

Focus on Our Faculty

by SUSANNA SHARPE



Alfonso Gonzales

The life of a migrant contains many dualities—of culture, of nationality, of language. For some children who migrate with their families, these dualities may escape examination, as the mind of the child has other preoccupations. But Alfonso Gonzales says that even as a child he was aware of straddling two cultures and two countries as he and his family went back and forth between Tijuana, Mexico, and Southern California. This consciousness about his identity led him first to Chicano studies, and ultimately to Latin American studies.

Gonzales is an assistant professor at LLILAS and at the Department of Mexican American and Latina/o Studies. He is the author of *Reform Without Justice: Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State* (Oxford, 2013), and describes himself as a U.S. Latina/o studies and Latin American studies scholar. Drawn to the Chicano movement as a young man, he pursued Chicano studies as an undergraduate. Because of his interest in migration, he sought to understand the reasons behind the violence and disdain toward migrants that he had witnessed and experienced growing up, and he came to embrace the study of Latino politics from a transnational perspective.

The 1994 Zapatista Uprising in Mexico drew Gonzales to the topic of Mexican politics. Later, an invitation to El Salvador, where he spent an alternative spring break, deepened his understanding of regional politics and the complex forces that cause so many Mexicans and Central Americans to move northward. Gonzales says that over time he developed a regional perspective, drawing “connections between the effects of neoliberalism on social justice and on the migration of Mexicans and Central Americans.”

Gonzales conducted research for his PhD in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. He has served as an expert witness in asylum cases in California and Texas, including during the current highly controversial detention of families fleeing violence in Central America.

At UT, Gonzales has taken his scholarly pursuits and his commitment to activism for the benefit of migrants and crafted them into a fascinating course offered at the graduate and undergraduate levels. In *Latino Migrations and Asylum*, taught during spring 2015, Gonzales’s students partnered with community organizations to do research for asylum cases. Several of their clients won.

In addition to teaching the undergraduate-level Introduction to Mexican American and Latino Studies course during the 2015–16 school year, Gonzales will also offer Gramscian Thought in the Americas, in which students will read works by Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci as well as texts exploring the applications



and limitations of Gramscian theory to the Americas. He will again offer his asylum course.

Asked about his current research, Gonzales responds, “More than any one publication, I am working to execute my research agenda on the politics of migration control and migrant activism in the Americas through the lens of global political economy and political theory. This will come in the form of a series of articles that take up questions that I raised in the conclusion of *Reform Without Justice*. I am also working on a second book, *Justice Denied: Mexicans, Salvadorans, and the Geopolitics of U.S. Asylum Law*, which will focus on U.S. immigration court practices and the fate of deportees and Latino migrant families. In particular, I want to examine why U.S. immigration courts reject the vast majority of Mexican and Salvadoran asylum

claims precisely at a time when human rights conditions in those countries have deteriorated.”

Gonzales hopes that his own humanitarian yet rigorous activist scholarship is motivating to others: “I want Latin American studies students to find a way that their research can have a practical influence on people’s lives, to learn the craft of being a socially engaged intellectual.”

Lauren Gulbas

What are the messages young Latina/o immigrants perceive about themselves in U.S. society? How might these messages adversely shape self-image and even family dynamics? These are some of the questions that interest anthropologist Lauren Gulbas, an assistant professor at the UT School of Social Work.

Gulbas says that Latina/o youth internalize some of the common negative stereotypes about Latino immigrants, such as the assumption that they lack motivation and don’t know how to work hard. In turn, immigrant parents’ fears about the safety of their children—especially their daughters—feed other immigrant stereotypes, like that of the authoritarian father figure. Gulbas believes that these kinds of challenges, coupled with a lack of opportunities, play a role in family dynamics and can adversely affect immigrant teens. She wants to understand how this works.

The interaction of culture and mental health is at the core of Gulbas’ work. Her PhD is in medical anthropology, and her fascinating doctoral work looks at how women manage stress via the body, for example, through cutting, eating disorders, and cosmetic surgery. These explorations culminated in her dissertation, “Cosmetic Surgery and the Politics of Race, Class, and Gender in Caracas, Venezuela.” In the case of Venezuela, Gulbas found body image to be intimately linked to the psyche, so much so that one psychiatrist there coined the term “scalpel psychiatry.”

The themes of stress and distress continue to be a common thread in Gulbas’ work. She is co-author, with Luis H. Zayas, dean of the School of Social Work, of an article titled “Examining the Interplay of Family, Culture, and Latina Teen Suicidal Behavior” (*Qualitative Health Research* 2015). According to Gulbas, Latina teens attempt suicide at disproportionate rates. Evidence suggests that recent immigration status is a factor in risk for suicidal behavior.

