

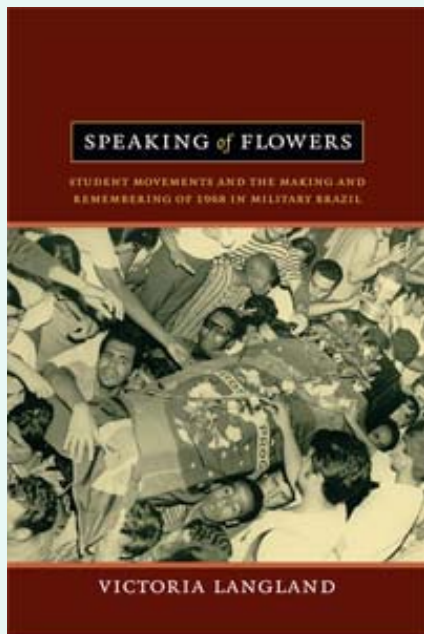


# an interview with **Professor Langland**

by Bruno Renero-Hannan

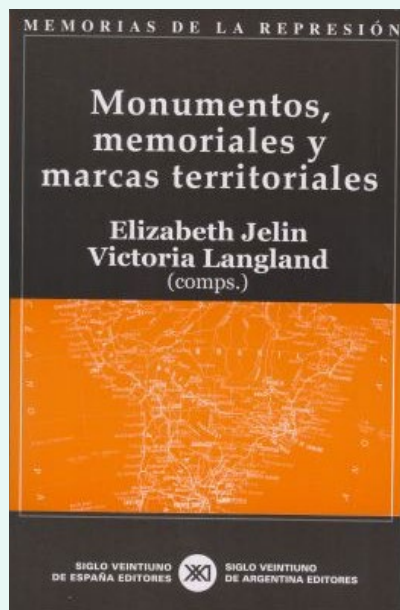
Dr. Victoria Langland—historian of Latin America and social movements expert—talks about Latin America, women in revolution, breastfeeding rights in Brazil, as well as the importance of history in the Trump era, and more, in this interview with a former GSI.

*LACS Course Spotlight for Winter 2017*



*Speaking of Flowers: Student Movements and the Making and Remembering of 1968 in Military Brazil* (Duke University Press 2013).

*Speaking of Flowers* is an innovative study of student activism during Brazil's military dictatorship (1964–85) and an examination of the very notion of student activism, which changed dramatically in response to the student protests of 1968. Looking into what made students engage in national political affairs as students, rather than through other means, Victoria Langland traces a gradual, uneven shift in how they constructed, defended, and redefined their right to political participation, from emphasizing class, race, and gender privileges to organizing around other institutional and symbolic forms of political authority.



*Memorias de la Represión Vol. 5: Monumentos, memoriales y marcas territoriales* (Madrid: Siglo XXI Editores 2003).

The fifth volume in a series of publications resulting from the SSRC program on Collective Memory of Repression. The entire multi-volume series consists of work produced by program fellows and faculty and has been released simultaneously in Madrid and Buenos Aires and distributed throughout the world.

## Who is Dr. Victoria Langland? And how did you come to teach this class on revolutionary movements in Latin America?

I'm a historian of 20th century Latin America with a focus on Brazil, and I wrote a book about student activists under the Brazilian military dictatorship (from 1964 to 1985). So I was interested in social movements and the ties between student movements and revolutionary movements in Brazil—although the Brazilian student movements and the revolutionary movements were not the same thing. They don't stand in for each other; but there are some connections there, and some of the counter-revolutionary repression that impacted the armed left also impacted university students. So I don't study revolutionary movements per se [for my book], but they were important within that project.

And my current research seems very different! I'm currently researching the history of breastfeeding in Brazil, basically from the early 20th century to the present. [There] I'm really looking at changing understandings, beliefs, practices and policies around breastfeeding. And one of my overarching questions is: How did breastfeeding change from being seen as a kind of menial, undervalued labor that elite women would push off onto more vulnerable female populations, to being something that is now celebrated by many as an essential, almost sacred part of one's experience of motherhood? At the same time, how do we account for the important development of human milk banking in Brazil? For today Brazil is a leading innovator in human breastmilk banking—in collecting donated breast milk, pasteurizing it, and distributing it, free of charge, to infants who need it. They do this in a very

low cost way, and they've been modeling this technology and this process to other places around the world. So the book asks what these transformations have meant for various groups of women, for infants, for society more generally, and what these changes reveal about different understandings about race, gender, women's bodies, collective health, the role of transnational infant formula marketing, and so forth. There's a lot in there that I think is really important, especially as we grapple with the current situation in the U.S. where the fact that we have no legally guaranteed parental leave means that breastfeeding is effectively impossible for most families, with truly negative consequences for maternal and infant health.

