

Interview with Dr. Stephanie M. Chancy

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RErIhj7ggBg>

Giovanna Violi (interviewer): Stephanie, thank you for agreeing to do the interview for *The Millennium*. Do you want to briefly introduce yourself so that the students who came into the program after you had already graduated know a little bit about yourself?

Dr. Stephanie M. Chancy (interviewee): Sure. Thank you so much for inviting me to talk with you and with the students. My name is Stephanie Chancy and I finished the PhD at FIU in December 2021. I defended in September of that year, almost eight years to the day after I had started the program in 2013, in the Fall of 2013. On paper I am classified as a Europeanist, but I consider myself as being more of an Atlanticist, because I look at the exchanges and connections between Europe, the US and the Caribbean. My dissertation, *Atlantic Legacies: Freeborn Women of Color in the Long 19th Century and the Changing Notions of Womanhood*. I probably messed that because it is a very long title, but just look for *Atlantic Legacies*. It looked at three freeborn African-descended women from the Americas, one came from Saint Domingue and two from the US, who actually left the Americas and made their lives and settled in Europe. I studied their lives in terms of the changing ideas of womanhood, ideal womanhood, so true woman, redemptive woman, and new woman. My subjects were very very kind in that they lived in chronological order and did everything in chronological order, and fit very nicely. It doesn't usually happen. After I graduated in December, I was a post-doctoral fellow in the Writing History Program for a year and I was then very fortunate to get the position that I hold now as the Caribbean Partnership Librarian and Director of Operations for the Digital Library of the Caribbean (DLoC) at the University of Florida (UF). So, this practically native South Floridian, because I was there for so long picked up stakes in 2023 and moved up to North-Central Florida, to Gator country. But I am still a girl of the 305 and a FIU Panther!

GV: We are glad to hear it! Actually, my first question is about something that you just mentioned. It is not the first time that I hear you say that you are a Europeanist but actually you consider yourself as an Atlanticist and for me this brings up this eternal question that all of us have when we are applying for funding, when we are applying for positions in the job market of this kind of categorization that goes on in the academic field. So, I was wondering if you could talk a bit about these categorizations and the fact that you don't quite always identify yourself as you're categorized. Did that affect you as you started looking into the job market after the PhD or even as you were still in the PhD looking at funding opportunities?

SMC: I think that perhaps it did. Perhaps it did. As I've mentioned previously in other occasions and I've told them that here, Gainesville was not where I was aiming when I was looking for a permanent position. I was actually looking at museums and institutions in the government, with the federal government in Washington DC. So, I think that they perhaps had a difficult time making me fit in whatever box that they wanted, and it is a talent. It's a skill more than a talent, it's a skill that I need to further develop in showing how, yes, I don't necessarily fit this box that you want but, because of all this stuff that I've done, I do fit that box. Being this

multidisciplinary, multiregional scholar, I think it helps you fit multiple boxes but learning how to express and explain how you fit is a skill that needs to be developed and I am still working on it. Because you also need to be concise, because you generally have a finite amount of space in which to talk about yourself, which is one of the hardest things that you will do.

GV: Yes, I think that “selling yourself” on paper is definitely tough. Talking about which, you mentioned the new position you are in at DLoC and I heard you previously talk about what you do with DLoC as a way of “deprivileging” access to sources. Can you tell us a bit about what you mean by saying that and how in your current position you are helping this process of “deprivileging”? And, bonus question, for people who don’t have exactly your role (maybe they work in education, or in other positions), what can we do if we share in your vision of “deprivileging” access to sources?