Gulbas believes that increased research is necessary to design effective interventions for this population. She has initiated a pilot project titled “Immigration-related Stress and Suicidal Behavior Among Latino Adolescents.” According to the School of Social Work website, the project will launch a new research program to “explore the effects of immigration-related change on gender and family dynamics and how such change shapes decisions to attempt suicide among adolescent boys and girls from Mexico.”

Her training in anthropology makes Gulbas an ideal fit at the School of Social Work. The program welcomes interdisciplinarity, she says, and espouses the “meet your client where they’re at” philosophy that requires an understanding of the context of culture. During the 2015–16 academic year, she will teach Foundations of Social Justice and Advanced Qualitative Analysis, both graduate-level courses, and Human Behavior in Social Environments, an undergraduate course.

Gulbas will be an invaluable faculty resource for students pursuing the dual master’s degree in social work and Latin American



studies, whose creation was just announced in spring 2015 by the School of Social Work and the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies (LLILAS). Research on the intersection of culture, family, and distress, and how these play out in the lives of young immigrants, represents just one possible avenue of study in this promising new program.

Benjamín Ibarra Sevilla

Benjamín Ibarra Sevilla has spent a lot of time in late-Gothic churches. He is not a casual visitor to these vast structures, who might stroll in and crane his neck to take in the splendor of the ribbed vaults high above, or fleetingly ponder the enormous effort that must have gone into their construction: removing stone from a quarry, transporting it, shaping it, and assembling the impossibly heavy pieces of chiseled stone in just the right way so that a structure could withstand the test of centuries.

Instead, Ibarra has devoted his career to examining such churches and other historical buildings in the minutest detail, and in some cases this work has led to restoration projects that replicate the centuries-old construction techniques of their creators.

An architect trained in building restoration, Ibarra is assistant professor at the UT School of Architecture. He is also author of the bilingual volume *El Arte de la Cantería Mixteca / The Art of Mixtec Stonecutting* and creator of a traveling exhibition of the same name, which won the University Co-op's 2014–15 Creative Research Award.

Photo by Mari Correa

The book and the exhibition focus on three sixteenth-century churches in the Mixteca region of southern Mexico whose construction involved the building of complex late-Gothic ribbed vaults.

At UT's School of Architecture (SOA), Ibarra has a full teaching load of 15 hours. His courses include Design Studio, an advanced course for graduate students and advanced undergrads that emphasizes historic preservation; Building Technology, a graduate-level course often taken by interior design and historical preservation students as well as some engineering students; Graphic Documentation, in which historical preservation students learn to document existing historic buildings via measurements and actual practice; and From Traits to Form Performance, a seminar offered at both graduate and undergrad levels that focuses on the study of vaulting systems (domes, arches) and the geometric foundation of how these structures work.

Should we assume that Ibarra has no spare time for additional pursuits, we would be wrong. In an upcoming project through the School of Architecture, he will be part of a design studio examining conservation alternatives at Badlands National Park, South Dakota, looking at the park through the lens of cultural landscapes, a term defined by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee as “combined works of nature and humankind” that “express a long and intimate relationship between peoples and their natural environment.” Says Ibarra, “These are landscapes that have meaning and significance in a culture, and the question is how to insert architecture into the landscape in a way that honors what is already there.”

Ibarra explains that the architecture at Badlands was part of Mission 66, a 1950–60s era program of the U.S. National Park Service that introduced architecture into national parks with the purpose of dramatically expanding visitor services. In Badlands, the project successfully introduced mid-century architecture into the park. The National Park Service approached UT's Historical Preservation Program about participating in a project that will update the park's facilities. Fourteen students, along with Ibarra and other SOA faculty, will visit Badlands in September as part of a multidisciplinary team. The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center will participate as well, advising on landscaping and native species. The team, says Ibarra, “will brainstorm the future of the park.”

Ibarra documents his work, as well as the world around him, in striking photographs. The exhibition *Restoring Cultural Monuments: Oaxaca, Mexico* assembles photos taken by Ibarra and others of a project that restored sixteenth- and seventeenth-century buildings in Oaxaca using the same building technology that was used when they were built. Thus, the stone was quarried and carved by hand, and there was minimal use of modern technology such as cranes. “The aim is to preserve the buildings' structural integrity,” Ibarra explains; the use of these original building methods is the best way to do this.

More than 900 images from this restoration project will be made available online through the Artstor Digital Library, which is partnering with the UT School of Architecture to archive the collection. They will also be archived by the SOA's online Visual Resources Collection. As for Ibarra's other photographic work, we are delighted to publish his striking nocturnal photo of Mexico City on the cover of this tenth anniversary issue. ✨