

What Do Historians Do?

Interview with Lisa Sousa

Lisa Sousa: My name is Lisa Sousa. I am a professor of Latin American history at Occidental College. I study Latin American history, and especially colonial Latin America, with an emphasis on Mexico and the histories of indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Shane Carter, ORIAS Interviewer: I want to first start by asking you, since you are looking at history, if you can tell me how you define history.

Lisa: Well, I would define history as a dialogue with the past that allows us to put the actions, beliefs, and practices of those who lived in the past in historical context. History can be a very powerful lesson for understanding how attitudes and beliefs change over time, but it can also be, I think, very empowering to communities to be able to recover their history.

I would describe the type of history I do as social history, which is often called history from below. And social history assumes that it is the daily lives of common people that really make history, it's a type of history that rejects the great man history or top-down history or even more institutional approaches to history.

The second type of history that's informed my work has been women's history, gender history, and this approach also is focused on decentering powerful men and trying to understand the way in which gender has been socially and historically constructed in different times and places, and considers the contributions of both men and women to their societies.

And then third, I practice ethnohistory, which is in an interdisciplinary study of the histories of indigenous peoples, and that draws upon art history, linguistics, history, and anthropology.

I would say that all three of these branches of history do have the objective of trying to uncover histories of peoples who are oftentimes marginalized from the dominant narratives and to appreciate the contributions that people who are often overlooked by more traditional approaches have made to the past.

ORIAS: I know that I and the group of teachers who read your-- "*The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar - Into a Jaguar*" book really saw that and it-- like thought it would be very like powerful for a person living now in one of those areas to be able to see kind of what their great- great- many times removed grandparents were doing and thinking. Do you love that? I mean, do you-- I ask partly because we were also like really struck by like just how many languages you must speak to be able to do the research that you did or read.

Lisa: This, I guess, gets to the question of what do you love about history? And I have to say, honestly, I didn't love history in high school. I grew up in Northern California, in a rural area that had a very traditional approach to teaching history.

And so I grew up with the histories of the founding fathers and a more institutional political approach that had very little appeal to me and didn't connect at all with the histories that I had heard through my

family, of immigration and my great grandmother fleeing the Mexican Revolution and more colorful personal stories.

So I came to love history as a subject when I was a Latin American studies undergraduate at UCLA, and I had the chance to really appreciate historical methodology. And so I think you could probably see in the book, *The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar*, that I love the idea of collecting the stories of common people and of thinking about how they made decisions and asserted their power where they could.

So I love doing history, I love being in the archives. I love reading documents. I love studying native languages for the lens that they provide on cultural beliefs and practices that are very oftentimes different from our own.

But I also love teaching history, and I think that students, now more than ever in this political moment, need to understand the importance of what we do as historians, of putting writings into context, of thinking about who is the author, figuring out what may be their political or social bias that they reflect, what do they hope to achieve in the writings they produce? And I think teaching students those critical thinking skills is really important.

I mean, I love the content of history, but oftentimes if a student may not be planning on pursuing a degree in history or perhaps teaching history themselves, I think they learn really important skills, critical thinking skills, the skills to express themselves, the skills of evaluating sources and points of view, and they understand that it's important to look at multiple perspectives in order to really understand the past.

And I think this is critical when they're watching debates or reading the newspaper or getting news on their phones, all of these things, I think, are critical for this historical moment.

ORIAS: I definitely agree with you. Have you ever had a student who told you that learning history changed their life?

Lisa: Well, as I mentioned, I teach Latin American history, and one of the things that we discuss in my courses on the colonial period, for example, is the development of a racial ethnic hierarchy and we spend a lot of time considering the ways in which, through the colonial period, ideas of race connect to the institutionalization of racism, and so I often have students say that the discussions on race, class, and gender make a strong impact on them.

I've also had students that I've worked with who were history majors who had the opportunity to do a summer research project, and they found that very empowering. The idea that they can engage in doing historical research on their own and producing original research, that has been very empowering to students, and several of my history students have gone on to teach history in local high schools in Los Angeles after doing a summer research project.

I also teach a course on race in Latin America, which traces the evolution of racial thinking and policy from the colonial period to the present. And I often have students who have parents or grandparents from Latin America who will say, "Oh, I've heard this in my family," or "I've seen this type of attitude expressed in my family," and that can be very powerful, where they start to connect their own personal family histories to the material that we cover in the class.

ORIAS: Yeah, yeah, there's something really powerful about seeing yourself or seeing your conception of yourself.

Lisa: Right, yeah, I mean, I guess history should be relevant to our students, and I think in that way it's more engaging.

ORIAS: Yeah, yeah, I think so too. What are a couple of really interesting historical questions that have directed your research? Or if questions don't direct your research, how do you go about that?

Lisa: Two major historical questions that I've engaged in, in-- particularly in my last research project on "*The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar*" concerned, for example, first, what impact did Spanish colonization and the imposition of Christianity have on the status of indigenous women in Mexico?

And a second question that I was interested in was, what was the meaning and value attached to women's work in indigenous communities, and how did that affect their status in their households and communities overall?

And in terms of how I did this research to answer these questions, in terms of the first question about Spanish colonization and the imposition of Christianity and its impact on the status of indigenous women, I looked at a broad variety of areas of women's lives.

So I looked, for example, at the demands for products produced by women as tribute payments to local Spaniards and the Crown. I considered changes in marriage practices and the elimination, for example, of divorce as an option for women under Catholicism. I looked at changing Spanish attitudes towards sexuality.

