



Dancing with Ghosts: A Critical Biography of Arturo Islas

Frederick Luis Aldama

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This first critical biography of Arturo Islas (1938-1991) brings to life the complex and overlapping worlds inhabited by the gay Chicano poet, novelist, scholar, and professor. Gracefully written and deeply researched, *Dancing with Ghosts* considers both the larger questions of Islas's life—his sexuality, racial identification, and political personality—and the events of his everyday existence, from his childhood in the borderlands of El Paso to his adulthood in San Francisco and at Stanford University. Frederick Aldama portrays the many facets of Islas's engaging and often contradictory personality. He also explores Islas's coming into the craft of poetry and fiction—his extraordinary struggle to publish his novels, *The Rain God*, *La Mollie and the King of Tears*, and *Migrant Souls*—as well as his pivotal role in paving the way for a new generation of Chicano/a scholars and writers.

Through a skillful interweaving of life history, criticism, and literary theory, Aldama paints an unusually rich and wide-ranging portrait of both the man and the eventful times in which he lived. He describes Islas's struggle with polio as a child, his near-death experience and ileostomy as a thirty-year-old beginning to explore his queer sexuality in San Francisco in the 1970s, and his fatal struggle with AIDS in the late 1980s. Drawing from hundreds of unpublished letters, lecture notes, drafts of essays, novels, and poetry archived at Stanford University, Aldama also deals frankly with the controversies that swirled around Islas's impassioned love life, his drug addictions, and his scholarly and professional career as one of the first Chicano/a professors in the United States. He discusses the importance of Islas's pioneering role in bridging Anglo, Latin American, Chicano/a, and European storytelling styles and voices. *Dancing with Ghosts* succeeds brilliantly both as an account of a fascinating life that embraced many different worlds and as a chronicle of the grand historical shifts that transformed the late-twentieth-century American cultural landscape.

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