movements, and thinkers have long theorized alternatives, often ignored in mainstream politics. My paper argues that we can no longer overlook them, especially as we move toward a multipolar world that demands new forms of self-sufficiency and political imagination.

Winning the Edwin H. Sherman Family Prize was profoundly meaningful. It affirmed that the questions animating my work, and their grounding in African experience and mass politics, belong squarely within the study of force and diplomacy. CENFAD's intellectual community gave me both the confidence and the analytical tools to treat African struggles for self-determination as legitimate sites of strategic inquiry. I am deeply grateful to CENFAD for providing a home for this kind of work, and for affirming, through this prize, that the future of force and diplomacy will be shaped as much by those at the margins as by those at the center. My hope is that this essay, and the project behind it, contributes in some small way to that broader conversation.

In Conversation with Faculty:

Dr. Christina Baker, Director of the Center for the Humanities at Temple (CHAT)

This edition features a conversation with Dr. Christina Baker, Director of the Center for the Humanities at Temple (CHAT), who shared insights on the Center's mission, upcoming projects, and its role in promoting interdisciplinary dialogue across campus.

Marcella Aline Toledo: Hello Dr. Baker, thank you for taking the time to speak with me! To start, could you please introduce yourself, your current role, and your main academic interests?

Dr. Christina Baker: Thank you for the invitation! I am a recently tenured Associate Professor, my home department is Spanish and Portuguese, but my area of interest is theater and performance, with an added emphasis in sound studies. My book, for example, is about theater and sound and the way they come together, to relay information about Mexico, specifically post 2006, when the War on Drugs caused increased violence. That came out in December 2023, and since then, I've been working on a second project that in some ways continues that line of thought, thinking about disappearance, the searching that mothers do, and I have another project that thinks about the superstar, Selina Quintanilla, and contemporary representations that reconceive of her, not just as a star, but also what it might mean if she aged or if she actually died.

MAT: Very interesting! Since taking on the role of Director, what have been your main priorities or guiding vision for the Center for the Humanities at Temple University (CHAT)?

CB: Those are big questions! One of my main priorities has really been elevating a profile of interdisciplinarity because the Center for the Humanities at Temple is housed and supported by the College of Liberal Arts. We have participation in the fellowship program this semester with one graduate student from Klein, but again, all the resources come from the CLA. It hasn't always been that way. In the pre-pandemic time, there were resources provided and additional support from three colleges: Klein, Tyler, and Boyer, which house the arts, theater, film, and media studies. After the pandemic, it's my understanding that support has sort of waned, and so while they might send a fellow from time to time, it's really CLA that's doing the promoting of humanities, though CHAT serves the institution. For me, humanities is defined by storytelling. What are the stories we want to tell about people and how do we do that? And for me, principally, that means qualitative, not quantitative research. So, anyone who is doing any kind of narrative work or visual work, they're telling the stories of people. And that is why I am sending a very clear message that the humanities isn't a set field. You're thinking about force and diplomacy, and that is the story of the way people, government, economy, all come into contact.

My guiding vision is reaffirming the diversity of thought and practice that defines the humanities. I'm also literally creating a visual brand, which CHAT has always done. CHAT has always had a graphic designer; I have posters all throughout the office and those were also put up around campus.

That graphic designer left, and I hired a new one, a Tyler graduate, and with her design, I have made stickers, buttons,

anything you can imagine. I'm trying to make a visual reminder that the Center physically exists to support interdisciplinary connections across the institution.

MAT: We've been in touch for a while now, especially since CHAT has been helping promote our lectures, but I'd love to hear more about how and when this support for CENFAD first began.

CB: I don't have a great answer for you – I've been mulling this over. What I do know is that Dr. Richard Immerman, a founding member of CENFAD, in 2005 became the second director of CHAT. He was director from 2005 to 2008. I'm going to give you a spoiler now: I'm director from 2025 to 2028, and I have inherited a benchmark for CHAT. During his time, he renamed the Center from the "Society of Fellows," as it was called when it began in 2003, to what is now called the "Center for the Humanities at Temple." And he coined the CHATTER because he wanted people to come together and chat. That's all him. I have been trying to rekindle that spirit by sharing news or little things like that is what he meant to be, not just like a newsletter of events, but really sharing ideas, elevating the profile. I don't know that there's been as much intertwining over the years, but I'm really interested in rekindling connections between CHAT and CENFAD, in part, because Alan and I were members of the same cohort in CHAT. I know his work and I know him. That was actually my first full year in person and for me, it's like a pivotal moment to think about my time in Temple.

MAT: In your view, what role do the humanities play in helping us understand conflicts and global challenges?

