No one will mourn the end of 2020. It has been a challenging, turbulent year for our university, community, and wider world. But there have been silver linings and bright spots for Romance Studies. Italian professors Maggie Fritz-Morkin and Serenella Iovino created dynamic seminars exploring how their fields of research (medieval Italy and contemporary environmental humanities, respectively) shed light on the current pandemic. More broadly, we have been fortunate to welcome several new department members whose work will be featured in upcoming newsletters. One of these new colleagues is Dr. Sean Matharoo, post-doctoral fellow in French & Francophone Studies, who describes his creative research on ideas of energy in post-colonial literature below.
Each fall semester Carolina celebrates University Research Week, a time to honor the most vital work of the faculty and students of our institution. This year, University Research Week served an even more important function: a punctual reminder, in this distracting time, of our primary mission as scholars and teachers. During the week, many of us in Romance Studies shared our current research topics on social media. This newsletter continues that research focus. You’ll learn about linguist Bruno Estigarribia’s investigations of the minoritized languages Paraguayan Guarani and Calabrian Rusitène. We share news about a new collaboration between the department and the Newberry Library Center for Renaissance Studies. Graduate Students Sarah Booker and Sarah Blanton report on their initiative to support literary translators in our region, the Carolina Translation Collective. And we offer a glimpse into the Undergraduate Research Workshop offered as part of University Research Week, to encourage and support our brilliant BA students pursuing their own interests and passions in Romance Studies.

My colleagues and I look forward to sharing more of our work with you in 2021.

Ellen Welch
Chair, Romance Studies

Fall 2020 Highlights

- The UNC Immersive Learning Collective led by ROMS Professor Lucia Binotti is a finalist for the Carolina Collective Open Call Crowdsourcing Campaign. Their project will provide teachers and students with the knowledge, resources, and community to create immersive VR/AR learning experiences.
- Teaching Associate Professor and Director of the Spanish Language Program Dr. Anastacia Kohl is the recipient of the 2020 South Region Professional, Continuing and Online Education Instruction Award from the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) for 2020. The award recognizes Dr. Kohl’s work in developing a self-paced elementary Spanish course for the Correctional Education Program offered through the UNC Friday Center.
• Assistant Professor of Italian Maggie Fritz-Morkin has been elected Secretary of the American Boccaccio Association for a three-year term.

• Professor Serenella Iovino, graduate student Paco Chen-López, and Professor Ellen Welch participated in the Modern Language Association’s Virtual Summit on the Future of Doctoral Education this November.

• The Carolina Conference of Romance Studies is back! This event will take place virtually, March 26-27, 2021.

Postdoctoral Fellow of French Sean Singh Matharoo

Earlier this year, I received my Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Riverside (UCR). As a part of the Carolina Postdoctoral Program for Faculty Diversity, I am now updating my doctoral thesis into a book, *The Damned of the Alienocene: Performatively Modeling Energy Aesthetics for a New Structuralism*, in the Department of Romance Studies. This book is a hypergenealogical study of the energy concept in French, English, Arabic, German, and Ancient Greek speculative literature and philosophy. I theorize the “hypergenealogical” method as a way of deconstructing texts that 1) understands history as an intervention in the present and 2) locates and commits to the energy that comes when thinking
absolutes, or speculating. In our epoch of Anthropocenic energy crisis, whose possibility condition is the colonial-racial reality, I defend the assertion that the hypergenealogical method allows us to transition to alternative energy sources while remaining oriented toward egalitarianism and justice.

I have published articles, a book chapter, book reviews, interviews, and encyclopedia entries about my transdisciplinary research in various venues, including *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism, Science Fiction Studies, Horror Studies, and Oxford Bibliographies in American Literature*. I have an article derived from my thesis forthcoming in French philosopher Frédéric Neyrat’s *Alienocene: Journal of the First Outernational*. As a Fulbright scholar at Ghent University, Belgium, I was the primary advisor for a student’s Master’s thesis about French and anglophone music, poetry, and philosophy. In Europe, I shared my research at various venues, including Trinity College Dublin, the University of Tampere in Finland, the Orpheus Institute in Ghent, and the University of Copenhagen. Earlier this year, I received the UCR Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award and was a finalist for the Walter James Miller Memorial for Student Scholarship in the International Fantastic.