## Are you thinking of integrating this new research into a future class?

Yes, I have a class I've been developing with a PhD candidate in History and Women's Studies, Diana Sierra, although it's not on the books for next year, but hopefully the subsequent year. [It's] a class about motherhood, maternalism and maternal and infant health in Latin America.

## Let's get back to revolution. What is the "Revolutionary Movements" class about? And in what ways do you think this subject is relevant to the lives of Michigan students in 2017?

Content-wise, the class really is a way of exploring the history of Latin America in the 20th century through the lens of revolutionary movements. One of the ways I see 20th century Latin American history is as [a series of] struggles against inequality, as that [inequality] has been a persistent structural feature of Latin American society. But it has also been one that people have been finding inventive and creative ways to push against, throughout the full 20th and 21st

century. Not all of those efforts are revolutionary—so we're not looking at all ways that people have pushed to create social justice in Latin America: we're focusing exclusively on revolutionary movements. I also don't mean to characterize revolution as the only way that people seek social justice, but nonetheless there are a series of really significant and quite fascinating revolutionary movements that occurred in Latin America over the twentieth century. So this course begins with the Mexican Revolution [1910-]—and it goes up to the present and asks: What are some of the social movements taking place today? And in what ways might we consider some of them revolutionary? And it looks at everything in between. So that's one part of the course.

Then the other part of the course, alongside that, is that we look at how historians approach this study of revolutionary movements. We're often thinking about how you think about the past, so students are reading primary sources and thinking about what we learn about them—and they write about primary sources. We're talking about how revolutions have been defined and re-defined over time, and how they're been represented. So we look a lot at film and at art and at other media that have created an iconography of tropes, and sometimes caricatures, of revolution, that get re-written and used in a variety of ways.

To give you an example of how we treat all of this together, one of the themes that threads through the class is the question of gender—and looking at, what were some of the aspirations of revolutionary societies? To what extent were changing gender relationships on their radar? Was that part of the new utopian societies that revolutionaries were trying to

“Content-wise, the class [Revolutionary Movements in Latin America] really is a way of exploring the history of Latin America in the 20th century through the lens of revolutionary movements.”

create? In some cases, yes; in some cases, no, in very different ways. We look at women protagonists, what roles they played in what they did, and how those (roles) got understood and recognized, or not.

And we look at the way that revolution is often mythologized and celebrated in very gendered terms, from the hyper-masculinity of Ché Guevara to the ways in which the front-and-center participation of women in the Sandinista revolutionary movement becomes part of the way Nicaragua is understood. So that's kind of one place [we're] seeing all that working together.

Since [2014, when] you GSI'ed with me, I've made gender more and more central—because I care about it. So I keep finding ways to make this part of every conversation. And now my students are like, “You can't think of revolution without thinking about gender!” Because I sort of insert it—some questioning of it—in all of our lectures in some way. So I'm very happy with that.

**Could you say more about the ways in which this topic—revolutionary movements in Latin America—can be relevant to the lives of your students?**

I think anyone who is interested in social justice is interested in the various efforts that people on this planet have taken to create some kind of social justice—how they've defined it, what they think is just and for whom, the steps that they've taken to try to reach that. So there's a lot that we can learn just by exploring those actors

who have been committed to this and who have undertaken a variety of different means for doing this. So even though the theme is revolutionary movements, these revolutionary movements are very different—and they evolve; they learn from each other; they try things that worked in one place, and try not to replicate things that didn't work so well in another place. And, you know, there's not one kind of model that just gets enacted again and again and again in different sites. These are, in fact, diverse and dialogical, right? They move off of one another. So that would be one piece of it.

