

CLAS Events – Lent Term 2026

Tuesday 03 February - 5:15pm to 7:00pm | Film Screening & Book Dialogue

Room S2, Second Floor, Alison Richard Building

From *Una voz estéril* to *Pájaros de medianoche*: Testimony and the Struggle for Justice in Peru

Speaker: [Dr Inés Ruiz Alvarado](#), Filmmaker | Author | UNESCO Chair in Public Policy and Cultural Management | Co-Chair of the Executive Committee of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) Peru.

Chair: Cristine E. Blas Blas, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, MMLL Faculty

Languages: Spanish/English

Blurb:

What happens when state violence does not end with the act itself, but continues through decades of institutional abandonment? How do survivors build collective memory and political agency when the very systems meant to deliver justice perpetually defer it? And why, three decades later, have only a handful of perpetrators faced trial—while the policy's architects escaped justice entirely?

Conceptual Framework: Testimony, Analysis, and the Politics of Recognition

This event brings together three modes of knowledge production—documentary testimony, scholarly analysis, and translation—to illuminate how state violence operates not only through direct harm but through what Dr Ruiz Alvarado terms the “*gran silencio de la ciudadanía*” (“great silence of the citizenry”; my trans.; Ruiz Alvarado 24), a societal indifference rooted in “*las grandes desigualdades del país, que tocan aspectos como la raza, el género y la pobreza*” (“the country’s profound inequalities touching on race, gender, and poverty”; my trans.; Ruiz Alvarado 24). The combination of documentary film and book is not incidental but methodologically constitutive: each form does intellectual work the other cannot.

Documentary testimony, as Dr Ruiz Alvarado argues, “*cumple un rol que está ligado a la memoria y al empoderamiento de las víctimas. No solo es el registro de los acontecimientos, sino también el de los testimonios que evidencian hechos traumáticos*” (“fulfils a role linked to the memory and empowerment of the victims; it serves not only as a record of events, but also of testimonies that make evident traumatic events”; my trans.; Ruiz Alvarado 309). The documentary captures what scholarly writings cannot: embodied witness, affective register, the texture and emotional weight of the survivors’ voices. When survivors at the Casa de la Mujer de Huancabamba first viewed *Una voz estéril* (2012), they affirmed that “*su discurso cobró más valor al verlo registrado en un dispositivo digital*” (“their discourse gained more value upon seeing it recorded on a digital device”; my trans.; Ruiz Alvarado 310)—a

recognition that testimony's power lies partly in its material inscription and circulation.

Scholarly analysis, conversely, provides the structural framework that testimony alone cannot articulate. The book, *Pájaros de medianoche: las esterilizaciones forzadas en el Perú de Alberto Fujimori y la lucha de sus víctimas por ser reivindicadas* (2021) traces the institutional mechanisms through which impunity operates: the repeated pattern of judicial case openings and closures, the strategic deployment of statute of limitations laws, and the transformation of direct violence into violence engaged through procedures such as delays, dismissals, and statutory barriers that harm survivors not through physical force but through bureaucratic obstruction. The book documents how survivors evolved from isolated victims into organised political actors, creating survivor-led organizations like the Instituto de Apoyo al Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres Campesinas (IAMAMC) (active since the 1980s), the Comité de Defensa de los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres Esterilizadas (CDME, 2012), and the Asociación de Mujeres Afectadas por las Esterilizaciones Forzadas (AMAEF, 2004), often *before* external organisations launched solidarity campaigns. Dr Ruiz Alvarado chronicles moments when survivor-led organisations asserted epistemic authority against well-meaning but paternalistic Lima-based advocates: "*Nadie nos va a venir a imponer, porque nos hablan de una manera como si fuéramos brutas que no entendemos*" ("No one is going to come impose upon us, because they speak to us as if we were ignorant women who do not understand"; my trans.; Ruiz Alvarado 287).

