

José Quiroga (1959-2024)

Leading Cuban Literary and Cultural Studies Scholar

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José Quiroga passed away in his home in Atlanta, Georgia, at the age of sixty-four, on January 11, 2024, after experiencing prolonged health challenges that greatly impacted his mobility and well-being in his later years. José was a renowned literary and cultural studies scholar who greatly advanced the fields of Cuban studies, Puerto Rican studies, and Latin American, Caribbean, Latinx, and Spanish LGBTQ and poetry studies through his extremely original scholarship and public humanities work. A consummate mentor and teacher, his engaging writing and public speaking were marked by a creative, almost poetic, style that brought together sharp insights, radical progressive politics, subtle wit, nuanced attention to detail, and a profoundly Caribbean Neo-Baroque delight in the beauty of an unexpected turn of phrase. He used this engaging style to great advantage, whether it was in a monograph, a scholarly article, a newspaper column, a *crónica* about a trip to Havana, the preface to a friend's book of essays or short stories, the review of an art piece, or a blog post. As a Cubanist, his essays focused on writers and artists such as Reinaldo Arenas, Lydia Cabrera, Ana Mendieta, and Virgilio Piñera, but also on political matters such as the assassination of the twenty-six-year-old exiled Cuban pro-democracy activist Carlos Muñoz Varela in Puerto Rico in 1979 and José's own experiences as a gay member of the Antonio Maceo Brigade in 1980, a group of young Cuban exiles that returned to Cuba in order to reconnect with their roots and build factory workers' dwellings outside of Havana.

As a pioneering Latin American and Caribbean queer studies scholar, José's forays into film criticism and literary and cultural analysis ranged from a trenchant critique of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío's 1993 film *Fresa y chocolate* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*) for its revisionist and ultimately reactionary politics, explorations of Teresa de la Parra and Lydia Cabrera's relationship, American poet Elizabeth Bishop and Brazilian Lota Macedo de Soares' relationship, and gay Caribbean adoration of bolero and popular singers such as Bola de Nieve, La Lupe, and Olga Guillot to discussions of "Carlos" (an anatomically correct gay novelty doll), Ricky Martin's negotiations of the closet, Latinx queer activism in Argentina and the United States, and Pedro Almodóvar's classic 1987 homoerotic film *La ley del deseo* (*Law of Desire*), starring Eusebio Poncela, Carmen Maura, and a very young Antonio Banderas. José's efforts also included very meaningful and longstanding scholarly and pedagogical collaborations, for example with Daniel Balderston, María M. Carrión, Licia Fiol-Matta, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, and Jorge Salessi. He was also generous with graduate students, having directed or co-directed more than twenty dissertations.

Born in Havana, Cuba, on May 3, 1959, José Antonio Quiroga moved with his family in the early 1960s to San Juan, Puerto Rico, graduating from the Academia del Perpetuo Socorro in 1976. He went on to receive a B.A. in English and Latin American Literature from Boston University in 1980 and an M.A., M.Phil. (1987), and Ph.D. (1989) in Spanish from Yale University. At Yale, he wrote a dissertation on the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro's 1931 magnum opus *Altazor o el viaje*

en paracaídas (“Los hilos del paracaídas: Vicente Huidobro y *Altazor*”) under the supervision of Roberto González Echevarría. José’s interest in poetry and vanguards was longstanding and spanned from Huidobro and Octavio Paz to Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges, Xavier Villaurrutia, César Vallejo, Julia de Burgos, and Nicolás Guillén, as evidenced by his publications on these authors. José was also an accomplished poet in his own right, publishing poetry in *The Americas Review*, *Chasqui*, *Linden Lane Magazine*, and *Mariel* in 1984, 1990, and 1991, and in anthologies such as *Paradise Lost or Gained?: The Literature of Hispanic Exile* in 1990. He left behind two unpublished books of poetry, *Flauta robada* and *Carne de papel*, which were donated by his family with the archival assistance of Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Anastasia Valecce and will be available along with all of his papers at the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami Libraries in 2025.

After graduating from Yale, José taught at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., where he co-directed one of the first Cuba Study Abroad Programs in the U.S. with Professor María M. Carrión. In 2002, he became a professor of Spanish and later of Comparative Literature at Emory University in Atlanta and served on the advisory board of the Studies in Sexualities Program. At Emory, he founded and directed the Argentina Study Abroad Program (2004–2009), served as Department Chair of Spanish and Portuguese, and as Director of Graduate Studies. He was a member of the Postcolonial Studies Working Group and convened the Cultures in Motion Initiative. José also held visiting professorships at Columbia University, Johns Hopkins University, Georgetown University, the University of California, Berkeley, the University of Maryland, and the Universidad de la Pampa (Santa Rosa, Argentina). He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in literary studies in 2011 for a project on art and dissidence in Cuba, the Caribbean, and Argentina between 1967 and 1989.

