

Focus on Our Faculty

by SUSANNA SHARPE



Sônia Roncador

What is race? What is whiteness? To sit across from Associate Professor Sônia Roncador and discuss her research interests is to consider the fascinating question of how we human beings categorize, and re-categorize, ourselves across different eras and geographical locations.

Born in the Brazilian capital of Brasília, with a PhD from New York University, Roncador has taught in The University of Texas at Austin's Department of Spanish and Portuguese since 2003. She currently serves as the department's Associate Chair for Undergraduate Studies. Under her direction, the department has reworked its major for fall 2014, renaming it Iberian and Latin American Studies.

Roncador is the author, most recently, of *Domestic Servants in Literature and Testimony in Brazil (1889–1999)* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), a book that grew out of her interest in marginalized people and communities. In the book, Roncador explores the portrayal of domestic servants—for the

most part, “poor, migrant, black(ened) or indigenous women”—over the course of a century in a range of texts. In particular, she examines the demeaning images of women servants, their status as being “invisible” and “silent,” and the implications of these portrayals for the writers themselves, who were intellectuals and thinkers in a post-slavery Brazil embarking on the road to modernization yet mired in the social and ethnic stratification that is a legacy of colonialism.

In her current research, Roncador investigates changing notions of whiteness during Brazil's Great Immigration (1870s–1930s), a period in which urban slums and tenements became crowded with new European immigrants whose socioeconomic status and physical proximity to poor black and mixed-race Brazilians brought about what elites perceived as a “degeneration of whiteness.” European immigration had been encouraged by the Brazilian elite—the *brancos da terra*—for the purpose of general societal whitening, but large swaths of the new arrivals came to be thought of as *lixo branco*, “white trash.”

Roncador uses the rich resources of the Benson Latin American Collection to a large extent in her research. For her current work, for example, she has consulted old memoirs of the city of Rio de Janeiro by authors such as Luís Edmundo, Charles Julius Dunlop, and Emiliano di Cavalcanti, as well as the *Revista de Imigração e Colonização*.

Roncador plans to teach a new undergraduate course in fall 2014, Luso-Migrations in Literature and Film, which deals with Portuguese Africa and Brazil. Her upcoming graduate seminar will cover topics of interest in her current research. In addition, Roncador will continue work as a dissertation director with doctoral students.

Doctoral candidate John DeStafney describes Roncador as bringing “remarkable energy and positivity” to the classroom. As an adviser, he says, “she is very involved with the student projects . . . and is able to supervise a diverse array of projects because of her wide knowledge of the field.” Undergraduate Veronica Toro appreciated Roncador's mentoring as she completed an honors thesis on the Brazilian domestic workers' movement: “Her insight, bibliographic recommendations, and access to other people and resources has proved invaluable to me.”



Carlos Ramos Scharrón

Carlos Ramos Scharrón remembers a day in his childhood when the runoff flowing down from the nearby *mogote* (haystack hill) changed color. Developers were building on the karst hill, and what the bulldozers wrought was water thick with red clay and other debris. Although he had no real environmental consciousness at the time, Ramos Scharrón was able to connect the

muddy, rocky debris to the construction going on upslope, and became entranced by it as it flowed past his house.

A native of Guaynabo, Puerto Rico, Ramos Scharrón is an assistant professor at the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies and the Department of Geography and the Environment, on faculty at The University of Texas at Austin since fall 2013. He holds a PhD from the Watershed Sciences program at Colorado State University. Prior to his appointment at UT, Ramos Scharrón served as principal investigator for several projects funded mostly by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and carried out post-doctoral work through the University of Puerto Rico–Río Piedras. His major interest is in the field of hydrogeomorphology, which examines the interaction among landforms, humans’ land-shaping processes, and how these affect the generation and quality of water, downstream aquatic habitats, and the life that populates them.

The Caribbean is a region defined by its waters and soils. The health of its coral reefs is essential to the health of marine life, to the livelihood of fishermen, and also to the economy. Soil health is essential for forests and agriculture. Disturbances to the soil, from industrial development, road construction, and other causes, have a direct effect on coral reefs and other marine habitats due to erosion and polluted runoff.

