

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305-2060

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION
ARTURO ISLAS
(1938 - 1991)

Arturo Islas, Jr., Professor of English, died at his Stanford residence on February 15, 1991, of complications arising from AIDS. A great undergraduate teacher, a pioneer Chicano novelist, one of the founders of the Chicano community here, and one of the most beloved members of the Stanford faculty, Arturo would have been 53 years old had he lived to celebrate his birthday last Friday. A few months before his death, he summed up: "I think I've had a magical life, a miserable life and a magical life."

Born May 24, 1938, in El Paso, Texas, Arturo was a product of the Mexican-American border culture described so vividly in his two published novels, *The Rain God* (1984) and *Migrant Souls* (1990). His grandmother, who appears in the novels as the matriarch Mama Chona, escaped revolutionary Mexico with seven children. She taught them and their children not only to treasure their own cultural heritage but also to master the ways—and especially the dominant language—of their new homeland. Arturo heeded her teachings well, and with splendid consequences. After distinguishing himself as a student at El Paso High School, he won an Alfred P. Sloan Scholarship and entered Stanford in 1956 at a time when Chicano students were few and far between. His fellow undergraduates, finding his first name strange and unpronounceable, abbreviated it to "Art," thereby turning him into a satisfactorily Anglo-Americanized Art Islas. Over the years, he gently resisted and overcame this erasure of his personal and cultural identity, eventually becoming one of the few Stanford people usually referred to only by a first name—a mark of affection as well as of recognition that there were few other Arturos here with whom this one might be confused. Although he came to university with the intention of becoming a neurosurgeon, it soon became clear that his gifts were for language and literature rather than for Chemistry and Biology. As an English major he found

mentors and supporters in two of Stanford's greatest professors, Yvor Winters and Wallace Stegner. He minored in French literature, acquiring an ability to read French with ease and a life-long passion for the autobiographical fiction of Marcel Proust. His achievements as an undergraduate were recognized by election to Phi Beta Kappa and acceptance into the Stanford Ph.D. program in English in the autumn of 1960.

After completing his course work for the Ph.D., he began to teach literature, speech, and humanities at, among other venues, the Sequoias retirement home and the Veterans Administration Hospital in Menlo Park. He later recalled that his students were frequently deeply depressed or drugged by tranquilizers. He at last succeeded in eliciting a live response by bringing in a basket of fruit and spices for them to handle and smell—sage of the desert, green opulence of avocado. Trivial in itself, this incident points to his career-long dedication and resourcefulness as a teacher and to his remarkable talent, revealed much later, for registering evocative sensory detail in fiction. In 1967 Arturo returned to Stanford, passed his oral examination, and began writing a dissertation on the contemporary Jewish-American novelist Hortense Calisher. When this dissertation was accepted in 1971, Arturo Islas became the first Chicano in the United States to earn a Ph.D. in English.

Arturo was very nearly denied this signal "first" – and life itself – when in 1969, at the age of 31, he was diagnosed as having intestinal cancer. He underwent five operations within three years as well as months of enervating, nauseating follow-up radiation therapy. This was his second experience of a life-threatening illness; for as an eight-year-old boy he was struck by polio, a disease that left him with a shortened leg and permanent limp. These near encounters with death deepened the sense of mortality that was part of his Mexican cultural inheritance, but they were never able to make him self-pitying or humorless about life. What he and his friends could not foresee was that these ordeals were strengthening, seasoning him morally and spiritually to contend with the disease that finally would destroy his body but that was as powerless as the polio and cancer to destroy his gaiety, charm, and abiding concern for others.

Arturo was the ideal person to nurture the small Chicano community that was beginning to take shape on the campus during the 1970s. In his pastoral-administrative role, Arturo served as an official and unofficial advisor to Chicano undergraduates and fellows, Chair of the Chicano Faculty Recruitment Committee,

Co-Director of the Stanford Center for Chicano Research, and active member of various University committees concerned with Chicano affairs, minority student and faculty recruitment, and Affirmative Action. He also regularly taught courses addressed to the needs and interests of Chicanos, such as Freshman English for Chicano Students, Chicano literature, and Creative Writing for Bilingual Students. As a Chicano and former Stanford student himself, Arturo understood these needs and interests as few others could. The Dinkelspiel Award for Outstanding Service to Undergraduate Education that was presented to him in 1976, the year when he became Stanford's first tenured Chicano faculty member, was earned many times over during his twenty years as a professor.

