Before we begin, I want to ask you a question: how are you all doing today? I mean this sincerely. The chat is open and I'd love for you to share a little bit about how you're feeling. Are you tired, like me, or depressed, or excited? Is it sunny where you are? Have your kids been up since 5am?

Since the chat is open, I also want you to feel free to talk among yourselves. My dream is for a backchannel conversation to extend across the full length of this talk.

My talk today begins with a paralipsis.

That is to say I'm beginning this talk in parentheses. As in, "In this talk I was going to tell you."

Abre hilo.

In this talk I was going to tell you about a map. Here's a photograph of the map, or I don't know, a screenshare of a digital photograph of the map.

At any rate, here's a facsimile, a replica, of a map that was drawn in the sixteenth century in the town of Cholula in what is now Mexico. It's part of a collection of census records known collectively as the Relaciones Geográficas, documents that were designed to map, with words and images, the religious, geographical, environmental, and economic qualities of the growing Spanish colonies in the Americas.

Scholars have done really interesting work with this map in particular, and with these census records more generally. The records offer a remarkable window into what successive generations of scholars have referred to as the lettered city, the contact zone, the hybrid culture of the Spanish American colonies.

One thing you see in the case of this map, for example, is the rigid grid of the town and the centrality of the church, which is obviously a product of the Spanish spacial imagination. But as Barbara Mundy has written, the grid also seems to map onto pre-hispanic polities, or calpolli. And the pyramid and toponym in the upper right corner take on the position of a different kind of center.

The map was probably made by a Nahua cartographer, trained in Cholula by Franciscan friars. Many of those calpolli survive today in the form of church communities that map geographically and genealogically onto those historic spaces.

The map of Cholula shown here is held at the University of Texas. It was acquired, along with other rare colonial Mexican materials, by the librarian Carlos Castañeda, a Mexican American teacher and historian, the first Mexican American professor at UT Austin, and a fierce advocate for the rights of Mexicans in Texas.

Castañeda fought the University of Texas over ethnic discrimination. He also stewarded the development of what is now the Benson Latin American Collection of books and manuscripts, but was then the Texas history collection. I don't think it is a stretch to say that one aspect of why Castañeda valued this collection is because he saw it as part of his heritage, and as part of Texas's heritage.

But colonial materials never just belong to one community. The Relaciones Geográficas were acquired from the family of the nineteenth-century Mexican historian Joaquín García Icazbalceta. Icazbalceta did not waste time thinking about whether Indigenous communities deserved access to these records, but he was very unhappy about the fact that so many of the documents that recorded Mexico's colonial history had been dispersed to other nations over the tumultuous nineteenth century. For Icazbalceta, these materials were part of Mexico's national heritage, and belonged in Mexico.

The map of Cholula represents a conundrum when it comes to cultural heritage because like many colonial documents, it belongs to many people: to people in Texas; in Mexico; in Spain; and in Cholula. This is what my talk today was going to be about. I was going to tell you about a 2016 project led by Kelly McDonough at the University of Texas and Lidia Gómez García at the BUAP in Puebla to create a high-quality replica of the map and to gift it, as part of a ceremonial act of return, to religious leaders in Cholula.

I was going to tell you about how when I went to Cholula a year after the repatriation, nobody could - or would - tell me where the map was being held. I was going to tell you about how a separate faction of the community requested, and was gifted, their own slightly smaller copy of the map. And I was going to tell you about how the map was used as part of a land dispute between religious leaders in Cholula, many of whom can trace their families and communities to prehispanic times, and the municipal government.

I was even going to tell you about Tania Romero, who introduced me to pulque and told me about her work as an Indigenous lands rights activist. And about Jesús Quiroz, who goes by Don Chuey, and who felt so connected to the map that he hired someone to make carved replicas of it out of stone. When that person stole his tools, Don Chuey bought new equipment and discovered he had the skill to make them himself. His carvings of the map now hang in a hotel in the center of town.

