IN MEMORIAM  
JAMES R. NICOLOPULOS

Professor James Nicolopulos passed away on December 1, 2010. He was an accomplished scholar, teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend who epitomized all of those terms in his professional life. His broad and interdisciplinary scholarly interests spanned space and time. He was a specialist on the literature of the Renaissance and the Baroque on both sides of the Atlantic and also devoted his intellectual energies to the study of the corrido, the narrative ballad tradition in what the great borderlands folklorist Américo Paredes called Greater Mexico.

He was as comfortable talking about the sixteenth-century poetry of Garcilaso de la Vega or Alonso de Ercilla, as he was discussing the latest narcocorridos from Mexico that told of the exploits of drug kingpins and border agents. His landmark book, The Poetics of Empire in the Indies: Prophecy and Imitation in La Araucana and Os Lusiadas, remains a definitive study of Ercilla’s New World epic. Published in 2000 by the Penn State University Press, it revealed a comprehensive and encyclopedic understanding of classical, European, and Latin American literary and cultural traditions. In his highly original work on the corrido, Professor Nicolopulos analyzed the “secondary orality” of the recorded corrido and broke new ground in the tradition of Mexican-American folklore studies inaugurated by Paredes and Vicente T. Mendoza. He also was the co-author of a prize-winning book-length oral history and “family autobiography” (a term he coined) of Mexican-American popular musician Lydia Mendoza. His scholarship was the result of years of field research and rigorous historical documentation and exhibited an unusual depth of knowledge that explains the enduring importance of his scholarly publications. An innovative scholar, he also created an online archive of corridos and webpages on numerous corridos to be used by researchers and instructors. This innovation extended to his teaching as well, and his students deeply admired his erudition, dedication, and essential humanity.

In his research on both the corrido and colonial poetics, Professor Nicolopulos pursued a consistent line of inquiry into forms of heroic verse narrative from antiquity to the present, explaining how both major political events and the lives of common people are shaped and preserved through poetry and music. His book, The Poetics of Empire in the Indies, mentioned above, is a nuanced and comprehensive investigation into issues of imitation, poetic and political rivalry, and the interweaving of prophecy and empire in colonial verse narratives of the Renaissance. More specifically, it is an exacting analysis of the competitive textual relationship between the two most successful Iberian epic poems of the late sixteenth century dealing with Western expansion into the New World and the East: La Araucana, by Castilian courtier/soldier/poet Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga, and Os Lusiadas, by celebrated Portuguese poet, courtier, and soldier Luis de Camoens. Professor Nicolopulos’ book carefully orchestrates a comparative reading of both poems to argue for “a more nuanced appreciation of Renaissance practices of imitation” in the study of colonial literature that could better reveal the pivotal promotion of imperial ideology in such practices. He successfully inscribed his work within the new theoretical orientation of recent scholars who call for the systematic study of imitation and prophecy in New World writing as textual strategies to legitimize European hegemony. His principal contribution to this line of scholarship was the critical disclosure of a dynamic of imperial competition—of contesting European claims to global lordship—behind poetic rivalries such as the one between Ercilla and Camoens.
In his extensive published research on the *corrido* and folk music, James Nicolopulos explored how orality and writing interact with technology in the production of what he called (after Walter Ong) the “secondary orality” of the commercially recorded *corrido*. Forging new critical ground in the face of a traditional lack of scholarly appreciation for this popular lyric form, he demonstrated that the *corridos* recorded during the “Golden Age” of recording (roughly the 1920s-1940s) serve not only as fixed texts, but also as the foundation for further variants as the recorded versions themselves eventually entered back into the oral tradition. Professor Nicolopulos participated actively in the collection of data and the analysis and preservation of these recordings. He was one of the first to document the vibrant tradition of *narcocorridos* that present drug traffickers as antiheroes, opening a dynamic field to a generation of scholars who continue to draw on his important precedents.

Professor Nicolopulos also co-authored a major book belonging to the burgeoning genre of “oral” cultural history, *Lydia Mendoza: A Family Autobiography*, published in 1993 by the renowned minority press, Arte Público, in Houston. This book was the winner of the 1993 Southwest Book Award and the Association for Recorded Sound Collections Award for Excellence in Recorded Sound Research. Its success is due to the appeal of its subject matter—the history of Mexican-American folk music in the Southwest as synthesized in the figure of Lydia Mendoza, the most popular Mexican-American singer of the post-depression era—and to the rigor and thoroughness of its discographic and socio-historical research, in the manner of recent methods in cultural anthropology.

He also collaborated frequently in several productions of the American folk music label Arhoolie Records, founded and still directed by the renowned collector, archivist, and publisher of vernacular music, Chris Strachwitz. Professor Nicolopulos did the field research and wrote the liner notes for several of the ground-breaking Arhoolie recordings of classic and up-and-coming borderland corrido bands, such as *The Devil’s Swing: Ballads from the Big Bend Country of the Texas-Mexican Border* (Arhoolie CD 480), *The Roots of the Narcocorrido* (Folklyric CD 7053), and *Ballads and Corridos Recorded on the Texas/Mexico Border: 1948-1975* (Arhoolie CD 367). He also assisted Strachwitz in the creation of the “Frontera Collection,” an online audio archive of Mexican-American music. The Arhoolie Foundation helped fund much of the research project Professor Nicolopulos conducted but left unfinished at the end on his career, a history of the commercially recorded *corrido* in Texas that focused on the pioneering work of the Mexican-American owned *Ideal* and *Falcón* labels from 1946 to 1985. The Arhoolie Foundation in El Cerrito, California, today houses what remains of Professor Nicolopulos’ research papers and files for future consultation.

