



Scholars of Brazil

BY SHERRI MILES

“Home to nearly 200 million people, Brazil is the largest country in Latin America and the fifth-largest in the world in terms of population and land mass. Brazilian territory borders every country in South America except Ecuador and Chile, comprising 8.5 million square kilometers that are divided politically into 26 states (plus the Federal District of Brasília), and geographically into five major regions: north, northeast, south, southeast, and central-west. From the arid sertão of the northeast to the lush vineyards of the serra gaúcha, and from the favelas of the coastal megalopolises to the pantanal lowlands and the floresta amazônica, Brazilians inhabit a wide variety of climates and landscapes that have served—alongside a long, uneven history of colonialism and colonial legacies—to shape their popular traditions, stories, and cultural practices in radically diverging ways. Uniting the majority of Brazilians across this vast country—and abroad—is their shared mother tongue: while some 200 languages are used in Brazil (most of these by indigenous peoples), over 99 percent of Brazilians speak Portuguese.”

Tracy Devine Guzmán, from her article “Brazil and its Importance to U.S. Latino Folklore,” Encyclopedia of Latino Folklore, Maria Herrera-Sobek (ed.). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. Forthcoming in 2012.

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As one of the “Big Four” advancing economies in the world (the other three being Russia, India, and China), Brazil is capturing the attention of economists, politicians, scientists, and numerous other scholars worldwide—and at the University of Miami in particular. In this article we spotlight five College of Arts and Sciences professors—researchers in the fields of anthropology, geography, political science, and modern languages—who are engaged in intellectual quests throughout the country on projects spanning political and cultural studies, indigenous peoples, and disease control.

FIGHTING DENGUE

In a country with the national campaign slogan *Não esqueça: A dengue se combate todo dia!* (Don't forget: You have to keep fighting dengue every day!), Brazilians know too well the threat of dengue fever and the need for vigilance in fighting its cause—the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito. An epidemic hit Brazil in 2008, infecting half a million people with dengue; and in 2010 the nation reported nearly a million cases and hundreds of deaths involving the more serious dengue hemorrhagic fever and dengue shock syndrome.

Douglas O. Fuller, associate professor and chair of the Department of Geography and Regional Studies at UM, has received a Fulbright scholarship to conduct research in Brazil during 2011-2012. His study, “Climate-based Prediction of Dengue Fever Epidemics in Manaus, Brazil,” will focus on the capital of Amazonas state, a city with two million people and the greatest numbers of dengue fever cases in the Brazilian Amazon.

Fuller's past research showed a link between dengue fever outbreaks and the occurrence of specific environmental conditions. Since there is indication that climate regulates how mosquitos reproduce and bite, his Fulbright project—designed to model climate dynamics and dengue fever epidemics in Manaus—will advance a new climate-based time series model that has demonstrated high accuracy in predicting dengue epidemics. He explains: “Tests of the model suggest it can predict major outbreaks approximately 40 weeks in advance, thus allowing sufficient time to mobilize

resources for stepping up mosquito-control measures, alerting at-risk populations to elevated disease risk, and helping health-care professionals plan for increased case loads.”

DECODING LANGUAGES

The world's largest tropical rainforest (the Amazon Rainforest, or Amazonia, the majority of which is in Brazil) has more than the greatest biological diversity on the planet—it also has the greatest language diversity. “Over 200 languages are spoken throughout Amazonia representing many distinct language families,” says Caleb Everett, anthropological and cognitive linguist and an assistant professor of anthropology at UM. “Unlike the Indo-European languages of English, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, which can be traced back to the same source and have fundamental similarities, many of the languages of Amazonia are completely unrelated, resulting in some remarkable features,” he notes.

“There are cases of number-less languages, languages with only two or three color terms, languages with unusual sound patterns, and languages with very uncommon word orders—for example, with the object of a sentence occurring first,” says Everett. “So instead of saying ‘Mike ate the mango’ you’d say something like ‘The mango ate Mike,’ while meaning the same thing.”

Everett, who researches these and other languages of indigenous tribes in the Brazilian Amazon, is specifically interested in how language influences thought. “Recently I conducted

research among two tribes—the Pirahã and the Jarawara—in order to understand whether speakers of languages without number words could tell the difference between certain quantities.”

The language of the Pirahã is anumeric—it has no number words and no distinction between singular and plural nouns. So “speakers of the language struggle with very basic quantity-recognition tasks for numbers greater than three,” says Everett. “For instance, if you place a line of objects in front of them and ask them to match the line with another line of the same quantity, they have real difficulty doing so with precision. Because there are so few anumeric languages, these findings are potentially crucial to debates about how the mind thinks about quantities, particularly how important language is to numerical cognition.”

The language of the Jarawara was believed to lack numbers as well, but Everett discovered otherwise: “They did quite well on tasks related to quantity recognition. Crucially, though, it turns out that the Jarawara language actually does have numbers despite previous claims. I’ve now documented this unusual number system, which is an interesting combination of binary and quinary [based on the number five].”

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“*Latin American Politics and Society* is the best English-language source for current research in the social sciences,” says John C. Carey, professor of political science at Dartmouth College. “The articles are carefully researched and edited, and they address issues at the top of the region's political, social, and economic agendas.”

Adds Susan Eva Eckstein, professor of sociology at Boston University and former president of the Latin American Studies Association: “*Latin American Politics and Society* is one of those rare journals that is interesting, engaging, topical, and interdisciplinary. It is among the main sources that anyone concerned about Latin America, including in a global context, should consult.”

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Left: Caleb Everett (white shirt) in a Madi village in the middle of Amazonia after a flight bringing in supplies; he later worked with the Jarawara, part of the Madi group.

