

# *In memoriam: Fernando Arenas*

## (1963-2019)

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The untimely death of Fernando Arenas on October 30, 2019 has left his partner, mother and brothers, who were by his side at the time, with much pain and an indescribable sense of loss. For his colleagues, his death is a major loss in Lusophone Studies, the field that he helped to forge with unrelenting conviction, generosity and kindness. As I share the outline of a memory that others will want to fill-in, I mourn a close friend and colleague of more than two decades without whom life in Minnesota will never be the same.

In early summer of 2018, at the beginning of what would have been a year-long sabbatical spent from his home base in Minneapolis, Fernando was diagnosed with one of the most aggressive forms of brain cancer, glioblastoma. Ever a passionate and committed member of the profession, he still went on as planned to host the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the American Portuguese Studies Association at the U of Michigan in October, where he also presented his latest research towards a book that would tentatively have been titled, *The Rise of Afro-Portugal: From African Migration to European Citizenship*. Fernando's satisfaction with the success of the event was such that he was full of hope that, among other travel plans, he would survive long enough to go on a book tour to Brazil this fall. Copies of that book, *África Lusófona além da independência*, published by the U of São Paulo P, unfortunately arrived too late.

From 1995, when Fernando Arenas began his career in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese Studies at the U of Minnesota, to the time he left for a position at the U of Michigan, in 2011, he developed an original and influential research agenda. From the start, with his first book, *Utopias of Otherness: Nationhood and Subjectivity in Portugal and Brazil*, published in 2003 by the U of Minnesota P, his interest in imaginaries of nation-ness were never mobilized for divisive nationalisms but rather to enable cross-national and cross-cultural

comparisons. The same was the case when his scholarly interests became increasingly Transatlantic and African in focus and included, besides literature, film and music in historically-grounded interdisciplinary perspectives. A Guggenheim Fellowship in 2005-06 allowed him to visit most Portuguese-speaking African countries to meet with authors, directors, performers and cultural critics as well as become familiar with sources impossible to find in the US. That experience was decisive for the writing of *Lusophone Africa: Beyond Independence*, published in 2011 also by the U of Minnesota P. Its breadth has so far been unsurpassed; it is likely that it will continue to be an oft-cited source for the study of Lusophone African literatures and cultures.

Fernando was an inspiring teacher who created a combined Spanish/Portuguese major at the U of Minnesota, ensuring that our Portuguese program not only survived but had a unique appeal to students interested in Global Studies and other interdisciplinary programs. At Michigan, he likewise worked hard in program building and successfully introduced a Portuguese Minor in the Department of Romance Languages, where he hoped to create a graduate program. A polyglot, Fernando took the time to learn Cape Verdean creole to better understand, write about, and teach culture from the archipelago. In the last two years or so before he was diagnosed, whenever we got together, he would introduce into our conversation phrases in creole; most memorably, he would do the same with Brazilian Portuguese. It was the music he heard and wanted to share in each language that inspired his code-switching. After all, it was music what first attracted him to a strange language when, as a young teenager living in Bogotá, Colombia, he tuned in to a program from Portugal on his shortwave radio. And thus began his life-long dedication to what he would come to label, in a gesture of distinction, *Lusophone Studies*.