So my talk today was definitely going to be about culture mapping. I was going to talk about how we inscribe our relationships with the places where we live, and the people we share space with, often under conditions that may be violent and exploitative and with which we may be complicit. And I was going to talk about what happens when those documents become commodities or collectibles, and how they replicate and are replicated in the name of capital, or heritage, or access, or even beauty.

[7 minutes]

But, ok, how can I give that talk in the middle of a pandemic? How can I *write* that talk in the middle of a pandemic?

Listen.

Listen.

Talks about heritage and culture and records and replicas — those are talks that we give in better times. It feels almost indecent to speak of these things now, and if I'm being honest, it's been hard to write about them.

Let me be more specific. It's been really difficult for me to write this talk.

About eight months ago, I left a career in academia for an amazing job working with brilliant and dedicated colleagues doing work that I am proud to do. I am so lucky. But it would not be accurate to say that I left my career by choice. I left because academia failed me.

This is a conference about futures. I still mourn the future I imagined for myself, and it makes it hard for me to do this work. And now, as universities cancel job searches and impose hiring freezes, my mourning is multiplied as I watch my colleagues and friends and students forced to make the same difficult decisions I faced.

It is not easy to do scholarship from a place of mourning.

And it's not easy to do scholarship in the shadow of the apocalypse. There's a fantastic short story by Jorge Luis Borges - Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius. In the story, the world is slowly overcome by an alien planet. People, nations, and languages all succumb to the influence of Tlön. Only Borges remains, translating a book from Latin to Spanish. From one dead language to another.

Borges somehow gets up every morning and works on his translation, even as the world becomes Tlön. For me it's not so easy. This pandemic is not actually an apocalypse, but it feels like one. There are mornings when I struggle to get out of bed. There are days when I am unable to read. I am lucky in my living situation, but I have not talked to another person in over a month.

Yesterday I had a zoom meeting with some colleagues and we talked about our work schedules. By which I mean, we talked about how many hours of animal crossing and pokemon we play each day.

I attended a number of really impressive talks yesterday, and I so admire your ability, overall, to get yourselves together and be professional in public. But this is not where I'm at.

So in the midst of a pandemic, I cannot give a talk about my academic research. In the time that remains to me, I want to do something else entirely.

I'll start with a question that I take from Ann Cvetkovich, one of my scholarly heroes. At an event in 2018, Ann asked: what future are you afraid of? And queer feminist activist that she is, she made us all go around the room and share our feelings.

I kind of hated it. Too much forced vulnerability in a professional environment. But I've never forgotten it and I think it broke something open for me. So I want to invite you to do the same in the chat. Tell me what you're afraid of right now. I'll tell you what scares me.

What scares me is that people I love will die. What scares me is that it may be a very long time before I can travel to the homes of the people I care about. I am afraid of the financial insecurity that so many of us are going to face. I am afraid that the economy will crash and I am afraid that no one graduating from humanities phds or masters degrees or mlis degrees will get jobs and I am afraid for the future of the humanities and of museums and archives and higher education, which means I am afraid for the future of everyone in this country.

These are things I am afraid of.

And I've been struggling with how to write this talk because I just don't know how my research can address or resolve those fears. I don't know how the study of historical maps can make the visionary futures that Kubi Ackerman spoke about in his keynote last night become real.

But here's the thing. I am part of a group that I've been calling the visionary futures collective. (Not all of them know I call it that yet.) We are humanists working on the margins of our fields — people employed as postdocs and adjuncts and VAPs and lecturers and freelancers, people working in jobs that some people like to refer to as alt-ac.

Many people are experiencing right now, because of this pandemic, the failure of structures that they thought were secure. For those of us on the margins of higher ed, those structures failed a long time ago, though the consequences of that failure are escalating now. And so for a long time we have been working to envision and implement better futures.