SMC: Sure. So, as Giovanna and some other graduate students in the program already know, I completed a pandemic dissertation. So, I transitioned to candidacy at the end of Spring/beginning of Summer 2018 and in Spring of 2019 I was given the opportunity to work with the Digital Library of the Caribbean, a mouthful, so DLoC, at FIU, which has an office there. And I always knew about DLoC, but I didn't really know exactly what they did. And that exposed me to, and exposed is probably not the right word to use, but that gave me...I developed a better idea of what they did. It's not just access, it's also preservation. So, we work with partners in the Caribbean, the US, Europe, and Canada to digitize or help partners digitize resources and upload them to our website, which serves as a centralized repository for resources about the Caribbean. And we make these freely available to everyone. And hey, that's a great thing to do! And then March 2020. And the fellowship that I had with DLoC actually included some funds for travel to do research. Well, after March 2020, it didn't make any difference. And I did not want to be 150 by the time I finished this dissertation, so I needed to find a way to access primary resources to help me make my argument and support my argument. So, I started to rely a lot on freely information that was available for free online, Library of Congress, National Archives, the US National Archives. There are many libraries: The Massachusetts Commonwealth. There's the Broward, I think the Broward Public Library, they have a whole collection on abolition newspapers. So, I started to find these things, often by accident. Often by accident. And of course I used the Digital Library of the Caribbean, so I was able to do my dissertation that way, but still, yeah, this is great, thank God for these things! But one day I was walking because there were no cars on the streets and I was walking on the streets of Miami to get some exercise and I saw somebody, right outside the elementary school that I had attended 100 years ago, and she was on her computer. And I was like, “What is she doing?” And I realized that she was there to tap into the Wi-Fi of the closed school so that she could work. And I realized, oh my God, I have privilege, because if my internet didn't work, I could call AT&T and tell them “Get out here and fix my internet! It's not working.” Not everybody had that option. So from that, as my mind works, I realized that they tell you everybody can go to the archive, but is that really true? No, it's not really true. Technically, yes, anybody can go to the archive, but people generally have financial limitations, time limitations, work responsibilities, and family responsibilities that prevent them from going to the archive. So then does that mean that those people should not

have an opportunity to complete an advanced degree? So, it was a whole process in my own mind, and I realized: “Why are we why are we limiting who can access information? Old stuff. Why are we limiting that?” And that's why I see what I do as de-privileging information. Probably not a word, but it should be. That's why I see it as deprivileging information because, essentially, to use the resources on the Digital Library of the Caribbean, all you need is curiosity and an internet connection. We don't charge you a fee. We don't even ask you to register for an account. We don't ask for any of that. Just be curious and connect. And you notice I didn't even say a computer because we make our site, we try to make our site low bandwidth so that people in the Caribbean, who generally access the internet through their mobile devices, don't have to deal with graphic-heavy sites. So, the other thing that I realized is once you open up access, you also open up who can undertake a research project that is as extensive as a dissertation or a master's thesis. At that point you are changing who is telling the stories and, therefore, you get different stories. Deprivileging knowledge. So that's why, and somebody once told me, when I explained this to them, perhaps a little bit more simply than I did now, but when I explained this, she said that is a very political statement. It was not intended to be a political statement. But if that's how you interpret it, then I'm okay with it.

GV: Well, as someone who's going through research for dissertation right now, I'm very, very grateful and I'm sure I can speak for a lot of my colleagues, not just at FIU, but in general across disciplines, having materials that we can use for the dissertations online definitely makes our lives simpler because, as you say, we don't always have the opportunity to go. But this leads me actually into the next question I wanted to ask you, which is: as someone who has survived the research and dissertation process, is there anything that you absolutely did not expect? I mean, of course, the pandemic, but is there anything about either the writing or the research or maybe both processes that you didn't expect that you wish you had known from the get-go that maybe you can give us some advice on?

