

HSS NEW FACES 2020-2021 VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

In gearing up for the new academic year, 18 of our new faculty, postdocs, and graduate students took time out of their busy schedules to record their answers to the following questions about joining Caltech's Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences:

- What brought you to Caltech?
- Tell us about your research
- What are you teaching?
- What are you looking forward to?

While individual responses were cut down for time in the final [HSS New Faces video](#), this transcript presents the participants' complete responses (lightly edited for readability) in alphabetical order by last name. A PDF of all the 2020-2021 HSS New Faces is available [here](#).

Peter Doe

Social Sciences Graduate Student

What brought me to Caltech? I at first was intrigued by the economic theory faculty list, by how they were economists that had mathematical interest in mathematical research. And then, after I spoke with one of the students here, I really saw it as a place where the faculty would invest in me as a student, rather than try to get things out of me, that they'd be pouring into me.

I most look forward to the academic freedom and the course flexibility. I'd be able to study what I want to study rather than being assigned a bunch of things that I'm going to learn. Being able to get to choose the classes that would really build me up as a researcher.

My number one goal is to mature my research abilities so that I can produce research that's really meaningful and helps a lot of people and promotes the public good.

I want to study game theory and mechanism design, specifically auctions like matching. And on top of that, I want to build methods of testing my results in the laboratory, because I'm really interested in knowing how my theories actually play out in the real world.

Kexin Feng

Social Sciences Graduate Student

My undergraduate school is the College of William and Mary in Virginia. So, the reason for me to choose Caltech is the "Big Bang Theory." I really like people like Sheldon or Leonard. So, I really want to know what the real Caltech is like. That's why I choose Caltech as my graduate school.

I heard that there are the best students, best professors, and best researchers among the world here at Caltech. I'm really looking forward to meeting with them, knowing them, and becoming one of their friends. My primary goal is to get a PhD degree in economics. I hope I could be able to independently conduct research in economics after I graduate. I will try my best to become one of the best students in the world, just like others.

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As for research, I double majored in mathematics and economics in my undergraduate school. However, I haven't done any research in economics so far. I did research in the binomial confidence interval as my honors thesis in my undergraduate school. It's something related to statistics. I hope to learn more about economics and explore all the possibilities in economics during my graduate study.

Julia Hori

Fletcher Jones Foundation Postdoctoral Instructor in Contemporary Literature

I just joined Caltech this fall, and I'm really excited to be a part of this collaborative interdisciplinary community. I'm especially excited to work with students coming from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds and to learn from the unique perspectives that they bring to a humanities classroom.

While at Caltech, I'm really looking forward to building a network of interdisciplinary thinkers with whom I can exchange ideas as I work towards turning my dissertation research into a book manuscript. And along the way, I'm hoping to sharpen my teaching approaches and expand my research methodologies.

My research examines the relationship between built-space narrative and violence in the legacies of British Imperial rule and Caribbean plantation slavery. I think through how ideologies are encrypted in built-space, in architectures, and how those architectures influence our understanding of history and our place within it. It's work that engages with ongoing academic and public conversations about race, place, and the political possibilities of reconciliation through heritage culture.

One of the courses that I'm teaching this academic year is called "Power, Politics, and Travel Literature." It maps the influential ideas of early colonial travelogues across time and space and into today's global digital era of Google Earth and social media.

In particular, the course is designed to draw attention to the inequalities embedded in touristic infrastructures and to voices which have been historically underrepresented in travel literature. I'm really excited to teach this course right now because I think it's an especially strange and opportune moment for us to think through the broad significance of travel. Since many of us are moving through the world at an unprecedentedly slowed pace.

Brian Jacobson

Professor of Visual Culture

Two things really brought me to Caltech. The first is the opportunity to work on this new program in visual culture that I'm very excited about. And then the second is a more personal reason, which is my love—a love that I'm sure many of you share—for Southern California. I got to know LA as a PhD student at USC, and I think I always secretly, or maybe not so secretly, harbored this kind of distant fantasy that I might someday come back to Los Angeles. And so, this was an opportunity I didn't want to pass up.

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The thing that I look forward to most is working on what I think are really pressing questions about the intersection between art, aesthetics, science, and technology. And I think there's not a better place to work on these questions than at Caltech where students, faculty, scientists, and engineers are working on visual culture all the time—just in a way that we don't necessarily always think of as visual culture. I'm really excited about the opportunity to explore with these students, with the scientists, with the engineers, these questions about visual practice and visual technologies.

