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Behind the Legal Culture: Associate Professor Mateo Taussig-Rubbo Brings the Tools of Anthropology to UB Law

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New Faculty

Behind the legal culture

*Associate Professor
Mateo Taussig-Rubbo
brings the tools of
anthropology to
UB Law*



UB Law School's reputation as a place where the law and the social sciences mix it up took a step forward last fall when Mateo Taussig-Rubbo joined the faculty.

Taussig-Rubbo is an anthropologist, having just completed the dissertation for his doctoral degree in anthropology at the University of Chicago. He is also a lawyer,

having earned the J.D. at Yale Law School in 2001. He practiced for two years in the area of cross-border transactions at a New York City firm, and clerked for a U.S. District Court judge in the Southern District of New York.

That combination of disciplines, he says, will be at home at UB Law. "It turned out to be a great fit for me," says Taussig-



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human community, and that includes the United States

and modern legal orders.” — Associate Professor Mateo Taussig-Rubbo

thropologist, saw a lot of the world while he was growing up. The family lived in Sydney, Australia; Colombia; New York City; and Michigan. It was good training for a social sciences discipline that studies the ways of humanity and human cultures.

“Anthropology is no longer only about far-flung locations and times and places,” Taussig-Rubbo says. “It is also a study of any human community, and that includes the United States and modern legal orders. The discipline has a very rich tradition based, on one hand, on empirical ethnographic research and field work, and on the other hand, theoretical tradition that spans over a century and brings many categories and questions that can be brought to bear in the study of law.”

Traditional anthropological concepts such as gift, sacrifice and consecration, he says, can be ways of understanding the law and legal systems outside the usual tools of legal analysis.

For example, Taussig-Rubbo’s recent paper “Outsourcing Sacrifice: Rethinking Private Military Contractors” looks at a private legal relationship – military contractors hired by the U.S. government to work in war zones – and discusses in what sense such workers embody the American ethos. The paper discusses a deadly attack on March 31, 2004, on contractors in Fallujah, Iraq, in which the bodies of four private security guards were burned and hung on a bridge. “This was a very spectacular, grotesque ambush,” Taussig-Rubbo says.

“The status of these people for an American audience was transformed. Somehow America became visible again in their destroyed bodies.

“How are we meant to talk about what happens in that kind of attack? Is it just meaningless, grotesque violence? We can get much more precise and in-depth in our thinking about our reception of that kind of consecrating violence, as I call it.”

Privatizing such dangerous functions of government as military service, he says, is a way to make the nation’s sacrifice less immediate and personal. But highly publicized attacks like the Fallujah ambush makes it impossible for the American public to ignore that these workers, too, are sacrificing their lives in the war effort. As Taussig-Rubbo puts it, “This spectacular attack rediscovers the body politic in the bodies of these individuals and demonstrates the difficulty that a policy of outsourcing sacrifice is likely to encounter.”

Taussig-Rubbo also has an interest in detention; his Ph.D. work dealt with U.S. immigration detention camps and the question, how does the state expel and eject people? He spent some time at detention centers in Los Angeles, interviewing guards, prison officials and detainees – non-citizens and legal immigrants who were in removal or deportation proceedings. “In a lot of court opinions around issues of detention, detention is really phrased as an act of beneficence,” he says – described in terms of what he calls he “sovereign’s gift” bestowed by an all-powerful state on an undeserving recipient.

He describes one telling detail: In one detention center, officials had installed one-way mirrors, but accidentally faced them the wrong way. The guards could see only their own reflections; the detainees could see the guards. Officials decided to keep it that way.

“To me, this spoke in powerful ways about the relationship between officials and detainees,” Taussig-Rubbo says. “For the guards, it was the position of seeing only yourself, the strange pleasure in other people looking at you and wanting to join you.”

Rubbo, who has been teaching at the New School for Social Research, in New York City. “My work has been moving between anthropology and law, and everyone I met at UB with seemed open and interested in an approach to law that was serious in engaging with other disciplines. The openness to a variety of approaches impressed me.”

Taussig-Rubbo, whose father is an an-