

UC Merced

The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced

Title

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Journal

The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced, 9(1)

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Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.5070/H39164324

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

Interview: Micro-study abroad opportunity offers undergraduate students the chance to learn about the history and contemporary experiences of Afro-Mexicans

By Kayle Fox

Kayle Fox (KF): As the editor-in-chief of the HCRES Undergraduate Journal, I am grateful for the opportunity to interview Professor Sabrina Smith, whose research and teaching has inspired this Special Issue on Afro-Mexico. Drawing on funding from the UC – Alianza MX Mobility Program (Research Institute on African-Descended People in Mexico), Professor Smith incorporated a week-long research trip to Mexico City for her students in November 2023. This trip included 17 undergraduate students in History, CRES, Sociology, Anthropology, and Management and Business Economics. As a participant on this trip, I am excited to interview Dr. Smith and learn more about her research and her approach in creating this exciting opportunity for undergraduate students in SSHA.

(KF): In Fall 2023, you offered HIST 141/CRES 141, which examines the historical and contemporary experiences of African descent people in Latin America. How does this course connect to your overall research as a historian of Mexico?

Sabrina Smith: Of all the courses I teach at UC Merced, this class is most closely related to my research. So, I see HIST 141/CRES 141 as an extension of my research, which focuses on the experiences of African-descended people in colonial Oaxaca. When I designed this cross-listed course, I wanted to ensure that students learn about the history of slavery and freedom in Latin America. I also wanted them to see the legacy of colonialism and understand power, resistance, colorism, human rights, migration, and activism among Black populations in Latin America. As I consider the circulation of ideas about freedom in Latin America and the broader Atlantic world, I also wanted students to think about how identity and race relations among Afro-Latines are transnational concepts between and within Latin America and the United States.

KF: How did you become interested in the African Diaspora? When did you know that being a historian of the African Diaspora was a field you wanted to pursue as a career?

SS: Great question! My father is African American and my mother is from El Salvador, so I self-identify as Black and Latina. This means that race relations, blackness, and latinidad are always on my mind. As an undergraduate student at UC Santa Barbara, I brought my personal experiences to the classroom and asked questions about the experiences of Afro-Latines in my Anthropology, Spanish, and Chicano/a courses. By the time I graduated from UCSB, I had

written an honor's thesis on blackness in Mexico and it was clear to me that I wanted to study the history or contemporary experience of Black populations in Mexico. I ultimately decided to focus on the history of the African Diaspora, and I earned a PhD in Latin American history at UCLA.

KF: While I know that you have offered HIST 141/CRES 141 to UC Merced students in the past, can you tell us why you decided to incorporate a week-long, in-semester research trip to Mexico City in this version of the course?

SS: Yes, I had previously taught HIST 141/CRES 141 twice: in Spring 2020 and Fall 2022. Teaching this class at the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic did not offer the best measure of success. When I taught this course for the second time, I realized that students wanted more engagement and to interact with members of the communities that they were studying. Assigning documentaries and inviting guest speakers came with certain limitations in Fall 2022, so I was left wondering how I could take the students to educational or cultural institutions in the Bay Area or SoCal, so that they could further engage with our course content, in-person. I eventually learned about the UC Alianza MX Mobilities to Mexico grant, which funds these kinds of academic opportunities, but in Mexico. By Spring 2023, I applied for and was awarded this grant, and that funding set the gears in motion to integrate a short-term study abroad experience into the course during Fall 2023.

KF: The UC Alianza MX Mobilities to Mexico grant funded the research trip to Mexico for the students participating in HIST 141/CRES 141. What was the application process like? Can you elaborate on how you planned the trip?

SS: This is another great question. The planning process was long and complex, but I had a few major objectives in mind. I articulated the following goals in my grant proposal: I wanted to enhance this seminar by integrating a one-week trip to Mexico City for students to collaborate with Mexican scholars and activists and attain innovative research experiences. But the primary goal was for students to better understand identity and race relations in Mexico and among Afro-Latinx in the U.S. I proposed that students would achieve this objective by visiting and conducting research at Mexico's national archive, and engaging with Afro-Mexican activists, scholars, artists, and filmmakers. My second major goal was to reduce the barriers that prevent minoritized students from participating in and benefitting from study abroad experiences. For this reason, the UC Alianza MX grant supported students' airfare, passport application fees, lodging, meals, ground transportation, and excursions. Pretty much everything.