ESSENTIAL PORTUGUESE

Because attention to Brazil is growing at UM, as in the rest of the world, there is increasing interest in learning the language of the only Portuguese-speaking country in the Americas in order to travel, study, and work there.

Merike Blofield, associate professor of political science at UM and scholar of Spanish-speaking Latin America, recognizes the

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importance of including Brazil in her comparative research projects. Blofield is currently on research leave in São Paulo, where she is teaching a graduate-level course at the University of São Paulo; conducting a new research project on gender, class, and politics in Brazil and the Southern Cone (the southernmost countries of South America); and learning Portuguese.

“Too often, the study of Latin American politics gets artificially separated into two camps: those who study Brazil and those who study the rest of Latin America,” says Blofield. “Much of this is driven by language skills, or the lack thereof. Latin Americanists who can do research in both Brazil and in Spanish Latin America are uniquely equipped to conduct insightful comparative research projects.”

For example, Steven F. Buttermann, an associate professor in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures and director of the Portuguese Language Program, has been studying Brazil’s cultural representations of sexual minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities) as well as Brazilian cinematic production under dictatorships. And Buttermann’s departmental colleague

Tracy Devine Guzmán is an assistant professor who has studied the relationship between indigenous peoples and Brazilian society from the colonial period to the present.

But for the past four years, Buttermann and Guzmán have collaborated on a Fulbright Foundation-funded initiative—the student-focused Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) Program—that brings young Brazilian scholars to UM to teach their language and

share their culture. “Our students and our Brazilian visitors benefit in countless ways from the program, both in and outside of the classroom,” says Guzmán.

“Having a native speaker with whom students can practice the language seems to be very motivating,” says Adriana Fontella Nunes, the current Fulbright FLTA for Portuguese at UM. “Students have demonstrated increasing interest in my culture; many intend to continue studying the language and some plan to study abroad in my country.”

Maisa Zakir, a 2009-2010 Fulbright FLTA and a linguist who specializes in second-language acquisition, facilitated UM’s participation in a program for online language-learning, called “Teletandem,” that matches Brazilian university students who wish to learn a foreign language with students in other countries who are learning Portuguese. “With this tandem language learning [via Windows Live Messenger or Skype], each partner is a student for one hour, learning and practicing the language of the other partner,” says Zakir. “Then they switch roles and switch languages.”

“We see this program as a pilot experience with potential not only to facilitate language learning,” says Guzmán, “but much more crucially to foster one-on-one contact between young people from across the Americas who have a unique opportunity to learn about each other’s cultures, histories, and perspectives on the major issues that are shaping our times and our collective future.”

The Fulbright FLTA program is one example of the growing interest in learning the sixth most spoken language in the world. “When I arrived at UM in 2000, there generally were three Portuguese language classes offered,” says Buttermann. “Today, we teach seven to eight classes, with 70-100 students enrolled each semester.” Opportunities have also bloomed for students to use their enhanced language skills on site in Brazil. “Our students had no such opportunities in 2000. These days, they participate in summer or semester-long UM exchange programs in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador da Bahia, and Porto Alegre.”

BUILDING THE FUTURE

In March, the Miami Consortium for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (a UM-Florida International University partnership) kicked off its Distinguished Speakers Series with the evocative question, “Brazil: A Global Player?” The event featured Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida, president of the Latin American Studies Association and professor of political science at the University of São Paulo.

With such Brazilian thought leaders invited to share their views at UM and numerous College of Arts and Sciences faculty engaged in research throughout Brazil—with young Brazilian scholars teaching and learning at UM and increasing numbers of UM students learning Portuguese to travel in Brazil—the University of Miami and the nation of Brazil are participating in a rich exchange of scholarship that builds new perspectives and opportunities every year.

Research, Outreach, and Engagement in Latin America

Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences are involved in research throughout Latin America, often playing a leading role in matters that directly affect public life. Here is a sampling of current projects:

In Peru, economist Richard Weisskoff, professor of international studies, works in the Ica Valley on the mitigation, prevention, and recovery of disasters; one focus, for example, is the building of earthquake-proof houses. He is also helping to develop drip irrigation for small farmers and train local populations in microfinance.

In Haiti, Louis HERN Marcelin, assistant professor of anthropology and chair of the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development (INURED), has been working since the 2010 earthquake to restore Haiti’s education system. He helps residents to rebuild by engaging the community in participatory research and town hall-style meetings.

Douglas O. Fuller, associate professor of geography, works in Costa Rica and Singapore on climate-based modeling of dengue fever outbreaks; he also works throughout Latin America on an NIH-funded study of environmental factors that control malaria transmission.

A number of faculty specialize in Argentina. Steve Stein, professor of history, is writing a comprehensive history of the Argentine wine industry; Eduardo Elena, assistant professor of history and specialist in the history of modern Latin America, has a forthcoming book titled *Dignifying Argentina:*

Peronism, Citizenship, and Mass Consumption (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); and Ivan Petrella, associate professor of religious studies, is serving as the academic director of one of Argentina’s major political parties in preparation for the next presidential election.

Bruce Bagley, professor and chair of international studies, researches drug-trafficking and security issues in Latin America; he is coeditor, with visiting assistant professor Elvira Restrepo, of the forthcoming *The Demobilization of the Colombian Paramilitaries, 2003-2010* (Editorial Planeta, Bogota).

Merike Blofield, associate professor of political science, researches Latin America politics. She has two forthcoming books: *Class, Gender, and the State: Domestic Workers’ Struggle for Equal Rights in Latin America* (Penn State University Press, 2011); and an edited volume, *The Great Gap: Inequality and the Politics of Redistribution in Latin America* (Penn State, 2011).

Lillian Manzor, associate professor of modern languages and literatures, directs the Cuban Theater Digital Archive—an interactive, bilingual web site for research and publication on Cuban theater and other performing arts.