So that's how I want to spend the rest of this talk. I want to talk a little bit about how we can think about envisioning futures for the humanities. And then I want to talk about what it looks like to put those visions into action.

[13 minutes]

Envisioning

Last week I wrote an article, actually a blog post, that got a little bit of traction. I keep making jokes about how many more people have seen that article than have seen all of my scholarship put together. I published it on Medium and according to their count, more than 5000 people have looked at it. I know that sounds small in the scale of viral posts. I saw a tiktok the other day that had four million likes. But it's so so many readers for me.

So I'm pretty pleased with myself, to be honest, and I've been thinking a lot about that article and why it resonated with people. The article is called "What the Humanities Do in a Crisis" and it's about thinking about the humanities as a site of activism and a site of action.

I think the article resonated because it makes the claim that our work and our communities are essential. This can be a hard belief to hold on to when we are faced with catastrophe.

We now have an official definition for an essential worker: those who have no choice but to leave their homes and risk their lives for us. According to this definition, most of us are not essential at all.

For some of us, people like me, this may have provoked a crisis of faith. Because in the humanities we are used to believing that our work is essential. We believe that in the face of a whole lot of evidence to the contrary: in the face of a public that is constantly asking whether we matter, and an economy that works to undermine us at every turn. It's why we work so hard, why we accept so little pay, why we sacrifice so much.

If this is not the case, if we cannot save lives or communities, then we might begin questioning who we are making these sacrifices for. We might ask why we should bend over backwards to maintain professional continuity. Why keep teaching? Why keep writing articles and monographs? Why keep entering metadata and designing exhibitions and writing lib-guides? As Rebecca Colesworthy writes, we might start wondering who exactly we are being generous to.

It's no wonder many of us feel depressed. We may be experiencing what Ann Cvetkovich calls an impasse, a moment when the social relevance of what we're doing and thinking is not clear.

Ann writes: "For those who are fortunate enough to imagine that their careers and other life projects can be meaningfully shaped by their own desires, depression in the form of thwarted ambition can be the frequent fallout of the dreams that are bred by capitalist culture" (17). In some sense, under quarantine, all of our ambitions are thwarted now.

And it's no wonder that many of us may be thinking about failure. Economic failure, professional failure, individual failure, social failure. Our failure to educate our children. To take a shower. To

work out. To be productive, always to be productive. To stop this pandemic from wreaking havoc on our lives.

I think my article resonated because instead of focusing on the impasse and the failures, it highlights a different version of the humanities than the one we are used to seeing. In the article I talk about humanists committed to equity and justice, and I talk about activist projects formed in the pandemic that range from wealth redistribution to data collection and community building. To do these projects, the humanists in question had to put continuity aside, to reimagine their purpose, and to redirect the gift of their labor.

I don't want to say that I am hopeful about the changes that this crisis will bring. It is a bad cliche spoken in bad taste. I am horrified by what is happening.

But I am excited about the ways that this change is empowering my community, which has been passive for so long, to take action.

I am excited to see humanists step up and redirect their expertise towards a collective good. In particular, I am inspired by the work of those who work in ethnic studies, in American studies, in the history of medicine, in public humanities, in information literacy, and in other areas directly relating to ongoing events who are doing so much to make their work relevant and impactful.

As for the rest of us, those of us whose expertise lies a bit to the side of all of this. I am excited to see people fighting to restructure labor, evaluation, compensation, and community at their institutions. We are in a moment where so many of our institutional weaknesses have become visible, a moment where we may just have lost everything. And yet, as Jack Halberstam reminds us, "there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing….all our failures combined might just bring down the winner" (120).

In this moment of failure, we may just have a chance to create change.

[20 mins]

Implementing

What I am calling for is, yes, a revolution in humanities institutions.

Or, you know, someone is calling for that. I'm ready to follow their lead. Where I have focused my attention is on small, community-based actions that we can take to introduce change to our institutions.

