting, get your research out there into the world. Sometimes we want to put off doing big things until we feel ready for them, but in my experience it doesn’t work that way: you dive in, and then you realize you were ready.

---

**Dr. Carlos Vázquez Cruz** graduated from the PhD program in Iberian and Latin American Literatures and Cultures in 2019 and is currently an Assistant Professor at Kalamazoo College. A creative writer, he is author of the novel *Las siete Partidas* and has been awarded a Letras Boricuas Fellowship and a Writing Residency from the Mineral School in Seattle for his writing. His current project is a short story collection entitled *Talón de brea* (Tar Heel).

---

**How would you describe your work?**

My creative work centers on experimentation and risk. It is strongly inspired by research and aesthetics, as well as it acknowledges my colorful linguistic heritage (Puerto Rican Spanish). Queerness and subversion also pervade my writings. For example, for *Malacostumbrismo*, a 78-page collection of stories, I revisited core texts of the Puerto Rican “Costumbrismo” with the goal of tackling untold taboo issues that have probably gone undiscussed because of their perception of being “bad habits.” That is the meaning of the title. *Las siete Partidas* (novel) was published in Puerto
Rico but drafted and written mostly during my years as a doctoral student here at UNC. It is about seven queer subjects who receive an email that was sent by AI and who, after opening it, get teleported to different parts of the world. They livestream, record, email... their experiences in their new settings, all while reflecting on, denouncing and criticizing the oppression they faced due to religion, culture, education, politics and/or LGBTQIA+ phobia(s), etc., in Puerto Rico. This novel was motivated by a course on the New Baroque, that I took with Dr. Rosa Perelmuter, another course on the picaresque taught by Dr. Carmen Hsu, and by the research, writing and creation of a digital project during my dissertation, under the advice of Dr. Alicia Rivero.

How do you combine writing and teaching?

In my opinion, writing and teaching are closely connected. Teaching helps me monitor the constant reflections on language that the writer in me needs to provide identity to his work. I do my best to create new and more accessible materials to teach the logics of language, not in the standard way the books say it should be understood, but according to my own understanding as a language user, and as an artist for whom language is the prime resource (or tool) for artistic productions. This is why I am always amazed when students make “errors.” Students sometimes trigger the poetic potential of words, unintentionally. They revitalize and reshape the language I thought I knew so well, which makes me feel like a kid discovering a new world of words. What is poetry anyway if not the struggle(s) with words, meanings, resources, techniques and senses, whose negotiation(s) end up in a work that challenges the traditional uses of language? I do not necessarily write as a teacher, but I definitely teach as a writer.

Tell us about your in-progress short story collection.

The original title of Talón de brea was Tar Heel. However, a friend convinced me to translate it into Spanish, for this is the language in which the stories are written. I am still thinking about it because, as the first story tells, I felt predestined to attend UNC. The first story talks about my initial visit to campus, and how I had a “revelation” that made me select this institution. Another story recalls the time when hurricane María hit Puerto Rico, the hardships my people encountered, and the massive support shown by the UNC community. This served as a pretext to my prior experiences with hurricanes, and a means of briefly addressing the controversial visit that former President Trump paid to the island. A third story surrounds the time when one of my teeth broke and had to be removed... a week before my dissertation defense! Then, I reflected on how my mouth—a metaphor for my expression—was suddenly damaged and made silent, how the tooth removal—my first surgical procedure ever—took away a part of my body that was essentially linked to my mother, who nurtured me and taught me how to speak. The first two stories were published in anthologies in 2018 and 2020, and the third will appear in an anthology of queer authors who write in Spanish in the US later this year. In my autofictional writings, the “autobiographical” strategy intends to earn the trust of the reader. In Tar Heel, the readers will find events that (perhaps) never happened to the narrator, as well as scandalous anecdotes that the protagonist (might have) never experienced.

How did you originally decide to pursue a PhD in Spanish?