Another piece is that to be a globalized citizen, to understand our hemisphere, and to understand our world, we need a better understanding of various regions of the world, including Latin America. And revolution is one of the tropes and the caricatures through which Latin America is often understood and misunderstood by US Americans. Or it's often presented in a kind of simplistic way that there is one kind of revolutionary model, all Latin Americans—or all of Latin American history, is kind of brushed with this simple brush of, “Oh, they all have a revolutionary background or past,” and that's not really understood, what that meant for each context. So I think it gives people a better understanding of what's at stake in Latin America and what people have done.

**Thinking of the Trump era, do you see new significance or urgency in the study of history and radical politics?**

I do think that *all* history courses are incredibly useful in the Trump era, as they get us to evaluate how we know what we know. One of the things that historians do is we put together varieties of documentary and other forms of evidence—what we call primary sources—to try to think about, what can we learn from each primary source? We think very clearly about who wrote it, and in what context, and for what audience. What’s the impact of this? What do we learn by the existence of this document?

So in a moment in which we’re questioning truth—we’re questioning news, we’re questioning what is false and what is true—I think getting back to basics [is really valuable]: How do you know what you think you know? Why do historians interpret the past this way? Showing students how to read and interpret primary sources, and getting them see how historians use a variety of



Blanca López, a Sandinista militia member, breastfeeding her son (1984). The Nicaraguan Revolution was marked by unprecedented mobilization of women. The image of this nursing mother, with an AK-47 slung over her shoulder, became iconic of the Nicaraguan Revolution. It was widely reproduced by the international solidarity movement. Gender and visual media are central elements of Prof. Langland’s “Revolutionary Movements” course; her current research looks at the history of breastfeeding in Brazil.

primary sources as they ask how and why things happened in the past, lets students become able to validate one interpretation over another based on the merits of the work, and not just the credentials or presumed biases of the author. To do this, you need to be able to really think about their evidence.

So I feel like all history courses are really useful in the Trump era, as we think about, “how do we know what we think we know?” Or why do we believe one person’s perspective over another? Is it because it aligns with ours or is it because the material on which they’re basing it corresponds with the argument that they’re making? Because we see that two historians can take the exact same set of primary sources and come to different kinds of conclusions from them. So part of what our students are doing is trying to evaluate: why would they believe *this* perspective over another? Or what is *compelling* about this perspective over another?

So that’s one thing, and then I feel like, certainly since Trump was elected, parallels come up in conversation all the time about leaders: What does leadership mean? Where does change come from? You know, in all of the revolutionary cases, merely seizing executive power does not a revolution make. So thinking about the various ways that people have tried to effect changes that go beyond taking office has been helpful, I think, for students coming to terms with this period.

Lastly, I would also think that when we talk about revolution, we talk about *counter-revolution*—it’s impossible not to talk about that. So we’re often talking about real state power in various cases, and I think that has been something that people are also making parallels with today.

Since Trump’s election, I feel like that’s our mission, as historians: to get [students] to think that there’s not *one* truth—but nonetheless, truth is not random, that not all interpretations are equally valid.

**Right, as you say, two historians can look at the same sources and come up with very different interpretations—but that does not mean that the two interpretations are equivalent.**

Exactly; or that they’re just completely ideologically driven: That one person just wrote whatever they wanted and claimed to base it on a particular source; and another person wrote the opposite of that and claimed to base it on the exact same source. And that they both use sources simply to confirm their ideas rather to really try to come to terms with the past.

**What kinds of students have you found generally take this class? And what students—perhaps even unlikely candidates—would you most recommend it to?**

The students [in the class] come from a diversity of interests and backgrounds. There are certainly those who are interested in revolution as a topic, who have taken courses on the Russian Revolution or the Chinese Revolution, and they’re interested in approaching this topic from different geographic perspectives. I certainly have one student this year who is a Russian studies major, who is making lots of really useful commentary and comparisons about the Russian Revolution. There are (also) a number of students who are interested in Latin America in particular, who have taken other courses on Latin America and who want to know more about the region.

I would say the majority of our

students are interested in the world outside the US, but not in any specific question about Latin America or about revolution. Rather, they might be International Studies majors—or they might come from any other major—and they want to learn about something that’s not what they already know!—(laughs)—but that maybe isn’t so far afield, that this seems approachable, something they’ve heard about.

