



## Instructor Spotlight: David Akbar Gilliam



**“Black in Latin America: A Blending of Bloodlines, Cultures and Religious Traditions”** is a Focal Point Seminar that introduces students to the cultural, social and political impact of Africa and her descendants in the New World. It also challenges students to re-think what they know about the roles of people of African, European and Native American/Indigenous descent in the shaping of the modern Americas – especially Latin America.

For me, half the reward in teaching the seminar is hearing students react as they engage with the material and with each other. “I never knew the tango had African roots.” Or, “You mean Black communities exist all over South America, and even in Mexico, not just in the Caribbean?” One student was amazed to learn that the menudo she grew up eating, and considered a quintessentially Mexican dish, actually originated in the African slave communities of colonial Mexico.

The seminar aims to spark both the right-brain and the left-brain through audio, visual – textual and graphic – and gastronomical input. Historian Phillip Curtin provides a provocative statistical view: Indeed, of the first 6.5 million people who crossed the Atlantic and settled in the Americas 5.5 million were African. Over 50% of these Africans were taken to South America and 43% to the Caribbean Islands. Almost as many were sent to the island of Barbados as to the United States, while almost nine times as

many were enslaved in Brazil as in the United States.

Poet Gastón Baquero provides a powerful poetic image:

From the 16th century up to the present and now for all time, three fundamental groups of human beings have lived together in the New World: those who were already there, those who came to stay, and those who were brought by force.... None of the three groups would ever again be purely what it was, either pure Indian, or pure European or pure African.... Whether their bloods mixed or not, their souls, their words, their beliefs, their superstitions, and their feelings all intermixed...

Due to a growing interest in Cuba, and its evolving political relationship with the United States, in the last two seminars offered we have focused on Cuba as an example of racial and cultural interaction in Latin America. Our sources have included *The Maids of Havana*, a novel by Pedro Pérez Sarduy; *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (based on interviews of Esteban Montejo in the 1970s by Cuban journalist Miguel Barnet) and *Black in Latin America*, a four part PBS video series, and accompanying text of historical, political, social and cultural commentary with the same title, both by Henry Louis Gates. The film series and text cover Cuba as well as Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Peru, and Brazil.

So far, the student enrollment of every “Black in Latin America” seminar I have taught has reflected the diversity that is DePaul. Students may share personal experiences and expect confidentiality from their classmates. I encourage students to speak directly and with passion, but also with courtesy and respect. In the classroom, difference of opinion – with other students, with the texts, or with the professor (!) – can be an advantage for all. Through exposure to different points of view, we may all expand our own knowledge and perception.

— David Akbar Gilliam  
Associate Professor  
Dept. of Modern Languages

## From the Director

As the City of Chicago prepares for the NFL Draft, we’re busy planning our own Spring tradition: the annual Chicago Quarter Best Practices conference on May 29. If you’re teaching Chicago Quarter in the coming year, please plan to attend. We don’t require a great deal in terms of training, but we do ask that you attend this with your teaching team. As veterans of the program know, the purpose of these classes goes beyond the topic of your individual section. The overall goal is to help new DePaul students transition into becoming successful university students in an urban setting. That calls for all three teaching team members strategizing how best to prepare them. Your academic portion should be representative of a 100-level DePaul course (not easier than 100-level, but also not 300-level). If you haven’t responded yet to the Outlook invitation, please do so ASAP. If you can’t find the invitation, please email Maria Hernandez at [mhernand@depaul.edu](mailto:mhernand@depaul.edu).

Chicago Quarter faculty, you also should have received an email giving you the chance to connect with and request Staff Professionals and/or Chicago Quarter Mentors for your teaching team (this is not required). You can email requests to [nsfe@depaul.edu](mailto:nsfe@depaul.edu).

Focal Point Seminar faculty, we look forward to seeing many of you in a couple weeks at our quarterly Faculty Chat, which this time will be at 10:30 on Friday, May 8.

Finally, I encourage you to attend the 20th Annual Teaching and Learning Conference this Friday. This wonderful conference supplements the training we’re able to provide at Best Practices. For more information, click <http://teachingcommons.depaul.edu/Conference/index.html>.

—Doug Long

### Important Dates!

- Friday, May 8, 10:30-noon: Spring Quarter Focal Point Seminar Faculty Chat, Munroe Hall 124
- Wednesday, May 20, 6:00-8:00 p.m.: First-Year Programs Writing Showcase, Cortelyou Commons
- Friday, May 29, Chicago Quarter Best Practices, Lincoln Park Student Center. Check-in begins at 9:15; the last breakout session ends at 1:15.