Honestly, after earning an MFA in Spanish Creative Writing at NYU and spending a few years teaching in the New York City area, I swore to myself that I was done with academia. I had an awesome experience there, but life in the city simply drained me. However, Malacostumbrismo granted me the

---

7https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/rosa-perelmuter/
8https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/carmen-hsu/
9https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/alicia-rivero/
opportunity of getting two awards. In October 2014, two UNC professors—Dr. Emil Keme and Dr.
Juan Carlos González Espitia—attended the New Voices Award ceremony, held during The
Word/Festival de la Palabra. After the event, Puerto Rican writer Mayra Santos Febres introduced
them to me, and told them something like, “Take this guy out of here. You are crazy if you do not
take Carlos to UNC.” She was the one with the vision. They invited me to apply, and I did. I was
frightened when I first set foot on campus, but the rigor, guidance and affection of my professors,
and the friends I found here, gradually made me realize that I would have not successfully earned my
Ph.D. from anywhere else. Aside from the usually, both stressful and delightful experiences we all
face during graduate school, especially the dissertation, I was constantly in awe by the brilliant and
competent professors I had, inspired by their rigor and human touch, moved by the opportunities
they found for us within our fields, and grateful for the amazing advisor I found in Dr. Alicia Rivero.

Do you have any advice for current students at UNC (grad or undergrad)?

My only advice is to be passionate towards what they love. No one bestows us with passion. That
comes from a light within us; the role of a college is to nurture and strengthen it, enhance and
challenge our perspectives, push us to the limit, challenge those boundaries, and help us build
character. College informs our passion and provides us with structure(s), content(s), strategies and
resources that turn these affinities we have for certain topics or fields into our professional
contributions to the world. UNC is a demanding institution but a very rewarding one. Within its
faculty and staff, the students will find people committed to walking the walk with them, and who
will guarantee that they—and their projects—have a successful future.

New Faculty Profile

Dr. Adam Cohn joined the department this Fall as the J.M.A. van der Horst Fellow in Jewish
Studies and Romance Studies. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia and specializes in
Hispanic Jewish Studies.

10 https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/jcge/
11 https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/alicia-rivero/
12 https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/adam-cohn/
How would you describe your area(s) of expertise?

I’m a specialist in modern Spanish culture who focuses on Jewish literature and discourses of Jewishness. Through my research, I study the contradictory ways that early 20th-century Spaniards understood notions of diaspora, Orientalism, coloniality, and race. In addition to this, I research, publish, and teach on other topics in Spanish Studies, such as literature of the Spanish Civil War and the work of Federico García Lorca.

What drew you to your current research project?

My current book project is about Spanish fiction from the first half of the 20th century that includes Sephardic characters, the descendants of the Jews expelled from the Iberian kingdoms at the end of the 15th century. I use these texts to argue that the Sephardic past and present were imagined to challenge Spanish colonialism and to question the motives behind contemporary attempts to “repatriate” the Sephardim centuries after their expulsion from Spain.

This project has its beginnings in my undergraduate studies, when I took a class on Jewish Spain and the Sephardic Diaspora. I came across a fascinating Spanish author, Rafael Cansinos-Asséns (1882-1964), who found one of his last names in a list of individuals tried by the Spanish Inquisition for illicitly practicing Judaism. From there, Cansinos-Asséns dedicated a large portion of his career to write about Jewish topics in newspapers, literary texts, translations, and academic scholarship. Curiously enough, he is perhaps best known today as one of the major influences on the famous Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges.

What would you most like more people to understand about the history and legacy of Sepharad or “Jewish Spain?”

One may be surprised to know that the legacy of Sepharad crosses national and linguistic contexts. In early 20th-century Spain, for example, liberal politicians and intellectuals looked towards the Sephardic past and present as a way of “modernizing” the country. German Jewish historians in the 19th century explored Sepharad as a precedent of Jewish assimilation and thriving in the diaspora. Other appearances of Sepharad as metaphor or a usable history include the 1910 Argentinian book *The Jewish Gauchos* (*Los gauchos judíos*) or Yiddish writing from the Spanish Civil War. These
examples speak to how the idea of Sepharad is an engaging topic for interdisciplinary teaching and research.

This semester, you’ve been teaching a First-Year Seminar on Jewish histories and cultures in the Hispanic world. Could you tell us about a memorable discussion or activity from your course?