Border and *corrido* scholars, as well as specialists in Mexican, Chicano, and cultural studies, owe Professor Nicolopulos a great debt for his study of the *corrido* as a form of cultural agency and popular expression. His extensive research on the catalogs and histories of Texan and border recording companies and their Tejano immigrant artists proved wrong the assumption that, by commercializing the *corrido*, the modern entertainment industry would compromise the popular character, social value, and epic trueness of the *corridos* composed during the Mexican Revolution. His work showed that the *corrido heroico* has remained very much alive, with its subaltern oppositional potency even invigorated, by the way it has been preserved, renovated, and disseminated through the recording technologies responsible for its secondary orality.

It is important to note that Professor Nicolopulos was capable of this important insight in *corrido* history not in spite of being a remarkable scholar of Renaissance humanism but precisely because he was such an outstanding one. It was this profound understanding of how imitating the classics became a way of giving birth to a powerful new vernacular during the Renaissance that helped him understand and account for the importance of secondary orality in *corrido* history. Without his expertise in Renaissance epic studies, he would not have been such an exacting *corrido* scholar; without his enthusiasm for Mexico and its *corrido*, he would have not appreciated Ercilla’s achievement with such lucidity. His career decisions and accomplishments demonstrate that humanistic scholarship and cultural studies are not antagonistic but complementary and mutually reinforcing models of research and analysis.

Professor Nicolopulos had a rare gift for inspiring Latino/a students to examine the nuances of their own culture, at the same time encouraging non-Latino/a students to see Latin American literature and culture as an integral part of Texan and U.S. history. His deep love and knowledge of Latin America reflected his extensive experience living in Mexico. It was this unusual background, much of it acquired before he earned his doctorate at the University of California at Berkeley, that lent him a deep sense of identification with popular traditions.
and historically marginalized populations informing his chosen field of study—indeed, Professor Nicolopulos internalized his Latin American experience to such an extent that he was equal parts storyteller and mentor, conversationalist and scholar.

Among Professor Nicolopulos’ most important contributions to the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, the Center for Mexican American Studies, and the Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies were the organization of several important conferences in his areas of expertise, including “Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz: Her Life, Works, and Times” (1995) and “The Corrido as Contemporary Narrative in Greater Mexico” (1996). He arranged to have vernacular practitioners of the corrido participate and perform in some of these academic events. He regularly returned to Berkeley to teach seminars on colonial Latin American literatures and contemporary border culture as a visiting faculty member. As his brother, Peter, noted in an eloquent obituary published in the Austin American-Statesman on December 6, 2010, Professor Nicolopulos “was a creative pioneer who early integrated the Internet into his teaching, starting with the construction of his first academic website in 1996. His students not only had easy and free access to the riches of his collections and commentaries, but were required to produce their own original sites to be linked together to build an ever-widening and deepening online body of content, knowledge, and thought intended to be freely accessible not only to academia, but to all.”

His erudition could be intimidating. In a recent issue of the UT Austin student-edited journal, Pterodáctilo, one of his graduate students compared Professor Nicolopulos to the Ahuehuete (Montezuma cypress), an imposing tree native to much of Mexico and parts of the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. For the student, Professor Nicolopulos, like the venerable tree, provoked a mixture of respect, awe, and astonishment. Yet if his students revered him as a source of knowledge, they also praised his kindness, patience, and accessibility. He impressed not just with the depth of his insights, but also with the breadth of his knowledge. He was equally eager to discuss colonial epic poetry, novels of the Mexican revolution and border ballads, Cervantes and Texas politics, Aristotle and telenovelas. He was, as one student put, “the perfect combination of an intellectual giant and a normal person with interests like anyone else.” He was also, students wrote, extremely generous with his time, fiercely dedicated to his students, and sensitive about giving feedback. Recognizing that his students at The University of Texas at Austin came from widely divergent backgrounds and levels of preparation, he never belittled them for their lack of knowledge or spoke badly of students or colleagues. In short, he was a rarity in academia: a top-notch mind who was also a selfless and remarkably democratic mentor and educator.

As a colleague, Jaime, as he was affectionately known, was someone we valued for many reasons. For one, he was always straightforward and trustworthy. He expressed himself forcefully but never in a petty or mean-spirited manner. Another reason why we appreciated him was his great generosity. He gladly shared his extensive and impressive knowledge with colleagues and students alike. During his illness, conversations about him always came back to what we might call the content of his character. He will be remembered as a gentleman, as a colleague who never said anything derogatory about anyone, and as a friend who was loved because he had such a big heart.

In his years in the department, Jaime gave us much, and one of the most wonderful gifts he brought was his loving wife, Christina, who also taught as a lecturer for many years. In Christina, Jaime found the perfect partner, someone who shared his intellectual interests and passions and someone who brought joy into his life. In her he found someone whose heart was at least as big as his own. Jaíme’s friendship, dedication, goodwill, and innovative scholarship will be dearly missed.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors César Salgado (chair), Cory Reed, and Jason R. Borge.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts on August 23, 2012, and posted under “Memorials” at http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.