



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

## **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Reading Programs, Cultural Engagement, and Civic Participation in Latin America: A Comparative Approach

Institution: Rutgers University

Project Director: Marcy Schwartz

Grant Program: Fellowships

## **Public Pages: Reading and Community along the Latin American Streetscape**

“At the end of the day, we all use the subway doors as a mirror.” This very short story written by twenty-year-old María Teresa Bertucci appeared on billboards in Santiago subway stations, where commuters could read it from the opening train car doors as well as from the platform. Entitled “Equality,” it was awarded third place in the Santiago in 100 Words story contest in 2007. Since its beginnings in 2001, the contest has received over 50,000 stories annually. Winning stories are featured throughout the transit system, and are published in books distributed free on the subway. Sponsored by a combination of private and public funders, this popular program invites citizens to write imaginative vignettes about the city that are readily accessible to Santiaguinos. After years of vigilance and fear in the subway and other public areas during the Pinochet dictatorship, the story contest commemorates the return to democracy by reclaiming public urban space and encouraging civic participation in creative writing and reading. This project examines the far-reaching impact of public reading programs in Latin American cities over the last twenty years. The initiatives I analyze present creative ways of disseminating literature to a wider, more inclusive, audience. They defy the conception of reading as solitary and private by literally taking literature to the streets and creating new communities of readers. The programs all use public space, distribute creative writing to a mass public, foster collective rather than individual reading, and provide access to literature in unconventional arenas. My comparative approach examines municipally sponsored as well as independent initiatives in cities in Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. From informal and spontaneous to institutional and official, these programs invest in reading for both social and literary value. My research on these programs goes beyond their products (books, exhibits, installations) to focus on innovative uses of public space, participation across social class and generational lines, and reading as a response to violence and political repression. This project’s interdisciplinarity and broad scope will make it a significant contribution to the fields of Latin American literary studies, urban studies, cultural studies and public policy, with implications for education, literacy, public safety and political agency.

The historical context for this urban reading phenomenon has its roots in the “lettered city,” a power structure established in the colonial period that severely restricted access to and participation in literate culture, art and education to elite urban inhabitants (Rama). After independence, print media became an essential tool for developing national cultures throughout Latin America, and for creating and expanding urban public culture (Anderson). In my study I demonstrate how public reading reinvents, reappropriates and resignifies the institutions of the “lettered city.” The theories that I dialogue with in this study include Michel de Certeau’s work on urban movement, Jürgen Habermas’s study of the public sphere, Roberto Esposito’s theory of “*communitas*,” and Latin American theories of urban planning and cultural citizenship. Public reading challenges the historically classist realm of civic cultural engagement, extending literature into public arenas to generate interaction and debate. “Public Pages” approaches reading as a social as well as literary activity, revealing how culture responds to the neoliberal economy. Literature in Latin America intervenes in public space in the midst of economic crisis and in the aftermath of political violence. Increasing privatization, particularly during the neoliberal period since the 1980s, has constricted public initiatives and resulted in more widespread private, corporate funding. The current reading programs in Latin American cities demonstrate the contradictory impetus to break through the restrictions of the lettered city, redefining yet in some ways perpetuating its hold. This paradox is evident in the innovative exploitation of public space that invites public participation but still relies on the backing of “official” urban institutions and often corporate financing. Bogota’s mayoral policies of the early 2000s, particularly Antanas Mockus’s “culture of citizenship,” offer examples of alternative interventions including performative expression for combating domestic and street violence. However, this research also uncovers spontaneous, grassroots responses, such as neighborhood “popular” libraries and literary readings organized by local citizens’ associations in Argentina during the 2001-2002 economic crisis, where literature is a valued component of the solidarity movement. In Bogotá, People and Stories groups lead reading and discussion sessions in marginal neighborhoods in efforts to reestablish community dialogue and trust after years of political violence.

“Public Pages” seeks to tease out these conflicting tendencies in Latin American urban culture as literature emerges into public space via these programs.

While planners, anthropologists, sociologists and cultural critics recognize the development, dilemmas and dynamism of urban culture in Latin America, these studies tend to focus on one particular city or national culture. Luis Cárcamo-Huechante’s *Tramas del Mercado* studies the relationships among political economy, public culture and fiction in neoliberal Chile, and Beatriz Sarlo in *El imperio de los sentimientos* and other works studies reading habits and urban identities in Buenos Aires. Craig Epplin’s forthcoming *Late Book Culture in Argentina* (Continuum) demonstrates the current interest in the intellectual history of Latin American book culture. However, no one has studied comprehensively the role of reading in urban public interactions, and the implications for public culture in Latin America.