We’re currently reading Benito Pérez Galdós’s novel Misericordia (1897) in the context of how modern Spain became interested in Sephardic topics to talk about the state of the nation and national identity. And my students find the novel fascinating! In a recent class, students worked together in groups to wrap their heads about three big questions the novel poses: What is charity? What is reality? What makes a person? When I explained the discussion topics to them, students had a well-intentioned laugh at how expansive the questions were, but then they jumped immediately into really engaging conversations. Their ability to collaborate, read deeply, and think critically impresses me every day.

Is there a book or film from your research or teaching that you would particularly recommend to others, and why?

One relatively new film that I’ve been thinking about a lot is Violeta Salama’s Alegría (2021). Starring Cecilia Suárez, from the Netflix hit series The House of Flowers (La casa de las Flores), the film is a 21st-century take on convivencia, the romanticized idea that Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived together in relative peace in medieval Iberia. Set in Melilla, a Spanish city on the Northern African coast, Alegría tells the story of Alegría, a middle-aged Jewish woman who had a falling out with her family over faith and politics. Things become complicated when her family goes to Melilla for a wedding and stays in Alegría’s home. At the same time, the film is about a group of four women of
different faiths, nationalities, and walks of life who try to find similarities in their differences. These personal relationships develop against the backdrop of an increasingly polarized politics and the militarized border between Melilla and Morocco.

Romanian at UNC - Celebrating the "Forgotten" Romance Language

Dr. Letitia Guran\textsuperscript{13} writes about her experience teaching Romanian at UNC

This is the fifth year since I have been teaching Romanian at UNC, and I am happy to report that, thanks to the unwavering support of the Center for European Studies (CES) and the Romance Studies department, the number of students has grown and so have our course offerings. Now we offer two semesters of Romanian instruction (ROML 461 in Fall and ROML 462 in Spring). Some of the students taking the courses are heritage speakers who want to polish their Romanian and to connect with their Romanian roots. Others are American students interested in working in Romania for various American institutions, or who are engaged in studying social and political issues related to Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Last year, I advised two such students who took my classes: one who was writing a thesis about adoptions in Romania, the other who was writing a research paper about Romania and the Republic of Moldova’s fraught relationship with Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.

Throughout these years, a lot of our success has derived from Romanian cultural programming on campus. For two years we have been partners and co-sponsors of the Romanian Film Festival (happening this year between 4-12 November). Students welcome the windows into the current Romanian culture that films by internationally famous directors of the Romanian New Wave provide. These films prompted students to ask perceptive questions about pressing social and political issues in Romania and also helped them get engaged in transatlantic explorations and dialogue. For all these events, a great debt of gratitude goes to the staff from our department (Ms. Shavon Carey-Hicks and Ms. Sheena Melton) who have helped me publicize the course offerings, the films, and solved registration issues.

\textsuperscript{13}https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/letitia-guran/
For the Spring, there are plans to bring to campus Dr. Bogdan Ștefănescu, Professor at the Foreign Languages Department of the University of Bucharest, Romania, current on a Fulbright grant at Florida Atlantic University. Editor-in-chief of the University of Bucharest Review, Vice-rector of the University of Bucharest (2020-21), Vice-Dean of the Department of Foreign Lang. and Lit. (2012-20), and Deputy Director, Romanian Cultural Institute, New York (2005-7), Dr. Stefanescu will speak about “The Paradoxes of Political Humor under Totalitarianism in Romania.”

Last, but not least, I am excited to announce that the Carolina Public Humanities Program has invited me to speak about Romania and the Romanian courses at UNC at the Flyleaf Bookstore early in the Spring (date and title to follow). I take this opportunity to extend a warm invitation to anybody interested. Mulțumesc!

Marking Día de los muertos
Members of ROMS's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee led a project to transform the display cases in Dey Hall into a celebration of Día de los muertos (The Day of the Dead). From left: Graduate student Ana Maria Pozo\textsuperscript{14}, Prof. Heather Knorr\textsuperscript{15} (project leader), Prof. Erika Serrato\textsuperscript{16}, and Prof. Sean Matharoo\textsuperscript{17}.

Students in several classes contributed materials to honor the memory of deceased singers, writers, artists, and other luminaries of Hispanic heritage. Photo: Shavon Carey-Hicks.

