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Keith Hamm

Global studies scholar-activist Charmaine Chua receives Harold J. Plous Memorial Award

In pursuit of the often-hidden realities in the lives of laborers underpinning global markets, Charmaine Chua's research has led her to the foundations of worldwide economies, from the warehouses of a retail behemoth to container ships in the middle of the ocean.

Along the way, her work has garnered a reputation for academic rigor and a wide-ranging influence on correcting systemic injustice both at home and abroad. Most recently, it has earned the UC Santa Barbara assistant professor this year's Harold J. Plous Memorial Award.

"I am deeply honored to receive the Plous award, whose previous recipients are some of the most brilliant faculty I know, and especially given the surfeit of excellent colleagues I am lucky to work with and learn from," Chua said. "Any impact I have been able to make on the university's intellectual community is owed to the collaborative and collective communities I'm privileged to be building with graduate workers, colleagues, staff and students across campus."

Chua's research, described by the award's selection committee as "path-breaking," focuses on the political economy of globalization in the context of labor movements,

logistics and the infrastructures and technologies of global supply chains. She's currently at work on two related book projects.

The first, "The Logistics Counterrevolution: Fast Circulation, Slow Violence, and the Transpacific Empire of Capital," draws on extensive archival research and ethnographic interviews — including time spent aboard a 190,000-ton container ship in international seas — to illustrate how the pursuit of economic sovereignty by Southeast Asia labor movements has shaped supply chain globalization. The book challenges the narrative of workers in the Global South as passive cogs in the machinery of logistics innovations.

The other manuscript is in collaboration with coauthor Spencer Cox, a labor organizer. "How to Beat Amazon: The Future of America's New Working Class Struggle," examines the powerful rise of the retail giant and the struggles of its employees. Her research on this topic, she said, aims to provide an important political economic analysis of Amazon's geographical and logistical expansion to assess how strategies of resistance by policy makers, labor organizers and nonprofits respond to the growth of corporate monopolies.

"What impresses me most about Dr. Chua is the societal importance and impact of her work," said Daniel Conroy-Beam, last year's Plous award recipient, who also served on this year's selection committee. "As a person who works on more esoteric topics of genuine interest to only about 30 people in the world, I was seriously impressed with the reach and relevance of her work. She is studying topics that strike at the core of some of the most pressing social issues of the day, and her work is being noticed by some of the most important stakeholders. This is a level of real-world impact that to me signifies a superstar assistant professor."

In April, Chua, who was also recently named a 2023 Freedom Scholar by the Marguerite Casey Foundation, will present her Plous lecture on supply chain solidarities and anti-imperial struggle.

On campus at UCSB, where Chua came aboard in 2019 in the Department of Global Studies, she has been a core faculty organizer for the Robinson Archival Project, a multi-year project to permanently acquire the archives of Cedric and Elizabeth Robinson for the UCSB Library and to bridge the collection to post-custodial community archives across the Global South.

Chua has developed four new courses and significantly reworked others, including a reboot of the department's important MA practicum course after a five-year gap. In all her coursework, Chua demonstrates a commitment to ethnographic, empirical and historical study of the processes and impacts of globalization. Her students describe her teaching as engaging, supportive, thought-provoking and effective.

In 2020, Chua co-founded the systemwide Cops Off Campus collective that brought faculty, staff and students together across UC campuses to advocate for community safety through a study of police accountability. Off campus, Chua co-founded the Marxist Institute of Research, a thinktank to bring together faculty and students across the UC system around methods of critical political economy. As a public intellectual, Chua edits a leading interdisciplinary publication, Society and Space, a peer-reviewed journal that brings pressing social, political and environmental issues to a broad audience.

Established in 1957 in honor of UC Santa Barbara assistant professor of economics Harold Plous, the award is presented annually to an assistant professor or instructor in humanities, social sciences or natural sciences who demonstrates outstanding performance and promise through creative action and contribution to the university's intellectual community. Awardees are selected by the College of Letters & Science Faculty Executive Committee.

Recent past recipients include: Conroy-Beam (psychological and brain sciences); Leah Stokes (political science) and Alenda Chang (film and media studies).

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