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UH HISPANIC STUDIES CHAIR RECEIVES FULBRIGHT GRANT

Anadelí Bencomo to Research Journalism on Narco-Violence in Mexico

HOUSTON, April 12, 2013 – University of Houston (UH) Hispanic studies department chair Ana Bencomo was awarded a Core Fulbright U.S. Scholar Grant to research how a young generation of Mexican writers are reporting narco-violence through a certain journalistic genre known as chronicle (crónicas).

During her year-long stay as a Fulbright U.S. Scholar, Bencomo will teach courses on the Mexican journalistic chronicle genre at the University of Guadalajara. She will have access to periodicals, newspapers and weekly magazines that would not be available to her otherwise. Additionally, she will interview journalists to learn more about the process of reporting on narco-violence.

“The chronicle style crosses the boundaries between fiction, non-fiction and literature. It’s more of a type of intellectual journalism,” said Bencomo. “The journalist may use some investigation of the facts, some personal narrative, interviews, subjective and objective sources, and their own impression, but the final result is a hybrid in terms of all the information they have. The trademark is the literary component.”

She compares the modern Mexican journalistic chronicle style to “new” journalism in the U.S. in the 1960s, when there was a rise of a new style of writers covering important non-fiction events. Works include Truman Capote’s, “In Cold Blood,” detailing the brutal true murder of a family, and Hunter S. Thompson’s non-fiction novel, “Hell’s Angels,” where Thompson spent a year embedded with a motorcycle gang accused of a number of criminal activities.

“The journalist who writes a chronicle piece, this hybrid piece, may use data and numbers, but in a broader context. The chronicle reporter will ask ‘Who are the victims? Why was a 15-year old girl dancing in a casino at 5 p.m. in the afternoon? Why was she not in school,’” said Bencomo. “Even though the journalists chronicle the horrors of narco-violence, they usually find a novel and humanistic approach to the story and leave the story open-ended, rather than reporting a traditional journalistic piece that answers who, what, when, where and why. For some writing a chronicle, the drug lord is not necessarily 100 percent evil.”

“Journalism is one of the channels we have to inform people in Mexico, the United States and the rest of the world about what is going on with drug cartels and the death and violence in Mexico. It is a crucial discourse in terms of national Mexican identity and its international image. The brutal violence is traumatic for the Mexicans. They are going through a difficult time. For me, it’s important that we read these narrative accounts and not just the mainstream reports where the sensationalist tone prevails. I believe in narrative journalism as a way to construct meaning. You can construct meaning by photographs and music, but in my case, I want to see what these journalistic accounts can tell us about this critical violence and its effects within Mexican society.”

From July to early August, Bencomo will relocate with her family to Guadalajara. She is excited to engage in research and for people in Mexico to see someone from the U.S. who is interested in learning more about Mexico and willing to establish formal links and exchange programs with scholars.

“In addition to my research, I have a personal goal for my kids. I want them to be more sensitive about how to live in a Latin American country where violence can be an everyday thread, but where life goes on and compensates your sense of vulnerability with a wide range of experiences and rewards,” said Bencomo. “You have friends, play dates and birthday parties, and at the same time you learn to take precautions. For example, instead of going to a late movie show, you go to a safe mall at 5 p.m. to watch that movie. You don’t drive through certain neighborhoods at night. I want for my kids to experience first-hand living in Mexico, and understanding that – despite general opinion – this is not a forbidden place. They’re not killing each other on every street corner in Mexico. Mexico has wonderful things to offer, and a diverse culture that will enrich them in many ways.”

A native of Venezuela, Bencomo is a scholar of contemporary Latin American literature with a focus on Mexican studies. She has published two books on the Mexican chronicle journalist style, co-edited a volume of transnational studies and is the author of many academic articles. She regularly writes book reviews for *Literal*, a bilingual cultural magazine. She earned a Ph.D. in Latin American studies from the University of Pittsburgh and was recognized with a Teaching Excellence Award in 2011. In addition to serving as chair of UH Hispanic studies, she is also a member of the board of directors of the UH Center for Teaching Excellence.

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About the Core Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program

The Core Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program sends approximately 800 American scholars and professionals per year to approximately 130 countries, where they lecture and/or conduct research in a wide variety of academic and professional fields. The application cycle is open from February until August 1 for the 2014-2015 academic year. Visit the Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program website for a complete application and eligibility details at <http://www.uh.edu/fulbright/> or interested UH faculty members may wish to contact their institution’s Fulbright campus representative Jerald Strickland, associate vice chancellor for International Studies and Programs, at (713) 743-8330 or strickland@uh.edu

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