They’re certainly familiar with the *idea* of revolution and with the proximity of Latin America and the importance of Latin America to the United States, but they don’t necessarily know anything about Latin America or Latin American revolutions. And they’re curious. And those students, like I said, might have an interest in International Studies, particularly—but they might not. Students can come from any part of the university, who just say, “For part of my college education, I’d like to learn about something outside of the US, and this topic sounds really interesting to me.” So those would be the major constituencies.

We do get also some history majors, who maybe have taken a class with me and wanted to take a second class, even though they’re not “Latin American-ists” per se. I currently have a few students who were in my History 202 section in the past and it’s great to see them in the classroom again.

## History 202?

History 202 is the required course for history majors. It’s called “Doing History,” and they take it typically in their sophomore year. We discuss why history matters, what it means to “do” history, and we visit several archives. Then they write a research paper based on primary sources from one of those archives and present their findings in class.

## It sounds fun; I would have enjoyed that as an undergrad.

Yeah, it’s actually super fun! I would’ve too—I would’ve enjoyed that as a *PhD student*!

## Right!

But I didn’t have it in either case! (*Both laugh*).

**That’s so true. On the “Anthro-History” side of things, I sometimes feel embarrassed to admit my lack [of training] in history. Because anthropologists, well, you [go and] figure it out, that ethnography is always a messy business in the end—but everyone knows that it’s messy and personal. But with historians and their archives, it’s like, “They’ve already got it figured out...”**

No! We’re always figuring that out on the fly too! So don’t you worry, we’re good!

**Any thoughts on perhaps unlikely students who might take the class? Students who might not necessarily imagine themselves taking it? Or other**

## kinds of students that you would recommend it to?

The only thing I would reiterate is that sometimes I hear from students that they were a little worried signing up, because they thought they needed to have a particular background—however, the course doesn’t assume any knowledge! I don’t assume that you know anything about revolutions, I don’t assume you know anything about Latin America, I don’t even assume you know anything about history.

But what I *would* say is that it’s a history course, and so there’s a lot of reading. It appeals to people who like to read. I can say a little bit about what they read, which might be interesting, because I do try to give them different genres: They read a history text [book], but they also read a memoir of a woman—you read this too, I think, you read Carmen Aguirre...

## Yeah—what’s it called? *Memories of a Revolutionary Daughter*!

Yes! *Memories of a Revolutionary Daughter*, they read that. So they read some historical scholarship, they read a lot of primary sources, they watch a film on their own, they get to choose a film. Did we do that when you were there?

## I don’t think they chose one.

What I do now is have them do an assignment—and it’s a group assignment—where they pick

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Photo of a woman revolutionary in Mexico, by the woman photographer Sara Castrejón Reza (1911).

Gender is one of the central themes threading through Langland's course on Latin American revolutionaries. As she puts it, "We look at women protagonists, what roles they played and how those roles [were] understood and recognized, or not. Was changing gender relationships on their radar? Was that part of the new utopian societies that revolutionaries were trying to create?"

four or five of their [discussion] section mates, and they pick a fictionalized film that represents a Latin American revolution, from a long list that I have: one for the first half of the course, and one for the second half of the course. They just do it once, but one section does it in the first half, and one section does it in the second half. They pick a fictionalized film, they watch it, and then they give a class presentation, where they show us a clip and tell us a little bit about the film—and then they try to analyze, how is revolution being represented? How or what is Hollywood, or whichever film studio is putting this together, saying about revolution in Latin America? We have everything from Benicio del Toro's *Ché*, to some of the great Tomás Gutiérrez Alea films in Cuba, and I have *Machuca* on the list. What we cover just depends on what they choose.

I find it a great way for all of us to get kind of a little snapshot: We get about ten films, five in the first group and five in the second group—just quickly, little snippets—and see the diversity of ways, and sometimes the lack of diversity of ways (laughs) in which the silver screen represents revolution. And what that does, the work that that does.

**That sounds fun, too. Some of those are films I haven't seen.**

Yeah, it's really fun. They're doing it the following Monday, the second group. They do a group presentation and then they also write an individual paper on the same film. For both, they interpret a scene, so I ask them to pick one scene that their group is going to discuss, and then pick a different scene for the individual paper. They also do a primary source paper. Those are their two writing assignments: the film and the primary source paper.