My research is about the mid-century French oil and gas industry. What I'm really interested in right now, especially in the context of Caltech, is thinking about the politics and culture and especially the visual culture of energy transition. I think at this moment, we all foresee, and many of us hope for, a transformation away from a fossil fuel economy towards a different kinds of energy economy, something more sustainable.

I think we have a lot to learn by looking back at an earlier era of energy transition that brought us into the fossil fuel economy and the fossil fuel technologies that we use now. I'm very interested in the culture that made that transition possible and what we can learn from seeing how a new energy economy becomes possible and desirable. I think we have a lot to learn about how to make a more sustainable energy economy possible and desirable in the future by looking at how it worked in the past.

Sophia Kalantzakos

2020–2021 Visiting Fellow in the Research Institute for the History of Science and Technology at Caltech and The Huntington

I'm a professor at New York University and a long-term affiliate at NYU Abu Dhabi. I teach in environmental studies. I came to Caltech as a fellow in the Research Institute for the History of Science and Technology at Caltech and The Huntington (RIHST).

I'm looking forward to a lot of things [at Caltech]. Mostly working with different colleagues in fields that are related to mine, the social sciences, the humanities, and also hear from scientists. I know things are kind of difficult with COVID at the moment, but I'm sure we'll find ways, even if it's through Zoom or smaller one-on-one meetings, socially distant. We'll manage to get to know each other better and to talk a lot about the work that we're doing.

For The Huntington, I'm working on a project that looks at the new discourse coming out of China and the name of ecological civilization. What kinds of norms, values, and new ideas are they trying to project as they, as China, seeks to lead the world along with other powers with regard to the climate crisis?

[Another] important project is an institute that I'm putting together at Caltech for the summer of 2021 that will be focusing on the importance of certain critical minerals, such as rare earths, cobalt, and lithium, that are indispensable for the functioning of all of the technology that we use today, and will be vital for the decarbonization of the global economy and for the fourth industrial revolution that is currently underway. So, this is particularly interesting because it

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brings in issues of technology, about politics, and the history of why and how did these particular minerals become as important as they are.

And it's equally important because we're seeing that there's a growing competition, technological competition, between the United States and China, and this will impact the countries where they're produced. They have a particular geographic singularity. They're concentrated in very particular parts of the world, mostly in developing countries, and who will have access to them is going to be part of this conversation.

My research focuses on the geopolitical realignments that are currently underway in light of the climate crisis. So, I work a lot on China. I examine what kind of leadership role China will be playing, and is already starting to play in the world, and how and with which other powers it could possibly best collaborate in order to help us deal with a global problem, which is the climate crisis.

Most recently, I've been working on the Belt and Road Initiative. And because this is China's singular vision for the 21st century that will unite Asia, Europe, and Africa into a seamless belt of connectivity. And it will also loop in South America. So, the implications of such a mega project are vast at many levels—environmental, political, technological, trade, and people-to-people relations. There is no aspect of this that is not important.

Claudia Kann

Social Sciences Graduate Student

I actually originally came to Caltech for mechanical engineering before realizing that that's not where my passion lay. I'm really excited to use what I already know to new and exciting problems within the social sciences. And I'm looking forward to meeting you all.

Jonathan Koch

Caltech-Huntington Humanities Collaborations Postdoctoral Instructor

I came to Caltech because of the wonderful opportunity to continue and expand my research and teaching as a postdoc in the Caltech-Huntington Humanities Collaborations. Between these two institutions I will have the very best resources to develop as a scholar [and] teacher [in] early modern literature and history.

I'm most looking forward to the people at Caltech, both the colleagues with whom I will have the opportunity to collaborate and research, and the students with whom I've had the chance to read and discuss literature, and to think about how the problems and questions raised in historical texts relate to problems and questions of our own world.

While at Caltech, I plan to finish my first book, which considers how religious toleration was imagined, experienced, and expressed by writers and readers in early modern England. I will also begin new work that traces the concept of forbearance into the marketplace, exploring the relationship between economics and the spirits, between markets and moralities, in the book trade of early modern Europe.

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This winter, I will be teaching an advanced humanities course that asks how reconciliation was imagined and staged in the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Many plays from this period are filled with violence and revenge. Think of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* or *Othello*. But, in this course, we will consider what pathways to concord and peace these plays offered. And what might we learn from these plays as we consider the possibility of reconciliation amidst the violence of our own age.

Charles Kollmer

Ahmanson Postdoctoral Instructor in History of Biology

I recently completed a PhD in history of science at Princeton University, where I focused on the history of the modern life sciences. I'm very excited to have this opportunity to continue my research and sharpen my teaching skills at Caltech.