By Summer 2023, I was deep in the planning process, meeting with stakeholders all across campus, from curriculum committees to Student Financial Services, Risk Management, and the Office of International Affairs. Considering that this was an international university-sponsored

trip, I had to assess all possibilities for student engagement and safety, as well as financial costs. The second part of this process involved planning academic activities of the trip with my partners in Mexico. My colleague in INAH, Dr. Gabriela Iturralde Nieto, was instrumental in helping me coordinate the community conversation with Afro-Mexican women activists and our workshop on the Movement of Enslaved People in New Spain. I also collaborated with the Educational Programs department and archivists at the national archive. I came across other scholar-activists on social media, and those collaborations with muralists and filmmakers were the most fruitful for the students and me.

No matter how much I planned out our trip, I knew that unexpected hiccups would undoubtedly come up. I tried to navigate those circumstances with grace, including dealing with the heavy traffic in Mexico City, which frustrated all of us!

KF: What was memorable about the trip, especially in terms of cultivating this travel experience for UC Merced students?

SS: There were several memorable moments, and I am sure that each student might offer a different answer to this question. But the workshop with Afro-Mexican filmmaker-activist André Lo Sanchez was most memorable for all of us. This is an example of an academic activity that was hosted at the Casa de California, which is a conference center owned by the University of California. Prior to the workshop, students were asked to upload individual video clips of their expectations of this workshop. My sense is that many were nervous to record themselves and have those videos shared with the larger group! We started the seminar with a discussion about representation and anti-black racism in Mexico, then the students were given the freedom to create anti-racist social media content in the gardens of the conference center. It was fascinating to see the students' creativity flourish as they worked in small groups to create content that addressed racism and anti-racism in Mexico and the US. The students were also attuning to the fact that they are not members, rather allies, to the Afro-Mexican community in Mexico City.

KF: What do you hope the students gained from the trip?

SS: Obviously, my primary goal was for students to better understand the course content, and specifically, the intersectionality among Black populations in Latin America and the interplay between individual actors and structures of power. Aside from this scholarly objective, I hope that this academic trip exposed the students to the possibilities of studying abroad. There is a considerable amount of growth that happens during a study abroad experience. Although this was a short-term trip, prior to Fall 2023, some of the students had never traveled abroad, others had never been on an airplane, and some students only had a limited command of the Spanish language. In addition, many students are children of Mexican immigrants, so traveling to Mexico carried a deeper meaning for them. In short, there were many firsts for all of us. And to truly

immerse oneself in Mexico City is to experience a shock to all the senses! The students proved to step out of their comfort-zone, and they were open to learning during the academic activities that I organized and during their free time.

All of the students in the class are underrepresented students in study abroad programs – many students self-identify as Latinx, African American, AAPI, neurodivergent, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. I was honored to take such a diverse group of students to Mexico. I was also pleased to see the students support each other over the course of that week. When we returned to class the following week at UC Merced, it was clear that the students had built a sense of community and belonging in ways that simply were not possible in the classroom.

Another important outcome of this trip is that several students wanted to produce original research projects. A handful of students used this trip, and ultimately this class, as a means to revive the HCRES Undergraduate Journal. Those students, including you, Kayle, now form part of the editorial board. I am so proud to see that my students are engaging in this important service to the HCRES department, and many students are also publishing their research findings from our academic trip in this Special Issue on Afro-Mexico. I am really excited to read it when it is published!

KF: Do you think this version of HIST 141/CRES 141 could be a model for future upper-division seminars at UC Merced?

SS: Yes, in fact, my grant proposal originally indicated that this class could serve as a pilot program for future research-intensive seminars in History. With funds remaining from this UC Alianza MX grant, I brought two History students and two CRES students enrolled in History 195 to conduct archival research with me in Oaxaca City, Mexico in March 2024. HIST 195 is designed for advanced undergraduates, and the smaller class made it easier for the students to partake in hands-on research in Oaxaca's archives and research libraries. It was a very different experience for the students, but nevertheless transformative and rewarding for everyone.

I would like to design more sustainable and recurring mobilities for my students. I envision a possible research-intensive seminar in History that involves a one or two-day trip to research libraries in the Bay Area, like the Bancroft Library or the Huntington Library in Pasadena, CA. This kind of trip would be much more cost-effective than international travel, yet it would introduce History majors to the research process, and lead to students engaging in an original research project. Ultimately, the idea is that learning happens inside and outside of the classroom, and I am happy to facilitate that engagement if I can weave it into the courses that I teach.

KF: Thank you Dr. Smith for participating in this interview. I am one of the many grateful students that were able to experience your culturally engaging and interactive course (HIST 141/CRES 141). Reflecting back on our in-class discussions regarding the course material I recall feeling confident engaging with classmates because our mutual knowledge inspired conversation during the trip to Mexico. The trip helped me develop lifelong connections and fulfilled my academic goals. I am thankful to you Dr. Smith for your dedication to truth and knowledge sharing. I am especially thankful for educating future generations about the legacy of colonialism and on-going racism by teaching the history of slavery in Latin America.