You've answered this in some ways, but I wanted to ask you to tell us about some of your favorite elements in the course. Perhaps there's a particular activity or a set of readings you're particularly fond of?

Right, well, I definitely do like the film presentations. I like getting to see what they choose and what they had to say about it—I mean, that sounds so empty, but it's true! The problem for me to answer that question—and you know this—is [that in] lecture courses, you, as the faculty, don't get to see as much about how students are responding. So I can say (in a contrived voice) "What I like to read..."—you know? I don't always know how they respond to all of it.

But, as the designer of the syllabus—even if you don't always know how it comes off in sections—there might be a piece you really loved creating, you know?

Yeah, like I said, I like being able to talk about gender within revolution cause I don't think that it gets integrated usually. It's usually seen like this separate category of, "Now we'll talk about women," as this separate discussion.

**Like a gender week, or day, or whatever?**

Or a gender week. So I try to make sure that that's part of what we're always looking at. Cause one of the things that I emphasize is

that, if you imagine revolutionary movements struggling to create a new society—in that new society, who do they think are cleaning the toilets? [These] are racialized questions as well as gendered questions: Who do they think is running the military? Who do they think is watching the children? Who do they think is patrolling the cities? Are they imagining a society of equal sexual liberty for all? Are they imagining a multiplicity of gendered identities, including trans-gender? It's like, is that on the table? Well, it's not—okay, so what *is* on the table? What is it that they're imagining? And what is the lived reality?



This photo was taken on March 5, 1960, in Havana, Cuba, at a memorial service march for victims of the La Coubre explosion. On the far left of the photo is Fidel Castro, while in the center is Che Guevara. Source: Museo Che Guevara (Centro de Estudios Che Guevara en La Habana, Cuba)/Wikimedia Commons.

Film and photography are another important aspect of the course. In one activity, groups of students watch a fictionalized film of their choice. "They give a class presentation, in which they show a clip from their chosen film, and they try to analyze it: How is revolution being represented? What is Hollywood, or any film studio, saying about revolution in Latin America? We have everything on the list, from Benicio del Toro's *Ché*, to some of the great Tomás Gutiérrez Alea films in Cuba, and *Machuca*. We get about ten films—just quickly, little snippets—and we see the diversity of ways in which the silver screen represents revolution."

That's been one of the things that I like—and I think my students know that I like it, cause I'm *always* highlighting it! (*laughs*).

And I like seeing students work with primary sources. Again, maybe this is what “the professor’s view” is—that I get to see their voices more when they write their papers on primary sources, cause then I get to see which sources really spoke to them and what really intrigued them about these different documents. So that's more like—I like to see what *they* liked.

I could also say that I like images a lot. And I think the study of revolution lends itself to looking at [images]. From the Mexican Revolution on, they (revolutions) are highly photographed events. So that makes lectures more interesting, as we have a lot of iconographic material to think about. But revolutions are also represented in culture, so we look at the muralist movement—you know, in visual culture they are highly represented. And I think the imagery is really rich...

**This might not necessarily be something for your course, but have you heard of this? [Retrieves a copy of the EZLN's Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra (2015), which includes an appendage of artwork on glossy pages.]**

No.

**It's great; it's actually a collection of pieces.**

I'll check it out.

**I was just thinking about images, cause...**

Oh, wow!

**Zapatista imagery in 2015.**

Oh, that's awesome, can I write down that title?

**Definitely.**



**Bruno Renero-Hannan** is PhD candidate in anthropology and history at the University of Michigan, where he has taught courses in both disciplines. He works in southern Mexico on social movements, political violence, and prisons. His forthcoming dissertation is based on long-term research and advocacy with political prisoners and their communities in the Loxicha region of Oaxaca. His research interests include revolutionary movements and radical politics, political economy, popular culture and religion, and questions of memory, narrative and place.

Bruno is currently program assistant at the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Center (LACS). He has also served as a graduate student instructor (GSI) for “Revolutionary Movements in Latin America,” alongside Prof. Victoria Langland.

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*A member of the International Institute*

1080 South Univesity Avenue  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1106

734-763-0553

[ii.umich.edu/lacs](http://ii.umich.edu/lacs)