The forthcoming English translation, tentatively titled *Midnight Birds*, represents a third intervention: the moment when subaltern testimony and decolonial analysis enter anglophone academic discourse. This is not merely linguistic transfer but epistemic reframing—asking what becomes visible (and what remains invisible) when survivor knowledge travels across languages and institutional contexts.

The 2024–2025 political developments confirm that the pattern Dr Ruiz Alvarado documented continues in its most explicit form yet. Even the 2003 *solución amistosa* ("friendly settlement") in the emblematic case of María Maméríta Mestanza Chávez remains only partially fulfilled twenty-two years later: "el caso de Maria Maméríta continua en la impunidad" ("María Maméríta's case remains in impunity"; my trans.; "Esterilizaciones en Perú"). This non-compliance forced escalation: in May 2025, Celia Ramos v. Peru became the first forced sterilisation case heard by the full Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR), where Peru adopted a negationist position denying systematic violations ("El caso de Celia Ramos"). Meanwhile, Law No. 32.107 (August 2024) shields crimes committed before July 2002 from prosecution (Alvarez); Fujimori died in September 2024 without trial (as it relates to the State's forced sterilizations); and the October 2024 ruling by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) recognised Peru's 1990s policy as sex-based violence constituting potential crimes against humanity (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights). Peru's failure to deliver justice is architecture, not accident, as survivors continue to declare: "*Nosotras no nos cansaremos de continuar exigiendo verdad, justicia y reparación*" ("We will not tire of continuing to demand truth, justice, and reparation"; my trans.; Ruiz Alvarado 307).

The Documentary

Una voz estéril (A Sterile Voice), with English subtitles, is a 20-minute documentary created by Dr Inés Ruiz Alvarado during her doctoral fieldwork in Huancabamba, Piura, in 2012. The film captures testimonies from survivors of Peru's forced sterilisation campaigns (1996–2000), including Esperanza Huayama, who has since become an emblematic figure in the struggle for justice. First screened at the Casa de la Mujer de Huancabamba, the documentary embodies what Dr Ruiz Alvarado describes as “*un doble valor para el caso: de denuncia y empoderamiento*” (“a dual value for the case: denunciation and empowerment”; my trans.; Ruiz Alvarado 310).

The Book

Pájaros de medianoche: las esterilizaciones forzadas en el Perú de Alberto Fujimori y la lucha de sus víctimas por ser reivindicadas (Editorial Planeta Perú, 2021) emerged from Dr Ruiz Alvarado's doctoral research at the University of Kent. The book's central thesis argues that the forced sterilisation programme targeted women at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression— “*las mujeres más pobres del Perú—la mujer indígena de la sierra y de la selva*” (“the poorest women in Peru—Indigenous women from the highlands and jungle”; my trans.; Ruiz Alvarado 25)— through a policy Dr Ruiz Alvarado identifies as rooted in eugenics doctrine: “*Este discurso de clase, género y raza pone en evidencia la intención de aplicar la doctrina eugenésica en las campañas de esterilizaciones*” (“This discourse of class, gender, and race reveals the intention to apply eugenics doctrine in the sterilisation campaigns”; my trans.; Ruiz Alvarado 97).

Midnight Birds offers Cambridge an exclusive preview of this critical scholarship that will now reach anglophone audiences.

About the Speaker



Dr Inés Ruiz Alvarado holds the UNESCO Chair in Public Policy and Cultural Management and serves as Co-Chair of the Executive Committee of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) Peru. She holds a PhD in Hispanic Studies and an MA in Modern Hispanic Studies from the University of Kent, and a BA in Audiovisual Communication from the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). Her research centres on social and gender inequalities at the intersections of race, class, and ethnicity. Her IASH fellowship project, “Defenders of the Territory: Amazonian Women-Leaders,” extends her work into contemporary Indigenous women's movements. Dr Ruiz Alvarado's practice-based methodology—integrating documentary filmmaking with scholarly analysis—models how creative and academic modes of knowledge production illuminate state violence in complementary ways.