One way I have aimed to enact change is through public acts of vulnerability. In the Visionary Futures Collective, we talk about how the failure of the systems that we believe in and depend

on makes us feel. We talk about the sorrow and the hopelessness and the helplessness and the sickness because we cannot help ourselves.

But in talking we also seek, as Ann Cvetkovich writes, “forms of testimony that can mediate between the personal and the social, that can explain why we live in a culture whose violence takes the form of systematically making us feel bad.” As Ana Almar Liante wrote recently: “this life as it is, let’s say it, doesn’t admit life itself.”

A second way that we enact change is by improving structural transparency. That is to say, we look at the systems that are failing us and we describe what we see. And then we make those systems visible to others.

One example of institutional transparency that I’ve been involved with is the Academic Job Market Support Network, a repository of job materials like cover letters and research statements hosted on humanities commons. We noticed that part of what’s painful about seeking academic employment is the mystery of the application process: no one seems able to say quite what it is or how you do it. This means, of course, that only those with the luck of privilege and resources can succeed. The Academic Job Market Support Group seeks to change that.

A third way that we enact change is through collective action. When we build a community of trust based on shared vulnerabilities, and when we make transparent the ways that our systems are designed to hurt us, we are then empowered to ask for and implement change.

One example of collective action is the Postdoctoral Laborers Bill of Rights. We noticed that humanities programs are increasingly dependent on postdoctoral labor as a way of exploiting early career scholars without offering them tenable long-term employment. So we wrote a document that describes how postdoctoral positions work and offers applicants guidance on how to evaluate them, negotiate for them, and, when necessary, demand better treatment. The document also informs supervisors about expectations from the field. It has been endorsed by the Association for Computers and the Humanities and many of its recommendations have been implemented at universities.

But you can also enact collective action at your institution. For example, you can lead your community in the redistribution of wealth, as one employee I work with did in response to the layoffs of food service staff. If you are a faculty member, you can redistribute your research funds as summer stipends for graduate students. If you are a student, you can work with unions on your campus or elsewhere to demand better professionalization training, extensions of your time to degree, improved salaries and benefits, and other resources.

Quarantine has created an odd moment of solidarity, because those with secure employment are facing some of the same experiences that are familiar to the rest of us: a lack of office supplies and privacy and childcare and time; impossible labor expectations; the sudden loss of plans for the future; distance from loved ones; and uncertainty about what will happen next.

Maybe this means the hierarchies are softening. Maybe this means change is on its way.

[25 minutes]

Mapping

North America in the sixteenth century was a place of violence and pandemics. In 1519, during the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlan, Hernán Cortés famously massacred cholultecas on the town square. The Relación from Cholula, attributed to Gabriel de Rojas in consultation with “indios antiguos”, reports that the population of the city before the Spaniards arrived was 40,000 people. By the 1580s, the population was 9000. The cause of the dramatic reduction in population was listed as enfermedades - sicknesses (mcdonough and carvajal, 2019).

We’ll never know how the *indios antiguos* — the elders — who provided information for the relación felt about their participation in the census. Did they feel like they were betraying their community, or resisting Spanish authority, or trying to better their position, or just doing what they were told?

One thing we do know is that because these elders aided in the census, because they did their jobs in a time of crisis, four hundred and fifty years later the knowledge they chose to share survives. The Relacion is in Texas, but today, in Cholula, the map is everywhere. There are copies at the UDLAP, the local university, and hanging in a hotel in the town square, and someone told me you could get a postcard with the map on it if you wanted.

I like to think of the abundance of copies as a joke at the expense of the University of Texas, which invested so much time and money and stress in delivering one particularly nice copy to Cholula. I also like to think about it as a story of resilience, a multiplying of history in the face of events, from book burnings to pandemics to theft and sale, that should have made that history disappear.

I asked a lot of you in this talk: to join me in envisioning a better future and in making that future a reality.