I'm especially looking forward to working with undergraduates, to deepen their engagement with the history of science. Doing this at Caltech is doubly exciting because Caltech itself has been the site of so much fascinating research in the life sciences. Working with university librarians and archivists, I'd like to guide students' explorations of primary source documents related to these local episodes, while situating them in relation to a broader historical picture.

During my time here, I will be working primarily on a book project that builds on research I started during my dissertation. I'm also designing undergraduate courses that connect with my research interests including, for instance, the ways that different experimental materials and instruments have shaped biological research practices.

In my research, I look at uses of microbial cultures from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century. In past accounts, historians have focused largely on how these techniques helped medical researchers to diagnose and treat infectious diseases. In my own work, I explore a wider spectrum of uses of microbial life and how they fit it into a variety of industrial, agricultural, and academic settings.

One of the courses that I am most excited to teach this academic year is a global history of biotechnology. Often when people hear the word biotechnology, they think of genetic engineering techniques that emerged in the United States in the 1970s and '80s. In this course, we will think more broadly about the history of biotechnology, looking at a wide variety of ways in which humans repurposed plants, animals, fungi, and microbes as tools.

Edan Lepucki

Lecturer in Creative Writing

I am the author of the novels, *California* and *Woman No. 17*, and the editor of the anthology *Mothers Before: Stories and Portraits of Our Mothers as We Never Saw Them*. I will be teaching fiction writing at Caltech this coming winter term, and I'm very excited. I think what I'm most excited about is to get a chance to work with such brilliant students. I keep hearing how great the students are, and I just want to be around them and listen to their ideas and collaborate with them on making beautiful, powerful, readable, fun fiction.

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My goals for the class are to get students to think very deeply about sentences, word choice, imagery, and to think about what makes them want to keep reading, what makes them feel connected to a character, what makes them feel fear or desire or loneliness with words alone. And to really dig into what it means to have those feelings through art. And I really want them to find joy in making fiction and reading fiction. And so, I hope together we can sort of find that joy.

Peter McAniff

Lecturer in Economics

One of the things I'm most excited about is the opportunity to get to know a lot of the faculty and the students over the course of the term. As a Pasadena-native, I've long been exposed to this jewel of an institution, which is Caltech. And we've certainly had a number of friends who have served as faculty and been students at Caltech over the years, but it'll be a lot of fun for me to see it from the inside as well as from the outside.

One of my major goals for the fall quarter is to share the practical orientation that I have developed over 25 years of working in finance in the course I'm teaching, which is introduction to accounting. It is my hope that at the end of the quarter, the students will have learned this practical orientation and picked up a number of very useful accounting and finance skills, which will serve them well for the rest of their lives.

Kirby Nielsen

Assistant Professor of Economics

I'm an experimental economist, and Caltech has a long history of a very strong experimental group, so I'm really excited to be joining the department.

Caltech is wonderfully interdisciplinary and collaborative, so one of my goals during my time here is to take advantage of that by meeting and talking with colleagues outside of my field. I also really enjoy hiking, so I hope to take advantage of some of the opportunities nearby.

About my research—I'm an experimental economist, so I use experimental methods to answer economic questions. More specifically, I study individual decision-making behavior, and a lot of my research is using experiments to test economic models. And, most recently, I've been studying risk preferences. I try to answer questions like how individuals perceive uncertainty, how past events might affect future risk-taking behavior, how individuals prefer uncertainty to resolve over time, and questions like this.

I'm really looking forward to working with my colleagues. I'm excited to be joining such a strong group of experimental economists, and I look forward to our future conversations and collaborations.

Adam Pham

Howard E. and Susanne C. Jessen Postdoctoral Instructor in Philosophy

My goals for my time at Caltech are to keep pace with my research agenda and produce a couple of great classes. I work on issues in philosophy of social science, political philosophy, and AI ethics.

My course this fall is called “Ethics and AI,” and it’s about exactly what it sounds like it’s about. In the first part of the course, we talk about ethics and political philosophy. In the second part of the course, we talk about some important contemporary issues such as digital privacy, machine bias, and labor automation. And then in the third part of the course, we talk about some more speculative issues like existential risk.

Sandy Rodriguez

Artist-in-Residence (Winter 2021) in the Caltech-Huntington Program in Visual Culture

I am absolutely thrilled to be joining you in the new year with an exciting course, which will really be a primer on how artists have extracted colors from the natural world. And so, we will be introducing organic colorants including lichen, bark, plant matter, insects, as well as mineral pigments extracted from soils and earth. It’ll be an interesting moment to really share with you a traditional color processing using recipes that I’ve been studying from the early modern period from central-Mexican primary sources.