I am Book Review Assistant Editor for *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, and am a partner/collaborator with Vision Inclusive. I am also a noise musician whose collaborative pieces about the environment may be understood to problematize the presupposition of colonial-racial divisions in thinking and being. On shared walks, or drifts [dérives], we follow noise and record sounds. Using a digital sampler and analog effects pedals, I recycle the recorded material, or waste, into experimental audio essays that demonstrate that today’s ecological crises disproportionately impact nonhumans in diasporas and speculate beyond the apocalyptic present to find energy in collaborative worldmaking. Finally, I am translating francophone Belgian science-fiction author J.-H. Rosny aîné’s *Les sciences et le pluralisme* (1922), which has led me to the study of natural philosophy and translation theory.
Interview with Dr. Bruno Estigarribia

You recently published *A Grammar of Paraguayan Guarani*. What drew you to study the Guarani language?

My father is Paraguayan and a native speaker of Guarani. We have lived apart for most of my life now. This project is a way for me to get closer to him, and to
honor his heritage and the heritage of my paternal family. It was also a return to doing some very foundational linguistic work. I began my linguistic studies focusing on child language development. For my MA in France and my PhD in the US, I worked on how typically developing children learn their mother tongue(s). Then I did an NIH-funded postdoc at UNC studying the language development of children with fragile X syndrome, compared to that of children with autism or Down syndrome. While fascinating and of immense relevance to many families with atypically developing children, this work was somewhat removed from my main specialization in linguistics. Focusing on the description of modern Paraguayan Guarani and the effects of contact with Spanish is the kind of work that linguists are more specifically trained to do. I had the opportunity of going back to that kind of research when I was hired in Romance Studies in 2011.

How did you go about doing the research for your book?

The roots of this book lie my grammatical sketch of Guarani published in 2017. When I started working on Guarani, I was focused on code-switching and language mixing involving Guarani and Spanish. During my third-year junior research leave in 2013, I went to Argentina to do fieldwork to try to understand the use of “pure” Guarani as opposed to “mixed” Guarani among the expatriate Paraguayan community. I started thinking about writing a reference grammar for the language when I was writing the introductory chapters for the book I co-edited with our former student Justin Pinta (now a PhD candidate in Linguistics at the Ohio State University). While doing that work, I realized there was no place or publication with a linguistically oriented description of the whole of Guarani grammar for an English-speaking audience. So I proposed and obtained an NEH Fellowship for the year 2018 to work on this project. I went to Paraguay in 2018 and did some more fieldwork and data collection to answer some questions I had left unresolved in the sketch. I continued to do fieldwork while I was in the more advanced stages of writing in 2019 in the US and remotely with a Paraguayan colleague with whom I still work today.

Is there a feature of the Guarani language that you find especially fascinating?

Guarani is the history of linguistic success in the midst of terrible human tragedy. Most Amerindian languages are spoken by ethnically indigenous peoples. If you think about who speaks Quechua or Mayan, or any other autochthonous language in the Americas, chances are it is their ethnic group’s language… or they are linguists working on the language. In contrast, between 7 and 8 million people speak Paraguayan Guarani, most of them not ethnically Guarani. Whenever we (somewhat proudly) say that Paraguayan Guarani is the
only Amerindian language spoken by a non-indigenous majority, we should not forget that this is in part because ethnic Guarani groups were decimated in the colonization process. The indigenous Guarani are only about 1-2% of the Paraguayan population, whereas almost 90% Paraguayans speak the language.

So, the sociolinguistics and history of Paraguayan Guarani are important for various reasons, and there is substantial research on these. But personally what is most fascinating to me as a formal linguist is the grammar of the language, the formal aspects of the system and the way the language does things very differently from the majority languages most people know. For example, things that in English are a sentence with many separate words, in Guarani can be expressed by single words. Words can function as nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs quite freely without form changes, so these European-centric parts of speech do not really apply. Also, Guarani expresses the main participant in an event as a prefix on the verb. This is often, not the subject, but the object, as if English speakers said ‘me-love they’ and simply could not use the order ‘they-love me’. You know the passive voice? Well, Guarani does not have a passive voice, but has an atipassive, an inactive, and three causative voices: an embarrassment of riches! I could go on, but I will stop here before this gets too nerdy. If you are interested, take SPAN 683 Guarani Linguistics the next time it is offered! Or read my book, which is open access via UCL Press.