Puerto Rico’s particularly high rates of erosion are the impetus for a study that Ramos Scharrón plans to carry out with an interdisciplinary team including UT colleagues Edgardo Latrubesse, Eugenio Arima, and Ken Young. The study is part of a LLILAS Benson initiative to further integrate environmental research into the Latin American studies program. The team will work in cooperation with anthropologists from the Centro Interdisciplinario de Estudios del Litoral at the University of Puerto Rico–Mayagüez, who will construct a local oral history to provide a human context to the environmental issues being studied. Marine ecologists from the University of Puerto Rico’s Center for Applied Tropical Ecology and Conservation (CATEC) will also participate.

The team will focus on northeastern Puerto Rico, including the Corredor Ecológico del Nordeste, a small yet important undeveloped

coastal strip whose survival has enormous ecological ramifications as well as significance for environmental activism on the island. The aim will be to find ways to protect the soil, water quality, forest, and marine ecosystems, which are sources of food, tourism revenue, and recreation. The team also seeks to understand the socioeconomic causes—past and present—of land-use change and water pollution, and their impact in local communities.

When crystal-clear blue water becomes brown and turbid due to erosion, this is something everyone can see. Ramos Scharrón is heartened by community engagement and the actions of vigilant citizen watchdogs like the Coral Bay Community Council, Surfriders, and CORALations, who diligently monitor construction, runoff, and marine health.

Ramos Scharrón teaches the undergraduate-level Environmental Hazards and Water Resource Issues in Latin America and the Caribbean for LLILAS, as well as courses on physical geography for the Department of Geography and the Environment. He also teaches a graduate seminar on water resource issues in Latin America and the Caribbean. Latin American studies major Andi Clark says Ramos Scharrón encouraged her “to be part of a unique academic journey.” In his approach to teaching science, she says, he “applies the concepts of a liberal arts education by teaching and connecting the dots to something more than just a hazard or a governmental policy.”

Ramos Scharrón serves as mentor to undergraduate Sara Cabral through the McNair Scholars program. Cabral says that Ramos Scharrón pushes his students to think critically, and make connections that “tie our social, scholarly, and physical knowledge not only to theory but to present global issues.” She will be doing fieldwork in Puerto Rico’s Río Grande de Añasco watershed this summer. Doctoral student Matthew LaFevor conducted field surveys and installed instruments in hill-slope gullies with Ramos Scharrón on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands, in the summer of 2013. LaFevor says Ramos Scharrón’s work on roadway erosion, sediment transport, and coral reef response “represents an important and timely contribution to the literature on global environmental change.”

Ramos Scharrón has consulted the Benson’s histories of Puerto Rico, including the detailed eighteenth-century accounts of land-use patterns on the island by Fray Íñigo Abbad y Lasierra. He has also used the library’s resources to research the history of coffee and sugar production, consulting censuses not available through U.S. Census web services.



Daniel Fridman

In the wildly popular *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*, author and financial self-help guru Robert Kiyosaki exhorts readers to use their money to pursue financial freedom: “[L]earn how to acquire assets and you will be choosing wealth as your goal and your future.” Sociologist and assistant professor Daniel Fridman became interested in the *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* phenomenon while exploring the economic and cultural changes in Argentine society brought about by the military dictatorship of 1976–1983 and its long, economically rocky aftermath.

In his current book project, Fridman delves into the world of financial self-help, in which people consciously adopt certain practices and attitudes in an attempt to “transform their financial planning and behavior, their social positions, their goals, and their selves.” *Rich Dad* and its associated board game, *Cashflow*, are advertised as providing the tools for financial freedom. According to Fridman, the exhortation to become free and entrepreneurial has as its goal the creation of the “neoliberal self.”

The neoliberal self could be explained as a response to changes in capitalism and work life wrought by the neoliberal revolution, which exposed people to increased financial risk and instability the world over. Fridman believes that in Argentina, a program of consumer education during the dictatorship was expressly aimed at creating a “consumer identity” as part of a larger attempt at neoliberal transformation of the populace. If people began to behave predictably as consumers, it was thought, the result would be market success.