\textsuperscript{14}https://romancestudies.unc.edu/grad-student/ana-maria-pozo/
\textsuperscript{15}https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/heather-knorr/
\textsuperscript{16}https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/erika-serrato/
\textsuperscript{17}https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/sean-matharoo/
More Activities and Highlights

On September 29, Dr. Nilzimar Vieira’s Accelerated Intermediate Portuguese class (PORT 402) welcomed Dr. Janja Araújo from Bahia, Brazil. Dr. Janja Araujo coordinates the Women’s Department of the Secretariat for Promoting Equality, and she is a professor in the Department of Gender and Feminism Studies at Federal University in Bahia. Together with Dr. Courtney Woods from the Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering at UNC, Dr. Janja discussed her feminist perspective of Angolan Capoeira in Brazil and around the world. Students learned that Capoeira is much more than a fight or a dance. Capoeira is a movement of Black resistance that has existed in Brazil for more than four centuries. Dr. Janja defines Capoeira as a social movement that has confronted the expression of violence against Black corporeality. This inspiring visit is the starting point for our PORT 316: Brazilian Performance Capoeira: Resilience and Resistance through Movement, Music, and Dance taught by Dr. Nilzimar Vieira, Spring semester 2024 at UNC. Let’s spread the movement!

In observance of University Research Week, ROMS’s Undergraduate Research Committee offered an information session about opportunities and resources for doing independent research in Romance Studies. Committee chair Dr. Chloe Hill (second from left) led the session. Also taking part were (from left) student Simon Cook, Dr. Sandra García Gutiérrez, and student Lila Wilson.

https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/nilzimar-vieira/
https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/chloe-hill/
https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/sandra-garcia-gutierrez/
The ROMS Colloquium has been taking place monthly, giving opportunities for faculty and grad students to share their research and discover scholarly connections. This year, the colloquium is coordinated by graduate students Emanuele Stefanori\(^21\) (pictured at left) and Cristóbal Clemente\(^22\). Here Jhonn Guerra Banda\(^23\) (pictured at right) prepares to present some of his dissertation work.

ROMS faculty participated in the Latinx Heritage Month Kick-Off event in the Pit. Here, Dr. Martha Ruiz-Garcia\(^24\) and Dr. Victoria Martin\(^25\) promote the Spanish major and minor programs and ROMS courses designed for heritage learners of Spanish. Profs. Gosia Lee, Aaron Grace, Anastasia Kohl, Raquel Maqueda, Sharrah Lane, and Elizabeth Bruno also took part.

\(^21\)https://romancestudies.unc.edu/grad-student/emanuele-stefanori/
\(^22\)https://romancestudies.unc.edu/grad-student/cristobal-clemente-rodrigalvarez/
\(^23\)https://romancestudies.unc.edu/grad-student/jhon-guerra-banda/
\(^24\)https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/martha-ruiz-garcia/
\(^25\)https://romancestudies.unc.edu/faculty-member/victoria-martin/
Binotti, Lucia and Amy Chambless. "From Immersion to Immersive: Blending the XR in the Foreign Language and Culture College Classroom." Bridging the XR Technology-to-Practice-Gap: Methods and Strategies for Blending Extended Realities into Classroom Instruction, Volume I. Edited by T. Cherner, & A. Fegely. Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), 2023. pp. 97-118.


—. “Mi lengua madre”. El BeiSmAn, 8 mayo 2023.


—“La libertà e i segni. Un’interpretazione biosemiotica di Primo Levi. (Con un pensiero sul virus).” Quaderni d’italianistica, vol. 42, no. 3, 2023, pp. 7-32.

—. Regular column in La Repubblica on environmental issues.


Stay in Touch!

To stay up-to-date on what we’re doing in ROMS, check out our website⁶, listen to our podcast⁷, follow us on Facebook⁸, Instagram⁹, or Twitter¹⁰. And please drop us a note at romladmin@unc.edu¹¹ if you’d like to share your news. We love to hear from our alumni and friends.

⁶https://romancestudies.unc.edu/
⁷https://romancestudies.unc.edu/roms-podcast/
⁸https://www.facebook.com/uncroms
⁹https://www.instagram.com/RomanceUnc/
¹⁰https://twitter.com/RomanceUnc
¹¹mailto:romladmin@unc.edu