SMC: So, one of the things that I did not expect was that the writing part was going to be as difficult as it ended up being. I have always considered myself a writer, and I have never had any trouble writing, and I had a hard time. I had a hard time. And part of it was that I, particularly at the very beginning, I kept thinking of the project in its totality, and, like most of you, I had never done a project this big. And it was a conversation that I had with a colleague from the PhD program, and I'll give him a shout out, Felix Jean-Louis. Felix and I were about on the same trajectory in our dissertation work. I think he finished a little bit before me. But I was talking to Felix and I said to him: “This is so hard.” And he told me: “Stephanie, small bites.” And I took that to mean: “Focus on one chapter. Don't think about everything.” So, each of your chapters will probably be 25 to 30 pages, maybe 50 pages. You've done that. You've done that. You've not written a 200-page book, which is essentially what you're producing. So, stop thinking about it in its totality and think about it in its individual parts. The other piece of advice that I needed to, it was a realization that I needed to come to: typically, when I write, I write in a very linear fashion. I have a beginning; I have my introduction. I have my middle and then I have my conclusion, of course, rewriting and tweaking the whole time. With a project this large, you cannot start at the beginning. The beginning actually has to come at the end and once I wrapped my linear-focused

mind around that, things went a little bit easier. The other thing that I would also suggest is: give yourself, set goals for yourself, writing goals, research goals, whatever, but if you don't meet those goals every single time, give yourself some grace. This is hard and recognize that it's hard. And if anybody tells you that it's not hard, we won't say that they're lying, but they're exaggerating. They are definitely, because this is hard, and it can be very, very isolating so the other advice that I have is: get yourself a support system, whether it's family, whether it's friends, cohort, members of your cohort in the process. They will understand what you're going through and, as you talk to them, you'll suddenly realize "Oh my God, I'm not the only one going through this. I thought I was very unique and, oh my God, I am so weird. I am the only one having these problems." I wasn't. I wasn't. And talking to people made me realize that. Talking to people about your project will also let them know "Hey, I have a resource that could be very helpful for you." And generally, I have found that scholars, even senior scholars, will be very generous in sharing resources with you. So, yeah, don't think about it in its totality. Small bites. Don't try to start with the introduction and also remember your own voice. Remember your own voice and how you write. This is your project. Your advisors will give you guidance, your dissertation advisors will, but at the end of the day, it is still your project, and it has to reflect you. And I know that a lot of people focus very heavily on theory. I do not. I focus on the story. So, the story for me is what's important and, if you do ever access my dissertation, you'll notice that chapter one, line one, is a quote from a historical romance novel. It encapsulated what I wanted to say in my dissertation so much, but it is a historical romance novel. So, give yourself breaks. Give yourself breaks and do read things that you enjoy, not just things because you have to. I mean, no matter how busy I got, I always managed to read one chapter or maybe one page in my "fun book."

GV: I'm glad to hear you say that. That's exactly what I'm doing to survive the process.

SMC: That is exactly what you have to do to survive the process and of course, if you're me, medicate with chocolate.

GV: I love that advice as well. Perhaps, writing these stories in these different ways, not always relying heavily on theory, is another way that we can deprivilege how academia produces.

SMC: Definitely. One of my goals has always been that I want people to read my work and not just academics, so I try to make what I write very, very accessible. Still scholarly rigorous. I can speak. Still rigorous in the research, and in the approach, and in the framework and everything, but approachable. I don't understand why you would want to write something that people don't understand. I remember reading a book while I was in the PhD program, and I think in the introduction the author said: "I deliberately wrote this in a nonlinear fashion." And my immediate reaction was: "Why? Why would you do that? Don't you want people to understand what you're saying?"

GV: Maybe it was more understandable to write it in a different order.

SMC: I don't know. Needless to say, I did not enjoy that book.

GV: In this line of thought, would you say that this would be your approach also when it comes to being an educator? Because my last question for you was going to be: we know obviously you're in a slightly different role now, even though you're still part of the education field, but if some of the students that will watch this interview are going for a regular traditional career in academia and as educators... You have been an educator before, right? You were a postdoc. Do you have any advice? Do you think having this approach that you were talking about helps to deprivilege the classroom and make the material more approachable for the students?

SMC: Yes. Short answer: yes. And this is a point that I had to come to after several years of teaching: your teaching has to reflect you. Your teaching has to reflect you. It has to. We can both teach the same class, but the way that we approach the class will be different, because our interests are different. And, you know, so I would do like themed lectures, and it was a theme that I was interested in. So, you mentioned the postdoc. One of the classes that I taught was the US History AMH 2070, 2071? US history from 1877 to the present.

