Ileana M. Rodriguez-Silva (left) and Richard S. Kirkendall

Professor Susan Glenn caught up with Ileana M. Rodriguez-Silva (Latin American History) and Richard S. Kirkendall (U.S. History) and asked them to reflect upon their decisions to become historians, the inspiration behind their recent books, and their changing approaches to teaching.

Interview with Professor Ileana M. Rodriguez-Silva, March 18, 2013

SG: Why did you decide to become an historian?
I would love to relate an amazing story about intellectual depth and/or precocious intelligence but that is not the case. I believe I inherited a role my grandmother and mom have cultivated within our families and communities. In the face of impoverishment, dislocation, and rapid change, often an individual within a community, either because of their basic literacy skills or personality, becomes the memory keeper. Both, my abuela and my mami took on this role and always made sure we did not forget about how our family and those close to us always struggled and some managed to survive. Today, I want to believe that I am following in their footsteps.

SG: Can you tell us a little about your new book.

IMR-S: *Silencing Race* embodies one moment in my thinking process about the erasures of blackness in Puerto Rico. In an island situated right in the middle of the Caribbean—a region that received about 40% of all African slaves shipped to the Americas—, in a place whose sugar economy, together with that of Brazil and Cuba, served as engine of the intense illegal slave trade to the Americas for over 50 years in the nineteenth century, and in a colony that for over 500 years navigated the intricacies of complex racialized imperial fields (Spain and the United States), there is a striking "absence" of discussion about the multiple forms of racial domination Puerto Ricans practice and experience. So I began by asking: How come? Why? The book is an exploration of these and other questions.

The study does two things primarily: First, it provides various (very revealing) accounts of racial struggles in Puerto Rico from the 1850s onward, many of which little has been known about, to show that race has always be an organizing principle in the colony (shaping all aspects of individual and communal life) and in the imperial fields they navigated. Second, it reflects on the role of colonialism and Liberalism in the erasure of blackness and in silencing the critiques of racialized domination. I hope that in studying these transformations in Puerto Rico and illustrating the racialized logics behind what appear as racially-neutral ideas and practices, scholars of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States can reconsider the conventional paradigms framing our knowledge about racialized formation under liberal forms of rule.
SG: How did you become interested in the topic?

IMR-S: Any book-length project is comprised of too many ideas and argument threads. We may be conscious of some but not of all of them. Thus, it is difficult for me to identify an originary moment or the one thing that sparked my inquiries. But if I am to answer this question today, I would highlight two interrelated processes: A) my family and my own trajectories as a migrant subject (from rural to urban Puerto Rico and from the island to the US Midwest and now the Pacific Northwest), which brought about complex and sometimes contradictory understandings of racial identity and B) my difficult research process for a graduate school seminar paper on a very basic question: what happened to former slaves in Puerto Rico after abolition? As the years went by, I realized that the difficulties I faced in writing about former slaves—their erasure from the written record and the resistance of many to speak openly about their families’ past—was deeply related to my own complicated racial identity and to the present form of racial politics in Puerto Rico.

SG: What else did you find most challenging about this type of research?

IMR-S: First, for most funding institutions Puerto Rico is neither part of Latin America nor of the Caribbean, or of the United States. Consequently scholars who wish to conduct research on the history of the island are not eligible for most fellowships and grants. Similar to its present colonial status as a Free Associated State to the United States (“Domestic in a Foreign Sense”), the study of Puerto Ricans on the island does not have a legitimate place in academic structures. I have also had to confront the attitudes of many in academia who see a “small place” like Puerto Rico as unimportant. If anything, the island is assumed to be just one more example of dynamics already experienced and studied in more “relevant” case studies such as Mexico or Brazil. Yet the study of Puerto Rico can raise relevant questions about how we have interpreted dynamics in other places of the Atlantic world and beyond.

Second, in Puerto Rico, I faced the lack of a well-developed research infrastructure. Island archivists and librarians have done an amazing job with the few resources available to them but too many documents are not available because of their deteriorated state, entire deposits are not catalogued, some materials are not available because they are under the jurisdiction of different agencies and few people know their exact locations, and finally, the partisan politics that regulate access to materials are difficult to navigate. More importantly, while today there is a more receptive academic culture in Puerto Rico around matters of race, that was not the case when I began researching this project. Many Puerto Ricans in the academic and research sites I visited thought the study of race was a futile exercise. At the same time, I found others who literally whispered in my ear how glad they were about someone poking into these matters. These individuals guided me through the many years of research.

Finally, I had to learn a new methodology. How do we read silences? If we do not see something in the one form we recognize, does it mean it does not exist? At every single step, I questioned how my own positionality shaped my reading of the dynamics I was uncovering. Was I set on finding something I believed must be there instead of letting the already-familiar sources tell the stories? While often tortured by this latter question, I also had the blessing of always running into someone who quietly revealed a personal/family story or found a new document that indicated I was on the right path. Silencing practices were real not a fiction of my imagination. With patience and the help of many people I met who revealed personal and family stories, I became more skilled in reading the gaps and erasures, I learned to recognize the code languages in which people spoke of race, and, finally, I was able to reconstruct ongoing conversations, debates, and long-standing historical memories out of disparate fragments in obscure sources.