**Methods and Work Plan:** The methodologies applied to this project stem from my interdisciplinary interest and training in literary and cultural studies, urban studies, visual culture, and urban anthropology and expands on research from my previous books, *Writing Paris* (1999), *Inventiones urbanas* (2010), and *Photography and Writing in Latin America* (2006, co-edited). This project requires library and archival research as well as participant observation and interviews, and I plan to divide my time during the granting period between these complementary activities. I have research access at the Princeton University Library where I have identified key documents related to my project in their extensive Latin American Ephemera Collection. My preliminary research in Princeton last summer revealed indispensable newsletters, flyers, and pamphlets that document reading programs during the Argentine economic crisis, the two World Book Capital campaigns, independent book fairs and public creative writing workshops in all of the cities I study. I will spend two months in Princeton completing my review and scanning of these rare materials. Travel to Bogotá, Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Santiago will be essential to continue documenting these cities’ public reading programs. I will schedule return trips to each of these cities according to programming of public reading events. For example, I plan to attend the next Santiago in 100 Words book launch and the International Book Fair in Buenos Aires in April-May. During these trips, I will be consulting with contacts, gathering bibliographic materials, and photographing programs. I will use the time back in the US to collate and compile references and visual materials gathered in the field. I plan to spend five to six months completing the research, and another six months writing. I have already drafted two chapters and have one forthcoming book chapter and two articles under review based on my initial research. I would be grateful for this fellowship to relieve me from teaching and offer me valuable uninterrupted time for research, travel and writing. After successfully publishing four books and based on the progress of my research thus far, I am confident that I will complete the manuscript by the end of the grant period.

### **Chapter Outline:**

Introduction: Communities of Readers in Latin America: Public Space and Cultural Policy

1. *Reading on Wheels, Stories of Urban Convivencia:* Programs on public transportation reveal municipal efforts to foster reading in order to encourage local belonging and promote civic values through literature. This chapter discusses how the circulation of free books on buses and subways in Santiago, Bogotá, and Medellín intersects with transportation networks’ public relations, libraries, and mayoral campaigns for improving public space and combating violence.
2. *Recycled Reading: Cartonera Collectives and Urban Intervention:* An alternative publishing venture that began with Eloísa Cartonera in Buenos Aires in 2003, now some fifty independent collectives all over Latin America bind books in recycled cardboard. This chapter reviews this growing movement and highlight the Brazilian group Dulcinea Catadora for its artistic and literary responses to economic and housing crises in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.
3. *Capítulos Capitales: Latin American Cities Awarded UNESCO’s “World Book Capital”:* In its thirteen-year history UNESCO’s World Book Capital award twice has chosen Latin American cities (Bogotá in 2007, and Buenos Aires in 2011). This chapter studies these

two municipal campaigns to uncover how institutional cultural management promotes public reading.

4. *Reading under Crisis: Censorship, Solidarity and Reconciliation:* This chapter examines three contexts where reading has been a key factor in resisting state violence and responding to economic crisis. Argentina's libraries of books banned during the dictatorship (1976-1983) occupy spaces formerly used for detention and torture. After Argentina's economic crisis in 2001-2002, neighborhood associations organized a solidarity economy that along with *cacerolazo* protests sponsored public literary readings and community libraries. The Colombian initiative "Retomo la Palabra" established libraries and reading programs in village community centers to aid in reconciliation between former insurgents and victims of violence.

5. *Beyond the Plaza: Digital Reading Communities:* The globalized dimension of public reading moves beyond the local and exploits electronic media. This chapter discusses national reading plans in Chile and Colombia where public libraries turn reading into a collective experience through digital programs with youth and adults.

6. *Alice Underground: The Public Art of Reading:* Latin American visual arts depict reading in banners, sculptures, murals, mosaic tile installations, paintings and woodcut prints that intervene in public spaces to promote reading. This chapter considers the overlapping goals of public art and public reading in urban contexts.

**Competencies, Skills and Access:** This project builds on research for my previous books on the construction of urban cultural identity in Latin American fiction and photography. The research is also informed by fifteen years of experience facilitating bilingual public reading programs through *People and Stories/Gente y Cuentos*. The most essential skills for this project are language fluency; extensive knowledge of the cultures; and many years of community outreach and establishing contacts with individuals, libraries and institutions in the US and in Latin America. My competence in Spanish is near native, and my Portuguese is advanced in conversation and excellent in reading. I have been traveling to Latin America for research trips from several weeks up to several months since 1989; my research on this topic began in 2006, when I spent two weeks in Bogotá training reading facilitators to establish *Gente y Cuentos* there; since then I have made numerous trips to Latin America to further this project, including my participation as an invited speaker at the Bogotá International Book Fair and at a book launching for Buenos Aires World Book Capital. During these research trips I have acquired and maintained invaluable contacts at national libraries, archives, university research institutes, municipal and non-profit agencies. Among these key contacts are Ana Roda, director of the National Library and director of programming for the UNESCO World Book Capital in Bogotá; Josefina Delgado, undersecretary for the Minister of Culture of the municipal government of Buenos Aires; Patricia Velez, founder and director of *Gente y Cuentos-Colombia*; Carmen García, founder and co-director of *Santiago in 100 Words* in Chile; and the founders of several cartonera publishers in Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Santiago, all of whom I have interviewed and with whom I have regular correspondence. I have participated in local events in some of the cities where I have been researching, such as book launchings, teacher training workshops, book fairs and conferences, giving me first-hand experience with the reading programs and access to organizers and public officials for future consultation, materials and interviews. I have permission to consult archives in a number of libraries and research centers including the Space for Memory Institute in Buenos Aires, and the archives at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, as well as Princeton's Latin American Ephemera Collection.

**Final Product and Dissemination:** The results of this research will be a published monograph. I have consulted with editors of several university presses who have expressed interest in the manuscript. I also plan to design a public website to provide open-access information on these reading initiatives, libraries and organizations. I have been disseminating the initial findings of this research at conference presentations at the Modern Languages Association and the Latin American Studies Association meetings over the last few years, and will present in the coming year at both venues. My forthcoming book chapter will be published this year in the edited volume *Geografías imaginarias* (Santiago: Cuarto Propio).

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