The UN General Assembly proclaimed 2022–2032 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. For you as a linguist, why is it important to study and preserve indigenous languages?

An oft-cited reason that everybody can relate to is because when a language disappears, it is not only a language that is lost, but also a whole way of seeing the world, including very specific cultural and environmental knowledge, and ethical systems. Most languages are fully oral, so the language itself (and its stories, myths, etc.) is the repository of millennial knowledge for those societies. We can call these the “anthropological reasons.”

But language doesn’t just “talk about the world.” Language is part of how a person constructs their identity. Think about the “English-only” movement. Why do you think some people feel so strongly that they have to impose English? Because it is also an identity issue: one’s native language is part of who one is, and “foreign” languages can be felt to be “existential” threats. So it is not only about whether a language is “useful” for humanity: letting language die is tantamount to killing an important part of who people are, and for that reason,
speakers of indigenous languages need our support. We can call these the “sociolinguistic” reasons.

Furthermore, modern linguistics ties language to the organization of the mind, because language is a uniquely human capacity (as far as we know). There is enormous grammatical variety in the world’s languages. If only a few European languages survive, which are really very similar to one another in terms of their grammatical organization, then we have lost information about the potential of the human brain. We can call these the “cognitive-linguistic” reasons.

But in the end, it is simply because we owe it to our fellow humans to not stand in the way of their living fulfilling lives. One’s own language, the one that one shares with one’s closest community, is an unavoidable component of human fulfillment.

Your next research project focuses on another minoritized language: Rosetano, spoken in the Calabria region of Italy. What do you hope to accomplish in this project?

First, Rosetano is the Italian name, but the endonym or community name is Rusitène. I grew up in Argentina with my maternal family, who are all from Roseto Capo Spulico, a village in Cosenza, Southern Italy. My mom, my aunt, and my grandparents all are native speakers of this language. So I grew up as a heritage speaker, and the language has a very special, emotional meaning for me. It is again a way to honor the heritage I received from my family so it is not just an academic exercise. But also the language belongs to an interesting linguistic area of Italo-Romance dialects that conserve some “archaic” features lost in other dialects. And even though we have a wealth of information about languages of the Italian peninsula from a long tradition of Italian dialectology, this particular language has not been documented at all. In other words, I also hope to contribute to this venerable tradition of language description.
Undergraduate Research Workshop

Italian and Global Studies double major Laura Wilder (Dec. ‘20) discusses her experience doing funded research on the lace-making industry in Italy at the annual Romance Studies Undergraduate Research Information Session on October 21. Attendees learned from faculty and peers about fellowships, grants, and other opportunities to participate in mentored research in the humanities at UNC. The event was organized by Director of Undergraduate Studies Teaching Professor Amy Chambless and the Undergraduate Research Committee (Professor Lucia Binotti, Teaching Associate Professor Cristina Carrasco, Assistant Professor Lamar Graham, Teaching Associate Professor Abel Muñoz-Hermoso, Teaching Associate Professor Martha Ruiz-García, Graduate Teaching Fellow Emanuele Stefanori, and Teaching Professor Richard Vernon).
The Carolina Translation Collective

Sarah Blanton and Sarah Booker

The Carolina Translation Collective was originally founded in 2017 and reinvigorated in the summer of 2020. We, Sarah Booker and Sarah Blanton, drew on our research interests in translation studies, literature, migration, labor, and community building to create a supportive group for those interested in the practice of translation and interpretation.

We meet virtually once a month to converse about theoretical texts and approaches to literary translation as well as host guest speakers and workshops. We are interested in topics such as literary translation and theory, activism, and publishing. Thus far we have discussed texts by Walter Benjamin, Jorge Luis Borges, Don Mee Choi, and Lawrence Venuti, conducted micro-workshops on translation “problems,” and invited members to discuss their experiences as translators. In future sessions we are planning activities to consider the concept of the “foreign,” incorporate diverse readings beyond the “canonical,” and host project workshops. This group is first and foremost a collaborative and supportive community that is shaped by the collective’s interests and needs.