A prolific scholar, José published and edited numerous books in English and Spanish, including *Cuban Palimpsests* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), *Tropics of Desire:*

Interventions from Queer Latino America (NYU Press, 2000), *Understanding Octavio Paz* (University of South Carolina Press, 1999), *Sexualidades en disputa* (with Daniel Balderston) (Buenos Aires, Libros del Rojas, 2005), *Law of Desire: A Queer Film Classic* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009), and *Mapa callejero: crónicas sobre lo gay desde América Latina* (Buenos Aires, Eterna Cadencia, 2010). His essays and articles appeared in journals such as *Social Text*, *MLN*, *La Torre*, *Hispania*, as well as in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Nation*, and *The San Juan Star* and in pioneering anthologies such as *¿Entiendes? Queer Readings*, *Hispanic Writings*, *Hispanisms and Homosexualities*, and *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America* in the 1990s and 2000s. At the time of his death, José was working on “The Book of Flight,” a project investigating the political relationship between dissidence and escape in Cold War and Contemporary Latino America, with chapters on Pop aesthetics within the 60s and 70s (Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig, Marta Minujín), structuralism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis (Severo Sarduy, Copi, Marosa di Giorgio, Lorenzo García Vega), and gender and sexuality (Néstor Perlongher, Reinaldo Arenas, Manuel Ramos Otero). He was also completing a co-edited book with Francisco Morán titled *The Havana Reader: Society, Culture, Politics*.

José served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at the City University of New York (CUNY). In Washington, DC, he was the co-chair of Gente Latina de Ambiente, which engaged in grassroots organizing and AIDS-related work while providing health and social services to the Latina/o LGBTQ community. He also helped supervise the Cultura es Vida AIDS Prevention Program under the sponsorship of the National Latino/a Lesbian and Gay Organization (LLEGÓ). In addition, he was part of the organizing committee for the 2014 American Studies Association annual meeting held in Los Angeles, California, titled “The Fun and the Fury,” and served on the Modern Language Association Delegate Assembly.

José's scholarly editorial work was significant. With Licia Fiol-Matta, he co-edited *New Directions in Latino American Cultures*, an academic series at Palgrave Macmillan that published over thirty volumes on topics such as popular culture, Chicanx sexualities, bilingualism, and psychoanalytic studies by scholars such as Rubén Gallo, Raquel Z. Rivera, Mabel Moraña, Idelber Avelar, Doris Sommer, Jacqueline Loss, Rafael Rojas, Silvio Torres-Saillant, and others.

José is survived by his mother, the renowned literary scholar Rita Molinero, who taught Latin American literature at the Universidad Interamericana in San Juan and is the author of *La narrativa de Enrique Labrador Ruiz* (1977) and *José Lezama Lima o el hechizo de la búsqueda* (1989), as well as editor of books on Virgilio Piñera and Reinaldo Arenas. He is also survived by his sister Lourdes Quiroga; by his nephew José Castello; by his brother-in-law Thomas Graham; and by numerous colleagues, students, and friends. A memorial service organized by María M. Carrión and the Department of Comparative Literature was held at Emory University on April 15, 2024, which included testimonies, appraisals of his academic contributions, songs, and poetry by Cuban, Puerto Rican, Latinx, and other friends, colleagues, and former students, including Geoffrey Bennington, Elissa Marder, Daniel Balderston, Natalie Catasús, Licia Fiol-Matta, Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús, Victoria Alarcón, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Jossianna Arroyo-Martínez, Agnes Sastre Rivera, Juan Carlos Rodríguez, Anastasia Valecce, Christina A. León, Aurora Lauzardo, and myself. Cuban authors such as Norge Espinosa Mendoza have also published moving testimonials highlighting José's charm, his wide-ranging efforts to connect scholars and artists across the Americas (especially in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Argentina), and his passion for tobacco, which accompanied him to his last days.

As a person who met José while I was a graduate student in New York City in the nineties, around the same time I met Sylvia Molloy, Daniel Balderston, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, Rubén Ríos Ávila, Licia Fiol-Matta, and José Esteban Muñoz; as someone who benefitted from José's introductions to writers and scholars in

Havana and Buenos Aires (for example, to Norge Espinosa, María Moreno, and Pablo Pérez), and from his many letters of recommendation; as a friend who was practically adopted as a family member in San Juan, spending many Christmas eves with his mother and stepfather Hilario Martínez and with his sister Lourdes and nephew José, comiendo frijoles negros y arroz blanco y pernil y tomando cafecito y también celebrando el año nuevo en la azotea de Gerardo en frente del Marshalls (antes New York Department Store) de la avenida Ponce de León; and as a formerly twenty-something queer Puerto Rican who most likely learned about La Lupe and most certainly about Virgilio Piñera from José, I can only be eternally grateful for his generosity, for his brilliance, and for his insistence that I pursue my creative writing (and later, my drag performance) as much as my scholarship.

Donations in honor of José A. Quiroga can be sent to Waves Ahead Puerto Rico, Freedom University Georgia, CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies at CUNY, and the Buford Highway People's Hub.

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