Arturo's wider fame as a teacher came to him principally because of his courses on "mainstream" American literature: it delighted him, he said, to teach white Anglophone students their own literature. Of special importance among these courses were American Literature 1855-1917, Masterpieces of American Literature, and Hemingway and Fitzgerald. The last sometimes enrolled over 300 students, substantially more than any other English Department course of the 1980s. In the classroom he possessed a matchless power of empathy – with the texts under discussion, with students each of whom felt that he or she somehow retained an individual relationship with Arturo even when the class overflowed Cubberley Auditorium. Knowing how wonderful he was with huge audiences, the graduating seniors chose him as their Class Day speaker on four occasions. But Arturo himself found large lecture courses physically and emotionally exhausting and preferred to teach undergraduate seminars. A particular favorite, "American Lives," which examined the autobiographical writings of authors with a wide range of ethnic identities, was a core seminar for the American Studies Program. In this as in all his courses he worked quietly and with surpassing effectiveness to take his students behind ethnic and racial stereotypes; and in "Masculine/Feminine," a course he team-taught with Diane Middlebrook, he brought the same compassionate, funny, and devastating critique to bear on gender stereotypes.

He was a passionate multiculturalist, but he generally steered clear of the conspicuous roles in campus political debates that might easily and even logically have been his. For although he had profound political insight, he was not a politician – indeed, not enough of one to suit some of his colleagues. By temperament a mediator rather than a rallier of forces, he feared and loathed the

oversimplifying, dehumanizing tendencies of political polarization. And despite his success with large audiences, he was a highly private and vulnerable person who was happiest in smaller gatherings of friends and family members. Indeed, the gift he claimed for himself as certainly his greatest was his gift for friendship. Another reason the political arena did not appeal to him was that he was a fine stylist – not only with words but also with the clothes he wore and the spaces he lived and worked in. Once, when he agreed to teach a graduate seminar, he perplexed some of these admirers by offering a course on Proust and Henry James, politically “disengaged” novelists noted for nuance and complexity in both their styles and readings of human motive. No wonder that he admonished the graduating class of 1988 to “read good novels by good writers. Don’t rot your brains with schlock.”

Arturo’s love of cultural plenitude found expression in the classroom but perhaps still more powerfully and distinctively in the novels that he began writing during the early 1970s. These novels, the two published and two more unfinished at the time of his death, are essentially a single work in the tradition of the family chronicle novel sequence. Hometown readers recognize El Paso places, members of the Islas family, and events in local history when they read *The Rain God* and *Migrant Souls*. They are right to do so – up to a point – since, as the author cheerfully acknowledged, there is a close relationship between the story of the fictional Angel family and that of Islases. However, actual event and character are often revised to suit the needs of the overall fictional design: Miguel Chico Angel, for instance, shares many traits with Arturo himself, but as we trace his career through the novels we begin to see him become embittered and defeated by his illnesses and social marginality in a way that the author-model never did. What gives artistic shape to the Angel saga is the controlling metaphor of the border. In a *Campus Report* interview (March 1990), he explained that he “wanted to show people, characters, who are in conditions of *being on the border*, and the border doesn’t necessarily mean the area joining Mexico and Texas, although that geographical border is a very important part of the characters of these people.” In one sense the border is everywhere, since one exists wherever differences of any sort meet, struggle, or meld; but in another sense it is, in these novels, very firmly located in a particular region and ethnic culture. He did not regard this particularity as limiting. In an interview in *The Stanford Daily* (November 7, 1984), he observed that “Tolstoy wrote about a particular time and place and a particular psychology. He knew Russian history, he knew the Russian character, and he wrote the greatest novel ever written.

Is he an ethnic writer? Yes! Of course later, because he did his job so beautifully, we—anybody, from any culture—will respond to the humanity, to his vision. And then we call that universal.”

Finding a publisher who would risk publishing this “border” fiction took nearly a decade and conceivably might never have occurred if Stanford Professor of Philosophy Patrick Suppes and his wife Christine had not been running the Alexandrian Press out of their Palo Alto home and if Stanford Professor of English Albert Guerard had not brought *The Rain God* to their attention. The book was an immediate success, was nominated by the Bay Area Book Reviewers’ Association as one of the best novels of 1984, was awarded the Southwest Book Award for Fiction by the Border Regional Library Association, and has since gone through many printings and become a contemporary classic of Chicano fiction. The success of this novel opened many previously closed doors. Its successor was contracted by William Morrow and, when it appeared early last year, was the first novel about the Chicano community written by a member of that community to be published by a major New York publishing house. The University of Texas at El Paso wanted him to become its Director of Creative Writing. He was invited to give readings and contribute to panel discussions at gatherings throughout California and the Southwest. He felt, he told his friends, that his career had reached another level. Not long afterwards he discovered that he had AIDS.

Arturo knew that we all live on the border, many borders. But some are more dangerous than others and demand more skill, agility, and courage to negotiate. For him the pertinent borders were between Anglo-American and Chicano culture; between the homely provincial world of Southwest Texas and the magnetic cosmopolitan worlds of San Francisco, New York, and Paris; between the perspectives of gays and straights; and, of course, between living and dying. He was at home, or at least was the most charming and thoughtful of visitors, on both sides of these borders. A magical life.

George Dekker, chair
Larry Friedlander
Diane Middlebrook
Nancy Packer

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