Individuals at all levels of experience, interest, language, and position both at UNC and beyond are welcome to join the collective. Indeed, active members include local professionals, UNC undergraduate and graduate students, professors, alumni, as well as people from other universities, such as UNCC,
Duke, and Wash U and represent languages such as Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Korean, French, Italian, and German. If you are interested in attending meetings or learning more about the Carolina Translation Collective, please email Sarah Booker (skbooker@live.unc.edu) or Sarah Blanton (sblan@live.unc.edu) and we will add you to the listserv. You can also find us on Facebook as the Carolina Translation Collective.

Our Ties to Chicago’s Newberry Library Center for Renaissance Studies

Students and faculty specializing in early modern studies have a new asset: UNC membership in the Consortium of the Newberry Library Center for Renaissance Studies in Chicago. Since its founding in 1887, the Newberry has become one of the country’s finest independent research libraries, housing a wealth of material in the European Renaissance, American literature, Native American and indigenous studies, and a range of other areas.

Founded in 1979, the Newberry Library Center for Renaissance Studies sponsors lectures, short courses, graduate seminars, and an annual grad student conference in coordination with the many Consortium member universities in the US, Canada, and Europe. At UNC, ROMS shares membership with the Departments of History and English and Comparative Literature. Membership came about at the initiative of Hassan Melehy (French). Another faculty member with close ties to the Newberry is Carmen Hsu (Spanish), who in 2018–19 held a prestigious research fellowship there.

Funding from the Consortium is available for students and faculty to travel to Chicago for events. The annual conference is an excellent way for grad students to meet others in their field. For further information, contact Prof. Melehy (hmelehy@unc.edu), UNC’s Consortium representative.
Profile on Italian Graduate Seminar: “Entangled Emergencies Theories (and Stories) to Think with the Virus: An Environmental Humanities Approach”

Prof. Serenella Iovino

This is the story of an experiment, or better: an experience. It is about how a small graduate seminar with only four officially registered students became an international attraction, with a growing number of external auditors and prominent guests. Everything started when it was clear that the new cohort of Italian Ph.D. students—four very motivated aspiring Carolinians—could not join us before the pandemic (or the visa ban) would be over. In the beginning, we were quite frustrated. However, when it was clear that teaching online would be the option, these students immediately accepted to be our informal auditors and have a preliminary taste of their future life. COVID-19 transformed our ITAL 830 seminar in many ways, including the choice of the topic. As it was impossible to keep the virus out of our life, it was impossible to keep it out of our class discussion, especially in a seminar with a comparative literature orientation like this one. In fact, from Thucydides and Lucretius to Boccaccio, Defoe, Manzoni, Camus, and Margaret Atwood, plagues have been present in literature for many centuries. Moreover, having the environmental humanities as our framework, it seemed inappropriate to talk of COVID-19 in isolation from the ecologies that “make” the virus, and their larger planetary reverberations in terms of climate change, environmental justice, species extinctions, biopolitics,
biosemiotics, postcolonialism, and trauma. So many perspectives for a small seminar! The further step was consistent: experts were soon invited. With the help of technology, soon internationally renowned scholars accepted to join us and generously shared their research. Now our line-up has become impressive:

- Prof. Louise Westling, University of Oregon, on Biosemiotics and Symbiogenesis
- Prof. Maggie Fritz-Morkin, UNC-Chapel Hill, on Virus in the Middle Ages and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*
- Prof. Shaul Bassi, Università Ca’ Foscari, Venice, on Postcolonial Perspectives on Climate Change and a View from Venice
- Prof. Joni Adamson, Arizona State University, on Environmental Justice and Syndemics
- Prof. Marco Armiero, Director of the Environmental Humanities Lab, KTH Stockholm, on The Personal and the Political, The Virus Between Trauma and Political Ecology
- Prof. Federico Luisetti, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland, on Biopolitics and Pandemic Injustice
- Prof. Scott Slovic, University of Idaho, on Covid-19 and the Future of Public Humanities

Once again, UNC and ROMS are bridging disciplines and discourses, ideas and the world, different people and different places, physically distant but close enough to “think with the virus” together.
In the Summer of 2020 Kristine Taylor was the recipient of The UNC Summer School Teaching with Technology Mini-Grant. She developed and implemented tools to teach the PORT 101 summer course as a “flipped classroom,” providing students with a digital guide and study materials to support preparation.