And so trying to look at the impact of some of these new institutions and cultural attitudes allowed me to really get a sense that although there was this official effort, oftentimes in regions where there was very little persistent Spanish presence, Catholicism had relatively little impact on native beliefs and practices and therefore, did not dramatically impact the status of women.

I think, more importantly, demands for women's labor and goods had a really profound impact on the status of all people in indigenous communities, who became increasingly impoverished over time.

ORIAS: And when you went into it, did you-- how long did it take you to figure out those types of sources as proxies for what you were looking for? 'Cause one of the things that was really striking as we were reading it was that, we just felt that your-- like that your way of going about answering the questions was very creative. And I don't mean creative like you made something up creative, I mean creative like you had figured out, like, how can I get at this voice of people that would otherwise have been not visible to a modern historian?

Lisa: Right, so I had the great privilege of studying Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Aztecs. And then I also studied, to a lesser extent, Zapotec, a language of Oaxaca and Mixtec, another indigenous language of Oaxaca.

And so I realized that there was great potential in working with documents and formal speeches and church materials that were written in the native languages, that they would provide a cultural lens on indigenous beliefs and some of the attitudes that I might see in more mundane records.

So I worked with both native language sources and especially with criminal records, and the criminal records were incredible because although most of the criminal records are in Spanish, I could link some of the attitudes and the status of women and the types of work they were doing and things that people were saying as-- in their testimony to some of these broader cultural concepts that I could pick up in the language.

And so, I loved doing research. I went to Mexico, I lived there for one long eight-month period, and then I went every summer for about four years and spent three months there. And I just lived in the archives, looking especially at criminal records, inquisition records, last wills and testaments, anything that I could find from the regions that I was studying, which were central Mexico and the state of Oaxaca, and I kind of left no stone unturned.

And then worked quite a bit with published indigenous language sources, such as the doctrinas, marriage speeches, formal speeches that would be made to children and things like the *Florentine Codex*, and then related to this, then were also indigenous language pictorial sources.

One of the reasons I love doing the indigenous language-based research is that we work oftentimes very collaboratively on these types of research projects that involve extensive translations, and so it really is in some ways the ideal model of a communal effort.

And so I definitely take responsibility for the translations and any errors in the translations, but I will say that very often, we work as groups on interrelated projects, and so my study of native language would not have been possible without having teams of scholars that I've worked with over the years at-- particularly at UCLA.

ORIAS: I think that's really-- that's a nice model.

Lisa: Yeah, it is, because I think it's a different approach than, you know, a sort of top down, you know, I'm the authority and I'm gonna write history that, you know, that tells you what your past is about. I like to think of it as much more of a dialogue and of learning from one another through the process, but also having a sense of community and camaraderie in the process.

ORIAS: Do you think there are questions about the past that are not historical questions? And if not, why not? And if so, what makes them not historical?

Lisa: This is such an intriguing question, and I really struggled with thinking about this because as you can see in my book, I think all aspects of culture are worthy of historical inquiry, and everything is so interrelated, it's hard for me to imagine a topic about the past that is not historical.

I think, if anything, people may treat certain themes ahistorically, but if it is a theme in the past that is approached in some historical and cultural context, then I think it counts as history.

ORIAS: The reason I asked the question was actually because of, you know, people in different parts of the world have-- are treated more and have longer, quote, unquote, "histories," and so there are different places in the world where you go back to a certain point and then all of a sudden it becomes archaeology.

And so, depending upon how closely a person who's doing research decides that like written text sources are the only legitimate sources, which I mean, no one fully does at this point, but the closer you get to that, the more parts of the world don't have a history that goes back beyond imperialism, and that was sort of what I was-- what I was asking about.

Lisa: Yeah, that's actually a very interesting question, which gets to the heart of historical methods, and as an ethnohistorian, I've been very flexible with the use of sources. So I've used language, I've used pictorial writings, which often were studied predominantly by art historians because they were images, but as a historian, I see them as writing historical narratives, as recording historical narratives.

I've also used material culture, particularly weaving, which is the work of women, but also on my current project, I've been looking more at the methods used for making gold and feather objects and the values that were placed on them, because my current project examines indigenous responses to the destruction of material culture and the ways-- during the conquest and imposition of Christianity, and the ways in which indigenous people link destruction of their cultural heritage to violence against native bodies.

So, for me, I-- as an ethnohistorian, I see those boundaries as very blurred. I mean, I guess I would just say, and I often say to my students at the end of a semester that history matters and understanding how we got to the places that we are today is extremely important, but also understanding that we are not on some sort of linear path of progress is really important.

Challenging notions of progress and civilization and cultural attitudes and values is really important, and especially when I'm-- when I think about the contributions of women's history, just challenging the notion that patriarchy is natural or universal has, you know, been really important for me.

And so, oftentimes, I have students who are surprised to learn that perhaps in the past, women may have had more rights in their communities than they do today. For example, indigenous women hold land in the colonial period, and it's less common for them to hold land today.

And there are lots of reasons why that has occurred over time, but just to have students think about, because these assumptions are still very common, that somehow if we impose Western institutions that that will, you know, radically transform indigenous communities in Latin America and that they'll be progressive and modern and liberal.

And that-- and that's been tried since 1492, it has not been a successful undertaking. So, I guess I would just really want to emphasize that history matters, it allows us to use our imagination to see a world that may be very different, and that we are not inevitably on some sort of path of progress.