Lex Williford, Department Chair & Prof. of Fiction

Katherine Elizabeth Seltzer: What drew you to UTEP’s Bilingual Creative Writing MFA?
Lex Williford: Originally, the English Department hired me, in 2000, but after a few years the creative writing faculty unanimously decided to create its own first-of-its kind bilingual program. We believed then as we do now that it was a good move, and our many successes since then seem to confirm our original instincts to take such a risk and make such a change.

KES: You became the interim department chair in Spring 2014, and then filled the position permanently in Fall 2014. You’ve been with the department a number of years. What changes have you seen, what changes would you like to make, and what sets this Creative Writing MFA apart from others?
LW: Our department chairs have three-year terms and since I came in midyear I’m going to stay on till August 2017—3½ years. By then, we’ll have elected another chair, and, believe me, we have some terrific people in our department to fill the chair position next time around.

Our department has grown almost exponentially. As the founding director of the online MFA, I helped get our grad student enrollment up to thirty students in that program before the UT Telecampus was defunded—almost as soon as it started—but since then we’ve continued to thrive on our own, and our terrific Online Program Director Daniel Chacón has doubled that number to sixty. And don’t let the increased quantity in any way suggest a decrease in quality. These students are remarkably talented, in both the online and bilingual on-campus programs, and they get better every year.

The change I’d like most to make is to find a more permanent funding source for a world-class reading series. It’s a daunting task in an era of tight budgets and budget cuts, and sources for grant funding are usually short term, not something like a large endowment. Unfortunately, our faculty spend a great deal of time each year getting funding for readings, time they could be spending with their students and their work. We’ve been fortunate to bring some of the most respected writers in the world here over the years, from Elena Poniatowska to our current U. S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera, but if we’re going compete with other Tier One MFA programs, we’ll need to bring in more visiting writers to attract the best students we can recruit.

I hope to have time to explore more...
options before my term is over.

KES: Do you think bilingualism is an important part of the coursework in a creative writing MFA? What is the typical classroom dynamic?

LW: Though my Spanish has improved over the years since I’ve been at UTEP, it’s still muy basico, but our students have been remarkably generous and patient with me, others and each other, helping us all grow in our language acquisition—all teaching each other. As I said earlier, I was hired into the English Department originally, and as a perro viejo who has trouble learning new tricks, I’m never satisfied that my Spanish is ever going to be strong enough, but I’d be willing to bet that our translations into English not only satisfied the poet who wrote them but, with a little work, could be published as English translations in literary magazines anywhere in the U. S. and beyond. I can’t think of another program that offers that kind of rich cultural, literary and linguistic experience, not even the new up-and-coming bilingual programs like the University of Iowa and NYU. We were the first bilingual program to try these experiments in bilingualism, and our experiences have helped us all to become better writers, poets and translators. In a surprisingly short time, we’ve established a strong international reputation.

KES: How does bilingualism affect students and how diverse is the program?

LW: Eighty percent of students on campus are Mexican or Mexican-American, yet I’ve also taught a good many güeros like myself, along with many talented African American writers and a few students from Japan, Viet Nam, China, and, of course, students from across the Americas. I’m not sure why, but as a white guy I prefer teaching in communities of color, perhaps because I feel more at home in places like St. Louis—where I was a visiting writer one semester at UMSL and lived in a mostly African American community close to Ferguson—or San Antonio—where I’ll be co-teaching a few classes next semester with one of our gifted online MFA graduates, Yvette Benavides—or El Paso—where I plan to stay till they kick me out or I keel over. It may seem strange to some to say I feel less at home around my own English only family—people who too often live in a world in which anyone who’s different is almost always the other, the enemy—but sadly it’s true. I simply don’t understand this kind of thinking, never have, especially the hostility I see against persons of color, immigrants and so on in our politics, so popular with the white conservative set.

Studies have shown that becoming bilingual, especially at a young age, makes synaptic connections like playing Mozart to a baby in a crib. Something magical happens, something, I believe, that makes us all more open, more empathetic, more intelligent in all the ways that matter. I wish I’d grown up in a bi- or even tri-lingual family. Learning a fourth
or even a fifth language apparently becomes easier, and we have less of a chance of seeing foreignness or otherness instead of sameness and equality, less of the fear that someone speaking another language is somehow talking about us. It's a ridiculous, egotistical form of paranoia I see far too often, one I'm afraid to say too often keeps us separate, distrustful, rather than open, nonjudgmental—not just tolerating but celebrating diversity and difference.