CB: I mean, I have already touched on some of it, so I'll say it in a different way. The humanities are about communicating. If I think about it as storytelling, it's really about thinking through the way we communicate ideas. And it isn't that politics, right? Someone has an agenda and puts forth that agenda. Script writing is the same or very similar to speechwriting, right? So the humanities are critical to putting forth policy, to making policy, to critiquing policy, to having different perspectives on the House or Senate floor, to then putting policy into practice. And if we have people who, for example, don't have necessarily a lot of training in the humanities, that interest in thinking across diversity in so many different ways, we end up with "global challenges."

I think if we look to so many other moments in time and geographies where conflict arose, and was steadily growing, if not sustained, power became an echo chamber, and we need humanities to break through that. It's not just about not repeating

the past, because everyone seems to be doing that right now, but it's about thinking about ways that we can come up with alternative forms of being with each other.

MAT: You've put it beautifully – thank you for that. What advice would you give to students from other disciplines who want to engage more with the humanities?

CB: I guess, you know, like Nike says – "just do it." I mean, it's a question I think more and more people, particularly post-pandemic, are asking themselves. At Temple specifically we have a student population that is often local, within the urban area of greater Philadelphia or Greater North Philly, but that doesn't mean they have ease of proximity. Many do not have the ease of resources, they don't necessarily have the support systems, and they're often working more than one job. When these students come to Temple, they want to get a degree as quickly as possible and they don't necessarily think that taking a history, philosophy, or a language class is the best idea. But it is because it's about reading the literature, watching films, and thinking about culture. More than that, it's about thinking about how we come together to form community.

MAT: Student support is a key part of CHAT's work, especially through its mini grants. Why do you think it's important to invest in student-led initiatives?

CB: This question is key to my heart because the College of Liberal Arts can only support a very limited number of CHAT fellowships for graduate students. That means there's so much more need than can be met by the traditional fellowship model. So, this year, I requested some funds, and I got a little bit of money from OVPR, which is the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at Temple. That is what allowed me to do this pilot run of the mini grants. They weren't a lot of money, but for some people, it's enough to drive to an archive in Long Island and maybe money to stay the night at a hotel. And that can make all the difference. These mini grants show that the Center cares and that all kinds of humanities research matters. What I also want is a pilot, like a boot camp from paper to publications sort of workshop. I think I might roll it out this summer, where I could hopefully offer a little bit of money as well for participating.

MAT: That's sounds cool! And I know CHAT also supports faculty through its fellowship program. In your view, how does participating in an interdisciplinary group of faculties enrich their research?

CB: My call for faculty (and it'll be the same for students) has a theme this year:

materialities. It was inspired by a philosopher's perspective on how objects themselves animate us – rather than we, as humans, animating objects and the non-human. It's a reversal of that usual thinking, focusing instead on the energies we receive and the effects they produce. And so with this, for example, a biologist reached out to me, I just met with an architect who's doing a motive design work, and so I would really love to build cohorts that are interdisciplinary in these really out of the box ways, so that we have rich descriptions, rich conversation, and maybe that results in some interesting edits to their papers.

MAT: So, both the graduate and the faculty fellowship programs are open to students and faculty outside the CLA, right?

CB: Yes! I have three CLA faculty members participating: English, Sociology, and GENUS (Geography, Environment and Urban Studies). Then, anyone who would come from outside of CLA, would ideally get an equal support to participate, which means of course release. The same is true for students: CLA supports a certain number and anyone outside of the college would get support from their school or college. This is meant to create parity, so that everybody has the same incentive. But it's not just about incentive, it's also the ability to have time. Anyone from any school or college can participate as long as the projects that they workshop are humanistic or humanities-aligned in nature, meaning qualitative.

MAT: Can we have a sneak peek of the special event CHAT is organizing for Dr. Alan McPherson's book early next year?

CB: I just ordered the books today so that we'll have copies to give away for free. The event will be Tuesday, February 3 at 12:30 pm and we'll have Joseph Johnson who will be the respondent. It will be on the 12th floor of Mazur. I wanted it there because it is a very nice room, with lots of windows! That's also the floor of the Dean of the CLA, so I wanted the book launch there because it's a symbolic space for a faculty member launching their first, second, or third book. I don't know what number book this is for Alan, but he is so impressive in his production rate and the scope of his work. It's the least I can do to get him a regal space is Mazur.

MAT: And finally, if someone wants to learn more or get involved with CHAT's programs, what's the best way to reach out?

CB: Just contact me! Send me an email or follow CHAT's social media's profiles on Instagram and Facebook.