Fridman’s book describes financial self-help groups in Argentina and New York City that gather to discuss the precepts of *Rich Dad* and play Cashflow. This project originated with his general interest in the intersection of economics, culture, and society, along with questions of consumption, consumer culture, and development. Fridman’s teaching in sociology and Latin American studies reflect these interests. He teaches the undergraduate-level Economy, Culture, and Society, which looks at gift-giving, altruism, generosity, and self-interest. He also teaches both undergraduate and graduate versions of the course Consumption in Latin America, offered through both LLILAS and the Department of Sociology. Fridman uses the Benson’s extensive collection of Latin American magazines for his research on consumer policy and consumerism in Mexico and Argentina.

LLILAS graduate student Leon Leid describes Fridman as an engaging teacher with a “special knack for keeping class discussions both challenging and lively.” Leid goes on to say that Fridman’s “rigorous guidance as an adviser has been invaluable.” Undergraduate Latin American studies and economics major Andrés Junca says of his class with Fridman, “I learned a lot and had fun while doing it,” adding that in his teaching, Fridman “focuses on relevant issues applied to real life.”

Kenneth Young

As a biogeographer, Kenneth Young pursues a scientific discipline that has existed since the time of German naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt. A professor in the Department of Geography and the Environment and a LLILAS associate, Young studies the geographical distribution of living things

on Earth—plants and animals, ecosystems—conducting policy-relevant research in the areas of biogeography and ecology. He holds a PhD from the Department of Geography, University of Colorado at Boulder.

Young’s work encompasses several areas of the globe, but is focused at present in Peru, where he studies ecosystems in the high sierra and the Amazon. Since 2010, under a grant from the National Science Foundation, he has conducted ongoing research on climate change and coupled natural systems with a team that includes human geographer Jeffrey Bury, environmental historian Mark Carey, glaciologist Bryan Mark, and hydrologist Jeffrey McKenzie. Together, they are examining the retreat of glaciers in Peru’s Cordillera Blanca



and how this is affecting farmers, institutions, water use, and water quality in the area.

Young has conducted research in Peru since 1981. In the late 1980s, he and his colleagues were among the first to observe climate change. Assessing long-term records of forest growth in the Río Abiseo National Park of north-central Peru, they noted that the altitude of forest growth in the high sierra was extending upward, meaning that higher elevations were becoming warmer and therefore able to support forests. Collaboration with an interdisciplinary team led to the additional discovery that the new forest had expanded the habitat of a rare species of mouse—one example of climate change benefiting a species.

Peru has some 77 protected areas, natural reserves making up 17 percent of the land there. But these areas are separated from one another by lands that remain unprotected. Young supports work toward a national policy to create conservation corridors where population permits. This goal reflects the interconnectedness of ecosystems, and the necessity of recognizing them as dynamic systems.

Young’s other current project is an investigation in the Peruvian Amazon in collaboration with colleague Eugenio Arima (assistant professor in Young’s department) and University of Texas at Austin PhD student Sara Diamond. Under the auspices of the Wildlife Conservation Society, the team is using GIS tools to assess the environmental impact—specifically carbon loss—associated with road and railroad construction, petroleum extraction, river channelization, and other activities.

When he is not on research leave, Young teaches an interdisciplinary graduate seminar course that combines geography, biology, and public policy. He is also a dissertation adviser. Doctoral student Molly Polk says Young is “a fantastic adviser and mentor because he’s so willing to help and share his experience and ideas.” Polk is investigating the effects of glacier recession on high-altitude wetlands in Peru’s Huascarán National Park. Her dissertation, she says, is inspired by much of Young’s work. “His expertise in biogeography, landscape ecology, biodiversity, conservation, and human–environment interactions are all critical to the ways I am trying to conceptualize changes in high-altitude wetlands in a national park.” She is working with park officials on maintenance and, where possible, restoration of wetlands. “Like Ken,” she says, “I am passionate about sharing our scientific findings with policymakers in hopes that my research will have direct application to conservation strategies in the tropics.”

On his use of the rich resources of the Benson Collection, Young says, “I make my pilgrimage to the Benson to be surrounded by books on the places I am doing research. I go there especially before I visit a new study area (or a place I have not been to for years) or when I am trying to learn background for a new research topic.” ☀