We will be learning about really, how do we shift colors? How do we understand them symbolically as well as materially? In order to really catalog and organize a chart for ourselves in a very systematic way, there are certain colorants that I will be introducing that we can shift from its dried state using some very simple techniques for acidifying or neutralizing water temperatures, heat extractions, decoctions.

We will have a really, very fun, hands-on lab. The history behind it will be part of what we’re going to be exploring as well as methods for representing our stories of migration. We have an opportunity in the course to really introduce you to the methods and materials of art history, to really think about power and place, and to take this moment to figure out how we take a very material, sensorial, organoleptic kind of teaching approach, and put that online. I’m looking forward to seeing you all in the new year. And we’ll be mapping and exploring a lot of really potent materials as part of my course.

Joseph Root

Linde Postdoctoral Scholar in Economics

The faculty and the research environment at Caltech are very unique, and it’s a place where people seem to work together from different disciplines on some really interesting and challenging problems. I look forward to working with those faculty—potentially being there in person at some point, but [either way] getting to know everybody and learning more about the [HSS division]. I would like to work on some projects [and] get to know what people are working

on—expand my research agenda by starting a new project in an area that I haven't worked on before.

I work on an area of economic theory called mechanism and market design. And essentially what that means is that I try to think of how you can design systems that can be used to elicit information from people in order to achieve a goal. So, examples are, how do we figure out people's preferences in order to determine what society should do, which civil projects should we do, or which president we should elect. Another example is sort of how you get people's information about their preferences over discrete resources in order to allocate them. My work is about thinking about how you can elicit this information in a robust and compatible way.

Hanna Rose Shell

Eleanor Searle Visiting Professor of History (Fall 2020 and Winter/Spring 2022)

I'm honored to have the opportunity to be a part of the HSS community at Caltech, as well as to participate as a long-term fellow at The Huntington Library[, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens]. I've just come out with a new book, called *Shoddy: From Devil's Dust to the Renaissance of Rags*, about textiles, technology, and waste. And I'm now starting a new project about astronomy and visual culture called *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*.

As Eleanor Searle [Visiting] Professor [of History], I look forward to teaching an undergraduate advanced humanities course about the interfaces between science and filmmaking and to conducting research and filming at Mount Wilson Observatory, the Caltech Archives, and the LA Filmforum.

Ke Shi

Social Sciences Graduate Student

I'm coming to Caltech because I love its unique and vigorous social science program. I also like small campus[es], so Caltech is an ideal place for me. I did my undergraduate at NYU Abu Dhabi, where I also briefly worked as a research assistant at the Center for Interacting Urban Networks.

I look forward to the cities of LA and Pasadena, and especially the weather there. I've lived on a desert island for a good while, so it'll be really nice to have a change. I hope to work closely with the faculty members, really explore my research interests, and make the most out of my academic journey here.

Charles Sprenger

Professor of Economics

In behavioral economics, there are two pillars for individual decision making. One is decision-making over time and the other is decision-making under uncertainty. I conduct research in both of those areas. I think, when we look back, the next few years will really be an exciting time in behavioral economics.

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I think two things are going to happen. The first, is that we're going to be developing new models, specifically in the area of decision-making under risk, developing new ideas for how people react to the uncertainty in their environment and the complexities that they face. And second, I think that policymakers will become more receptive to the idea of using behavioral economics in their policy toolbox. And I think that Caltech has a unique opportunity to be at the center of both of those movements, and my goal is that we truly are.

To give an example for decisions over time, I study the effects of temptation. Are people tempted to put off unpleasant experiences and rush to enjoy pleasurable ones? And [I study] the consequences of that sort of motivation for things like procrastination—[such as] filing your taxes or accumulating a lot of credit card debt. Caltech is the premier Institute in my field, which is behavioral and experimental economics. And working here means access to a center of creation for the next set of ideas that are going to define the field for the next 15 years.

Across the spectrum of career times, Caltech has a cohort of field originators whose knowledge and insights continue to point the way forward. And the Institute has grown a new talent in my field, in the junior faculty and young senior faculty ranks. And, for a mid-career professor like myself, there's something really exciting about getting to be inspired and at work with both sets.

Qianying Wu

Social and Decision Neuroscience Graduate Student

I did my undergraduate in bio-sciences from University of Science and Technology of China. And I'll study social and decision neuroscience here [at Caltech]. [I look forward] to talking with all of you, sharing my stories, and listening to your stories.

I study human brains and how the brain functions using neuroimaging and computational modeling. In my graduate years, I'm interested in learning how people interact with each other and how they process social information.

Videos recorded in August 2020

Transcript released in October 2020