**KES:** I understand you recently had a piece published.

**LW:** It's a story from a collection I've been working on for too many years, a collection that mostly explores violence in the home, especially against the least powerful people in families: children and teens. It's really cheerful stuff as you might imagine, but I've already published most of these stories—many of them short-shorts—in litmags like *Quarterly West, Witness, Prairie Schooner, River Styx, Shenandoah* and *Glimmer Train Stories*. It's taken me many years to write some of these stories; they're all minefields of easy sentimentality and a kind of victim mentality that I'm always struggling to write away from, a hard writing assignment I've given myself that like most obsessions has chosen me and not the other way around. I can write these stories only for short stretches until I'm as depressed as the last living ground sloth, and then I have to move on or go nuts. Maybe that's why it's taken me so long to finish a second collection. I'm a slow, slouching writer. Dup-de-dup. The story, “A Good Green Switch from Mrs. Sauerwein’s Willow,” forthcoming in *StoryQuarterly*, is one I've sent out and revised many times till I got it as close to right as I'm going to get it, with just the right distance on the material, just the right level of understatement to keep it from being the over-the-top melodrama it was in earlier drafts. After a year or two hating earlier drafts of the story, I'm satisfied that it's more authentic and risky, that it refuses to make easy moves, that each scene is true, that I'm not publishing a story I'll regret publishing later. SQ's one of my favorite literary magazines. It's an honor to have one's work appear in its pages. **KES:** What other writing projects are you currently working on?

**LW:** I'm illustrating a kids' picture book I've already written—I got a grant from UTEP to do that this year—and when I have time I work on stories and a novel. I don't talk much about my work until it's finished and even then I prefer to let it speak for itself. Writing fiction is like raising children. You try to find out what the story wants and give it that—whatever it is, your best—and if you're lucky it'll become independent from you, ready to stand up and deal with the world on its own.

**KES:** What's your favorite thing about this program?

**LW:** The students—they're the only reason I keep at it. They feed me and my work as much, I hope, as I feed them and theirs. I'm happy to be teaching writer and a writing teacher, and I consider each job as equally important, as essential as the other. I'm lucky in that, and I get to do what I love in either case. But as with the writing, I try to let my students speak for themselves, in class, in their stories. The best way to teach sometimes is simply to get out of the way, to shut up and listen.

**KES:** What is your relationship with El Paso, Texas?

**LW:** I was born here, at Biggs Air Force Base, during a diphtheria epidemic at Fort Bliss, where my father was stationed in the mid-fifties. He and my mother moved me back to his hometown Dallas, where I grew up, when I was just six months old, but as I've said I don't much care for Dallas, even though many of my stories are set there. It took me fifty years to return to El Paso—a stroke of great, good luck, because I discovered that I'd come back home.
Overview: Bilingual Creative Writing MFA, 2015
by Katherine Seltzer

Fall began with readings, a rebooted organization, and a look toward II Encuentro de Programas de Creación Literaria y Escritura Creativa de las Américas 2016 in April.

Visting poets included Jen Hofer and John Pluecker of Antena Collaborative, Cuban Poet Laureate, Luis Lorente, and poets Ángel Petisme and Antonio Orihuela for La Ruta del Norte: El Ejército Ilumindo, in September. Poet Fernando Valverde read in October.

Second-year MFA candidate Alessandra Narváez-Varela translated into English and read the work of Lorente alongside him on Sept. 24.

“It was an invigorating experience. I was nervous as hell,” Narváez-Varela said.

The Bilingual Graduate Creative Writing Society (BGCWS) organized a reading of student work at Trade Craft Coffee Shop & Bar.

Director of Graduate Studies Dr. José de Piérola and first-year MFA candidate César Ruiz Ledesma are preparing II Encuentro de Programas de Creación Literaria y Escritura Creativa de las Américas 2016 for the spring. According to Ruiz, most of the guests have confirmed participation.

“The II Encuentro is a meeting of universities in [North and South] America that offer masters in Creative Writing to compare how each program works [through] event readings, conferences and talks,” Ruiz said.

The Bilingual Creative Writing Master of Fine Arts was featured in the Sept./Oct. 2015 issue of Poets & Writers Magazine in an article by Dana Isokawa called “A Distinguished Degree: Eight Elements of Unique MFA Programs.” Isokawa emphasized that UTEP offers the first fully bilingual MFA in the United States.

Dr. José de Piérola, Director of Graduate Studies

Author of the collection of short stories Máquina del tiempo (2015) and the novels Píshtaco Slayer (2011), A Kiss Hell (2010), Summa caligramática (2009), South and North (2008), The Way Back (2007), Shatranj: The Game of Kings (2005). He has translated into The Stranger by Albert Camus (forthcoming 2015) into Spanish and The Art of Fiction by Walter Besant and Henry James (2007). His novel A Kiss Hell won the Short Novel Prize Awarded by the Reserve Bank of Peru. His short story "In the Belly of the Night” won the Max Aub International Short Story Award in Spain, and his short story "Pencils” won the Short Story Biennial Awarded by Cope in Peru. His fiction has been anthologized in Peru, Mexico, Spain, France and the U.S. He earned a Ph.D. in Literature at the University of California, San Diego. His work revolves around displacement, immigration and political violence. He is interested in the construction of self, culture, and misunderstanding. His current work in progress includes a novel set in September at the end of the Eighteenth Century in the Peruvian Andes, and Minding Fiction, a critical study about the representation of the mind in fiction.

