

CLAS Open Seminars - Lent Term 2025

Mondays 5:15pm

SG1 Ground Floor, Alison Richard Building, 7 West Road, CB3 9DT

Monday 17 February - 5:15pm

Back to the (Amphibious) Future: Axolotl's Potentialities between Mexican Science Fiction and Indigenous Storytelling

[Iris Montero](#) (Brown University)

Chair: [Stephanie Rohner](#) (University of Cambridge)

Abstract:

In recent Mexican science fiction, the sixth extinction has reached the axolotl (*Ambystoma mexicanum*). Just at the moment that the amphibian's grinning face circulates in a new banknote – a somewhat belated effort to raise awareness about its endangered status in the wild – science fiction seems to foretell its imminent demise. But does it, really? This talk takes short stories by Mexican science fiction writer Andrea Chapela as a window onto foundational narratives about Mexico City and its amphibious beginnings in Indigenous storytelling. Looking at the axolotl in *jolloco atl (en el corazón del lago, or at the heart of the lake)* in Chapela's writings and in Nahuatl manuscripts such as the *Florentine Codex* and the *Codex Aubin*, I argue that the axolotl epitomizes an understanding of life between land and water that was central to the city's founding. This amphibious origin is best expressed in a forgotten version of the city's foundational story, where, after seeing the ominous eagle atop the cactus, Axolohua, a prominent migration leader, submerges himself in water and secures the blessing of water deity Tlaloc for the Mexica to settle on the lake. By highlighting the ways that Axolohua emulates the behavior of his amphibian namesake, I demonstrate how this forgotten figure serves to remind us of the necessary conditions for the city's growth in ancient times and, potentially, for the axolotl's own survival in the future.

Iris Montero is Assistant Professor of Hispanic Studies at Brown University. Trained in the history and philosophy of science at the University of Cambridge, she works at the intersection of the history of science, ethnohistory, and literary studies. She is currently completing her book *What the Hummingbird Knows: Tiny Objects for Expansive Histories of Mexico*. The book examines the influence of Indigenous Nahua intellectuals on early modern studies about nature, and the persistent echoes of their voices in today's relationships between hummingbirds and humans in Mexico and its diaspora. Her research has been featured in various collections on global histories of knowledge, including *Global Scientific Practice in an Age of Revolutions, 1750–1850* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), *Worlds of Natural History* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), and *New World Objects of Knowledge: A Cabinet of Curiosities* (University of London Press, 2021). Illustrative of her methodological approach, her article “The Disguise of the Hummingbird: On the Natural History of Huitzilopochtli in the *Florentine Codex*” received the 2021 Robert F. Heizer Award for Best Article in the field of Ethnohistory by the American Society for Ethnohistory. She has been a member of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton and has held research fellowships at the Centre Alexandre Koyré d’Histoire des sciences et des techniques in Paris and at the Newberry Library in Chicago. She is spending this academic year in Madrid as an invited researcher at the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas.

