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Remembering a Chicano Academic Legend

Álvaro Huerta reflects on the life and contributions of Mexican scholar, activist and poet Juan Gómez-Quiñones.

By [Alvaro Huerta](#) // December 11, 2020

“Anti-Mexicanism is a form of nativism practiced by colonialists and their inheritors.” -- [Juan Gómez-Quiñones](#)

ACCEPTED*

Last month, the Mexican people on both sides of *la frontera* and our allies lost a brilliant scholar, activist and poet with the passing of Juan Gómez-Quiñones, or JGQ, as people often called him. It was one of the saddest days of my life.

We lost one of the greatest intellectuals not only in the Americas but also the world. The fact that JGQ was born a Mexican in *el sur* (Parral, Chihuahua, Mexico) and died a proud

Mexican/Chicano in *el norte* (Los Angeles, Calif.) in a time when the Mexican continues to be otherized, marginalized and pejoratized serves as a grim reminder of this great loss for *la raza*.

For more than 50 years, from graduate student to full professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, department of history, JGQ dedicated his life to uplifting the people of the sun through his superior scholarship, dedicated mentorship, political actions and eloquent words. While his contributions are many, for the sake of space, I'll list only a few. He:

- wrote classic books and articles on Chicana/o history, labor, politics and culture;

- helped establish the theoretical foundations of Chicana and Chicano studies, along with the living legend **Rodolfo "Rudy" Acuña**, whom JGQ fondly admired;
 - taught and mentored thousands of students who became leaders in their own right; supported and participated in countless political actions for social, economic and racial justice; was lead co-author of *El Plan de Santa Bárbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education*;
- co-founded UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC);
co-founded CSRC's *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*;
was a National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies Scholar Recipient; and
wrote eloquent prose -- something that escapes most academics.

Did I mention that he also wrote beautiful **poetry**?

My father's land / is crossed / ribbon like / by stone fences / the wither in the sun / White stones that glisten in the sun, / Stones that ballast a sea of brown hills. / My father whip laid them, / My mother's tribe fed them.



As in the case of another brilliant Mexican in *el norte*, **Gloria Anzaldua**, JGQ provided us with a powerful voice against a racist American system that has attempted (and failed) to erase our history. He took the ashes of our history, once burned by the European colonists and their inheritors, and created scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, essays and eloquent poems in elite spaces limited to the best and the brightest Western civilization has to offer. He has done so, and has continued to do so, through his publications, speeches and memories without succumbing to fear or forgetting where he came from.

A Shared and Proud History

I first met JGQ in 1985, when I enrolled at UCLA as a freshman majoring in mathematics from East Los Angeles -- a place where JGQ also hails from. I must say that I was originally shocked to see a Chicano professor at an elite university. Since most of my K-12 teachers were white, I never knew that Chicana/o professors even existed. I was equally shocked when he assigned us books written by brown scholars. Many moons later, I'm following the example of the great Chicana and Chicano authors that I once read in JGQ's classes, especially his fine works.

While JGQ was stoic, like my late Mexican father, once you scratched beneath the surface, he was a sweet and caring teddy bear. That said, during my initial encounters with JGQ, I was intimidated. More than 30 years later, I can still recall knocking on his office door on the sixth floor of Bunche Hall, where he would gruffly say, "Yes!" Once I got to know him and gained his confidence, I would frequently visit him with my fellow student activists or **MEChistas** in that office -- where we minored in "JGQ studies" -- just to hang out and talk about politics or sports.

Whenever those of us in **MEChA** (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlán*) at UCLA during the mid-1980s organized a protest on campus or in the community, we could always count on JGQ for his unconditional support. For example, when we organized a **hunger strike** -- one of the first, if not the first at UCLA or any UC campus -- in defense of undocumented immigrants, we knew JGQ had our back. When we didn't show up to class, we were happily surprised that he didn't scold or hector us. He encouraged us, teaching us a key lesson that I pass on to my students and colleagues: knowledge comes from practice!

Later, several of us, as former UCLA students, became community activists and **organized Latino gardeners against the City of Los Angeles's draconian leaf blower ban** during the mid-1990s.

(City penalties for Latino gardeners caught with using a leaf blower? Misdemeanor charge,

\$1,000 fine and up to six months in jail.) To challenge this racist law, we sought help from JGQ to lobby city council members who voted for the ban on Dec. 3, 1996.

On a more personal level, when I got married in 1992 to Antonia Montes -- fellow MEChista, educator, activist -- I invited JGQ. To my surprise, he showed up. After that, we became academic homeboys and later colleagues, and he counseled me throughout my graduate studies at UCLA (M.A.) and the University of California, Berkeley (Ph.D.). He supported me without reservations when I was on the academic job market and beyond. Whenever I experienced racial microaggressions, academic hazing and pinche bullying by senior faculty of all colors, I never flinched, as I knew that I could count on my academic homeboy JGQ.

In short, JGQ was my professor, mentor, academic homeboy, fellow activist and colleague. He taught us that we, as Chicanas and Chicanos, also have history -- a proud history that must be taught in K-12, higher education and our communities.

Despite our generational divide, we shared many similarities: Mexican roots; native sons of East Los Angeles; doctorates from the University of California; veteran activists; practitioners of respect and *confianza* (something often absent in the academy); lovers of music (e.g., oldies), art (e.g., Mexican/Chicana/o art), food (anything Mexican), drink (e.g., mezcal), culture (our own) and sports (e.g., boxing); readers of poetry; educators and mentors; and our uncompromising defense of *los de abajo*, where he paved the road for me and countless others to emulate.

“Human issues can be resolved with humanistic solutions. Immigrants are not strangers; they are family,” he wrote in the forward to [my first book](#).

Moving forward, I'll humbly do my part to maintain and expand his shining legacy through my lectures, writings and musings. ¡Viva JGQ!

Bio

Álvaro Huerta is an associate professor in urban and regional planning and ethnic and women's studies at California State Polytechnic University. Among other scholarly publications, he's the author of [Reframing the Latino Immigration Debate: Towards a Humanistic Paradigm](#) and [Defending Latina/o Immigrant Communities: The Xenophobic Era of Trump and Beyond](#). He holds a Ph.D. in city and regional planning from the University of California, Berkeley, and an M.A. in urban planning and a B.A. in history from the University of California, Los Angeles.

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