SG: Does this research intersect with your teaching? Has it grown out of your course work or inspired ideas for new courses?

IMR-S: To me, teaching and research are not separate endeavors. My interest in exploring the workings of power—and the historical, everyday making of differences as constitutive of power—is at the heart of both my teaching and research projects in terms of my
approach to the topics I select, my pedagogical practices, and the methodologies I critique and implement. That is, teaching and research are overlapping fields of thinking and through these practices I can work out my thoughts while closely engaging others in the process. Students pose the most challenging questions and often offer the most insightful connections.

I am currently moving away from the nineteenth century in both my new research and my courses. For instance, my new research project looks at the constitution of Puerto Rico’s Commonwealth political arrangement of 1952 as the result of transformations in imperial formations taking place during the second-half of the twentieth century. Hence, I just finished teaching an undergraduate lecture course titled the “Multiple Caribbeans,” which introduces students to the broad Caribbean Basin through a study of the various colonial arrangements in the region. I plan to teach another two new classes: a) a more advanced course on the Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands and their diaspora communities and b) a large course exploring mid-twentieth century decolonization processes as a global transformation in political and economic power.

Interview with Professor Richard S. Kirkendall, March 18, 2013

SG: Why did you decide to become an historian?

RK: As a teenager during World War II, I held a number of part-time jobs and also often played golf; these activities enabled me to observe many men at work and play, and I drew important conclusions from my observations. I concluded that since men devoted huge amounts of time to work and often derived little satisfaction from these activities, I should seek a highly satisfying career. I thought about a number of possibilities, but by the time I entered Gonzaga University in the fall of 1946, I was still looking. There, a great history teacher soon ended my search. He obviously enjoyed his work and clearly stimulated a large class composed mostly of veterans and a much smaller group of eighteen-year-olds like myself. The following summer, I got better acquainted with him, and during the next three years, he, a Jesuit with a Ph.D. from Berkeley, did all he could to prepare me for graduate study.

SG: What year did you arrive at the UW and what do you remember most about those first years as a member of the History Department?

RK: Many years later, in 1988, after graduate work at the University of Wisconsin and thirty three highly satisfying years in the history faculties of four universities, I came to the UW as the Bullitt Professor of American History. The appointment was a rich reward for what I had accomplished elsewhere and offered great opportunities in a beautiful location. Right away, the department impressed me most favorably. My strongest memory from the first years is of its collegiality. Many members reached out to me; usually about a dozen gathered together in the seminar room at noontime for lunch and conversation; a larger group met over lunch once a month in what was then called the Faculty Club, and about half of the members participated monthly in a History Research Group that discussed each time a paper written by one of us.

SG: What kinds of courses did you teach at the beginning? Were you still teaching these courses later in your career?
RK: In my teaching during those early years, I emphasized undergraduate classes. That was what was expected of the Bullitt Professor. My classes included a 100-level course of about one hundred students on the U.S. since 1940, a more advanced and much smaller lecture course on American social and political history from 1920 to the present, and small reading, discussion, and writing courses focused on special topics such as the history of irrigation in the U.S. and the political history of the Boeing Company. In 1998, well before my retirement from teaching, I dropped the third type of course and replaced it with a reading course and a research seminar for graduate students, and from an early point and continuing until 2007, I directed the work of a small number of doctoral students.

SG: What are the biggest changes you saw in the History Department over the course of your career?

RK: In the past twenty-five years, the department has become much more diverse in its personnel and offerings. That, to my eyes, is the most obvious and significant change. Soon after I arrived, a historian at a nearby university criticized me for joining a department that had failed to keep up with the changes that had swept across the historical profession since the 1960s. At that time, the department had only three women in its faculty, no African Americans, and offered little in the newer historical fields. Today, it is no longer vulnerable to such criticism. SG: Can you tell us a little about your most recent book on Harry Truman and how you came to be interested in the topic?

RK: I still do political history, the field that dominated the profession when I entered and continued to do so for two more decades. My latest book, published early this year, focuses on President Truman and civil liberties. I did the book because leaders in the Truman Library asked me and the topic fits one of my larger projects right now. They invited me because I have explored Truman and his presidency since I joined the University of Missouri faculty in 1958. Over these many years, I have done research and published on him, promoted Truman-related research by other scholars, including many of my graduate students, participated heavily in the research and educational programs of the Truman Library and Museum, and served on the board of directors of its Institute. Right now, I am well into work on two other books, one dealing with Truman's quest for peace, the other on Henry A. Wallace and the agricultural revolution. I may finish them.

For me, pursuing the study of history was a great choice, and so was joining the faculty at the University of Washington.