

A Tapestry of Learning: Our Latin Americanist Faculty

From borderlands scholarship to Latin American architecture, social opportunity in education to the importance of literature in producing change—the range of expertise of the faculty featured here provides a rich tapestry of learning for students in Latin American Studies at the University of Texas.



Cecilia Ballí

This past March, Cecilia Ballí was one of the participants at the 2010 Lozano Long Conference, *Republics of Fear: Understanding Violence in Latin America Today*, presenting a paper on Ciudad Juárez and state violence in Mexico's war on drugs (see related story p. 34). While violence on the U.S.-Mexico border is the primary area of research for the UT Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Brownsville native, she is also interested in Mexican American expressive culture and narrative nonfiction writing. In addition to her LLILAS affiliation, Ballí is associated with the Center for Mexican American Studies and the Center for Women's and Gender Studies.

Professor Ballí received her BA from Stanford University and her PhD from Rice. She is also a professional journalist. A writer-at-large for *Texas Monthly*, she has contributed articles to *Harper's* magazine and was a staff writer on education issues for the *San Antonio Express-News* and the *Brownsville Herald*. The recent arrival at UT plans to teach courses on U.S.-Mexico Border Issues, U.S.-Mexico Borderlands Theory and Practice, Introduction to Mexican American Culture, and Ethnographic and Narrative Nonfiction Writing.

Ballí is currently working on a book about the construction of a border fence in the Texas Rio Grande Valley. In the future, she hopes to write a book based on her dissertation research, which explored the sexual murder of women in Ciudad Juárez. When the mayor of that city, José Reyes Ferriz, recently visited UT for a lecture on the violence in his city, Ballí was one of three panelists who addressed questions to him following the controversial talk to a packed house.

Regarding her work between journalism and anthropology and the issues that engage her, Professor Ballí says, "The University of Texas is the perfect place for this kind of research. There is a strong tradition of borderlands scholarship here, and my fieldwork site is just six hours away. Although my appointment is in Anthropology, I have benefited from the wealth of material and human resources of Mexican American Studies, Latin American Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and the College of Communication. This is a campus where people want to talk about violence on

the border and intervene as scholars, activists, and practitioners. I'm part of a wonderful community here."

Fernando Lara

Brazil's capital city, Brasília, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary on April 21, 2010, a milestone of particular interest to Assistant Professor of Architecture Fernando Lara, a native Brazilian whose interests revolve around twentieth-century Latin American architecture (see related article p. 12). Lara arrived at the University of Texas in fall 2009 from the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, where he earned his PhD. He also holds a BArch and an MSc from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais.



Lara is a licensed architect and a member of the Brazilian Institute of Architects and the Brazilian DOCOMOMO (Workshop for the Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement). His PhD dissertation was expanded into the book *The Rise of Popular Modernist Architecture in Brazil* (University Press of Florida, 2008), in which he discusses the singular appropriation of modern architecture by the Brazilian middle class—thus the interest in Brasília as the climax of this thirst for modernity. His interviews of construction workers led him to look at modernist vocabulary and spatiality being appropriated by the favela dwellers, the topic of his latest writings. In addition, Professor Lara believes it is important to maintain some engagement with architectural practice and recently has worked in public space projects for the favelas, in collaboration with local Brazilian firms. Such overlapping of scholarship and practice led Lara to found Studio Toró (www.studiotoro.org) in 2005, a nonprofit that addresses the challenges of water conservation and urban flooding in Latin America.

At the UT School of Architecture, Professor Lara teaches seminars on twentieth-century Latin American architecture and urbanism. His LAMA (Latin American Modern Architecture) research group constitutes a permanent forum for debating and documenting twentieth-century architecture (www.utsoa.utexas.edu/lama). Reflecting on his time at the University of Texas and in Austin, Lara highlights the exciting community of Latin Americanists who are affiliated with LLILAS and the strong student interest in that part of the world. Together, they provide a unique place to teach, research, and learn more about the American built environment in all its latitudes.

Leticia J. Marteleteo

The sociology of education is a broad field of research encompassing such themes as school access, social opportunity, the roles of schools and families, and gender, ethnicity, and race, themes that UT Assistant Professor Leticia J. Marteleteo explores from an international perspective with students in her graduate seminar of that title.

Professor Marteleteo, who came to the University of Texas in 2009, is also a Faculty Research Associate of UT's Population Research Center. She brings this expertise to the working group of the Latin American Electronic Data Archive of which she is a member (see story p. 48).



She received her PhD from the University of Michigan, where she was previously Assistant Professor in the School of Education and a Research Associate at the Population Studies Center and Institute for Social Research.

Long engaged in issues related to social demography and education, the Brazilian sociologist earlier conducted research and taught at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. She also has served as a consultant to such organizations as the United Nations and the Brazilian Ministries of Education and Social Development. Her current research examines how social context relates to inequality of educational opportunity in Brazil and South Africa, including an ongoing project that examines educational inequity in Latin America. She has been particularly interested in how race relates to inequalities of educational opportunity in Brazil, a timely theme given the current debate over racial quotas in public universities there that can offer valuable insights into the literatures of educational opportunity and race everywhere. Marteleteo has published numerous articles, including recent pieces in *Population and Development Review* and in *Studies in Family Planning*.

Regarding her time at UT and her interest in the factors influencing education, Marteleteo says, "I am interested in the multiple layers that define inequality of educational opportunity, from within-family factors to societal process. Investigating those issues in Brazil and South Africa, which are the countries with the most overall social inequality in the world, adds yet an additional interesting dimension to the puzzle."

Gabriela Polit Dueñas

Gabriela Polit is Assistant Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Texas. A native of Ecuador, she received her PhD from New York University. Polit specializes in contemporary Latin American narrative and has worked on gender and the politics of literary writing. Currently, her work is on the representation of the traffic of illegal drugs in literary works from Culiacán, Medellín, and La Paz. Part of her current research was presented on at the 2010 Lozano Long Conference, *Republics of Fear*, which she also helped organize.

Prior to joining the UT faculty in 2008, Polit taught at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Among her awards are a Fulbright Fellowship, an OAS Fellowship, and a Drescher Fellowship. She is author of *Cosas de hombres: Escritores y caudillos en la literatura latinoamericana del siglo XX* and *Historias de la radio*, and editor of *Crítica de la literatura ecuatoriana: Hacia el nuevo siglo*. Polit is currently finishing her manuscript entitled *The Fiction of Drugs*.

Regarding her research and teaching, Professor Polit says, "The goal of any professor is to encourage and foster students' growth. As a Latin American literature professor, my main goal is to give students the tools to approach texts critically and creatively. I believe that the strength of a literary text lies in the way it combines its art with its cultural and political relevance. Literature is a living component of a people's history, capable of producing change." 🌟