Professor Taylor designed the Sakai Lessons tool with a detailed step by step guide to preparation for class, handouts with practice activities, a guide to online homework activities as well as PowerPoint grammar presentations with
voice recording. These asynchronous grammar lessons provided the students with description, examples and practice activities as companion material for the textbook. Finally, the course incorporated recorded, low-stakes speaking assignments in FlipGrid.com to help students develop Portuguese speaking fluency and pronunciation as preparation for in-class speaking activities.

In addition to preparing digital learning tools, Professor Taylor offered office hours via Zoom in addition to the in-office schedule, creating closer connections between instructor and students. With help from the grant, Professor Taylor and PORT 101 made a successful transition to the online format this summer.

Interview with Maggie Fritz-Morkin

You'll be teaching a First-Year Seminar this spring on “Contagion and Culture: Lessons from Italy.” What will you and your students be reading and discussing?
I knew right away that I wanted to focus on Giovanni Boccaccio’s _Decameron_, set in Florence during the 1348 bubonic plague pandemic. He is particularly interested in social and civic unraveling provoked by the pandemic, I decided to begin the course by studying the metaphor of the “body politic” and its ailments in literature from Aesop to Dante. I’m excited to work through some philosophical and theoretical approaches to illnesses of the body and body politic with first-year students, and show them how we can use essays by Sontag, Derrida, Foucault, Agamben, Esposito, and others to analyze literary texts. With tools in hand for decoding the metaphors and power dynamics surrounding contagion, we’ll read Girolamo Fracastoro’s 16th-century epic poem _Syphilis_, revisit the plague in Alessandro Manzoni’s romanticist novel _The Betrothed_, and see how tuberculosis catalyzes artistic inspiration in Puccini’s opera _La Bohème_. Finally, we’ll review the myriad literary and artistic projects inspired by Boccaccio’s _Decameron_ in the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to think about the role our own culture gives to the arts in mediating our common afflictions.

**What text are you most looking forward to teaching and why?**

I’m really excited to work through the _Decameron_-inspired projects that have come out in the last several months, because the narratives, pieces, and performances will be as new to me as to the students. I usually teach authors and historical contexts that I know like the back of my hand, and it’s rare that such a rich body of contemporary work fits with what I research and teach. It’s a treat to shed the mantle of expertise and explore something new with others.

**From your perspective as a scholar of Medieval Italian literature and culture, how can studying the experience of disease in other times and places shed light on what we are living through right now?**

Boccaccio’s description of plague-time Florence is uncannily prescient of the challenges and conflicts emerging during Covid-19. Institutions like schools, churches, and courts ground to a halt. Medical science offered no easy remedy. People reacted to the threat of deadly contagion by embracing hedonism or ascetism, fleeing cities, forming quarantine bubbles with friends, blaming scapegoats – often displaying harmful selfishness. Boccaccio saw how class and privilege shaped lives and deaths, and recognized how a general loss of compassion marked a real degradation of our humanity.

We are also reading many texts that illustrate how people add layers of significance to biological conditions, and it’s essential that we recognize the political and social consequences of our language related to Covid-19. For example comparing mask requirements to a condition of bondage: this
metaphor might prompt us to fight a grave injustice and seek freedom, while the experience of wearing a mask is in fact nothing like true bondage.

Finally, I think everyone recognizes that our social fabric has frayed thanks to the pandemic itself and the rifts magnified by it. The underlying thesis of the course is that some degree of compassion, shared values, and mutual respect are necessary for a healthy democratic society. The arts help us to share grief and joy, think about our core values, and strengthen the body politic.

**How does this seminar intersect with your current research?**

The texts of Dante and Boccaccio have long been my areas of primary focus. I have worked on the ethics of strong language in the middle ages, and I have been planning a new project on the culture of fraud in 14th c. Italy, which is a major theme in literature, art, and even statutes of governance. In the past several months I’ve realized that the event of the plague pandemic raised the stakes more than I’d previously considered, because of the way institutions suddenly lost key officials, and because the trauma of the plague so transformed its survivors that their motivations and values could not be presumed.

For more on reading Boccaccio in Covid times: Here’s my Matthew Andrews and Jonathan Weiler on their podcast [Covid Conversations](#).

**Faculty Publications**