GV: AMH 2020, maybe?

SMC: You would think I would remember that. So that was the class that I taught, and one of the things that I did is there were these eras that we had to cover. I can't, you know, me standing there and reading what you can read in the text...you can read about, you know, the big general in the textbook, but if I use a story, a specific thing from this era, that will highlight what the textbook is telling you generally. That will help give you more context. So, one of the eras that we covered was the 1920s, which I know you're writing about. Well, the 1920s, that was when women got the right to vote. That was when women started to kind of liberate themselves from some of the notions of how women were supposed to be. They entered the workforce in larger numbers. They became more engaged in social causes. Fashions changed. I am a material cultures person, so what that means is I incorporate things like fashion and visual arts into my research. So, I had a whole thing: my lecture for the 1920s section was about how women got the right to vote, how they campaigned and protested and lobbied, and got the right to vote in 1920. And it so happened to coincide with about the 100th anniversary, and then I said: "But look what else was going on! The clothing was changing." My interest is in how women express themselves and their identity, so that was what my lecture was about. When I taught the first part of the US History Survey, this was for at another university years before...One of the things that I'm interested in, that I'm curious about, is espionage, so I did a whole thing on espionage during the Revolutionary War, and I gave my students a cipher and told them: "Send me a message in code," because that was how messages were passed, you know, from spy to spy master. So, in your teaching, I would advise to not discount what you are interested in, what your research interests are. When you are trying to teach larger concepts, sometimes focusing on the smaller concept helps the student better understand the larger concept. Plus, because you're interested, you will be very enthusiastic about what you're teaching and that will come through, and that will reach the student. That will reach the student, and, you know, I always try to make myself very approachable to my students. Most of the time I would say that that was very successful. The students felt that they could come to me, and I also felt that, because we connected, they

tried. It didn't always work. Some students took it that that meant that they didn't have to take me seriously. You win some, you lose some, but, at the end of the day, much like you're writing when you're doing your dissertation or your master's thesis, find your voice. Find your voice, find your approach, because if it works for you, then it works for the students. And before you tackle a concept, make sure that you understand it, because if you understand it, then you can explain it to them in terms that they will understand. That doesn't mean dumbing down, but that may mean, to make it accessible, that you maybe have to change the language that you use. If you have students whose primary language, first language, is not necessarily English, some of the colloquialisms that we use may not work for them and you need to be aware of that. And that's something that you just develop as you talk to them, as you read their essays and the like. Then you realize when you get the same wrong answer over and over again on an exam...At that point, that's your fault. That's not their fault. That's your fault. That's something you did. And again, remember: you may be the professor, but you are human first. Grace! They always tell you to give grace to other people. Give grace to yourself. Is every class going to be perfect? Absolutely not, and that's okay.

GV: It is difficult as grad students because I feel like we are, almost all of us, we're type A students. We're still type A students, so we go for perfection, and sometimes that's exactly what damages whatever we're producing, whether it's teaching or...

SMC: Yeah and, listen, I am guilty of that as well, but at a certain point, with the dissertation or even just regular papers, paper assignments, I could sit there and - because everything usually comes back to food for me - I let it marinate. I let it marinate for a long time and then, you know, and I'm tweaking and I'm saying: "Oh, no, no. I could use this. This is not the right word. Oh, no, no, no. I can find a more perfect word." At a certain point, I just had to decide: "It's done. Damn the consequences, it's done." Yeah, I give myself a deadline and then, okay, on this date, it's done. And the other thing for that, particularly for your personal writing is, if you can have somebody who does not know your topic, they don't have to know your topic...It's probably better if they don't know your topic. Give it to them to read. And if they understand what you're saying, you're good. Everybody's going to understand what you're saying.

GV: That's very good advice! Thank you so much.