Fall 2015 Courses
Narrative Techniques & Poetics
Forms & Techniques of Poetry
Documentary Poetics
Writing the Novel
Studies in Form: Hemingway
The Contemporary Latin American Novel

Faculty
Rosa Alcalá, Daniel Chacón, Andrea Cote-Botero, Grad. Dir. José de Piérola, Tim Z. Hernandez, Sasha Pimentel, Luis Arturo Ramos, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Jeff Sirkin, Dept. Chair Lex Williford

BGCWS
Director, Andrea Cote-Botero

Rio Grande Review
Director, Jeff Sirkin

Revista de Literatura Mexicana Contemporánea
Director, Luis Arturo Ramos

The Dishonest Mailman
Rosa Alcalá & Jeff Sirkin

Readings & Events
Antena Collaborative, Sept. 18
Luis Lorente, Sept. 24
La Ruta del Norte, Sept. 29
MFA Candidate Reading, Oct. 15
Fernando Valverde, Oct. 23
Eileen Myles, Nov. 15

Words on a Wire hosted by Daniel Chacón & Tim Z. Hernandez

Awards, Conferences, Publications
• My Other Tongue, forthcoming book of poems (2015), by Rosa Alcalá
• De puño y letra a novela (2015), by Luis Arturo Ramos
• Sasha Pimentel wins Regents’ Outstanding Teaching Award, Aug. 19
• Tim Z. Hernandez gives keynote lecture & panel at Jack Kerouac Conference in Lowell, MA, Oct. 7-11
• Tim Z. Hernandez honors United States Poet Laureate, Juan Felipe Herrera in Fresno, CA, Oct. 30
Bilingual Graduate Creative Writers’ Society
President, Fatima Masoud
Vice President, Andi Castillo
Sec., Alessandra Narváez-Varela
Tres., Katherine Elizabeth Seltzer
Rio Grande Review
Senior Editor, Mijail Lamas
Junior Editor, Daniela Ruelas
Junior Editor, Crisieda Santos
Revista de Literatura Mexican Contemporánea
Missael Duarte
Gianfranco Languasco
Marco Murillo
Edgar Saavedra
Graduate Student Creative Writing Instructors
Malena Alaniz, Giannnina Deza,
Alessandra Narváez-Varela,
Aaron J. Romano-Meade,
Katherine Elizabeth Seltzer
Online MFA Representatives
Daniela Armijo Gonzalez
Aldo Amparan
Awards, Conferences, Publications
Rio Grande Review No. 45
Summer 2015
Note From the Border
Board of Contributors
Director, Jose de Piérola
Katherine Elizabeth Seltzer
Alessandra Narváez-Varela
Paula Cucurella

Mijail Lamas is senior editor of the student run Rio Grande Review and co-editor of the literary website Circulo de Poesia. From Coyoacán, Mexico City, Lamas is a poet in his second year of residency.

Poeta, traductor y crítico mexicano, Lamas nos platica sobre su experiencia como estudiante radicado en El Paso, Texas, sus proyectos, filosofías y un viaje a Struga Poetry Evenings 2015, el festival internacional de poesía más antiguo del mundo que toma lugar anualmente en Struga, Macedonia.

Q &A

Alessandra Narváez-Varela: Siendo un poeta establecido en su país de origen, con tres colecciones de poesía publicadas y numerosas inclusiones en antologías, cuéntanos un poco sobre tu decisión de continuar tus estudios en UTEP.

Mijail Lamas: Había pasado un tiempo trabajando en cargos públicos, haciendo gestión cultural. Paralelamente desarrollaba mis proyectos de escritura, pero siempre me quedaba poco tiempo para realizarlos, así que el programa de maestría en Creación Literaria de UTEP me pareció un buen espacio para desarrollar y profundizar en algunos temas de creación e investigación literaria.

ANV: Recientemente asististe a Struga Poetry Evenings, un evento internacional de poesía de gran importancia. ¿Nos podrías describir el ambiente de este festival y el propósito de tu visita?

ML: Struga Poetry Evenings es el festival más antiguo de Europa, en él han participado poetas de la talla de Pablo Neruda, Allen Ginsberg, Hans Magnus Enzensberger o José Emilio Pacheco, entre otros. Es un evento muy animado, donde las lecturas son en espacios abiertos donde asiste mucha gente que se encuentra vacacionando en la ciudad, ya que Struga y Orhid son dos ciudades a la orilla de un hermoso lago, así que mucha gente va a vacacionar a estas ciudades. Así que todos los escenarios están repletos de público y la convivencia con los demás poetas, que vienen de todas partes del mundo, se hace muy agradable.