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### Obituary of Aurora G. Morcillo (1962-2020)

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**Aurora G. Morcillo**  
**(1962-2020)**

Aurora G. Morcillo, Professor of History and Director of the Spanish and Mediterranean Studies Program at Florida International University, and a pioneer of modern Spanish women's and gender history. After an accidental fall in her home, she died on March 3, 2020. She was 57. Aurora was an internationally renowned scholar, teacher, and mentor, an active member of the ASPHS, and most of all, a beloved person.

Born in Granada, Spain to working-class parents who lived under the shadow of the Franco regime, Aurora spent her formative years during the transition, aware of the role that the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent dictatorship played in shaping her family's and community's cultural and political views. She completed her undergraduate degree in History and Geography at the University of Granada in 1986 and received her MA in Contemporary History there as well in 1988. While working toward her MA, she noticed that the University of Granada still treated women's issues as secondary, and became an activist in response. She, along with women faculty and graduate students, facilitated the creation of the Center for the Study of Women (opened in 1987). Aurora's studies hit a roadblock when she realized that the topic she was most passionate about, women and gender relations under Franco, was still too sensitive for most Spaniards. So she decided to leave Spain. In 1989, she was admitted to the Department of History at the University of New Mexico to pursue her Ph.D. under the late Dr. Robert Kern. Upon graduation in 1995, she accepted a post-doctoral fellowship at the Spanish Colonial Research Center at UNM, followed by a three-year visiting appointment in the same university. While at UNM, she met her husband, Charles (Chuck) Bleiker, whom she adored and credits for her illustrious career—"Chuck is a feminist who values my career and independence as much as his own"—and bore Carlos, the son who would make her eyes light up when you mentioned his name.

In 2001, she landed a tenure-track job in Modern European History at Florida International University, where she remained for the rest of her life. Not only did she contribute to the vibrant History Department, she helped build a flourishing Women's Studies Program as Associate Director (2003-2008) and Interim Director (spring 2008), and later became the Director of the Spanish and Mediterranean Studies Program in the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs. In her time at FIU, she published two monographs—one of which was translated into Spanish—two edited volumes, countless articles, and was in the process of finishing another monograph. She also did community action work. In conjunction with FIU and the Spanish Consul, and with a large grant from Banco Popular, she helped to create cultural and academic exchanges between the

South Florida community and Spain. She was a favorite among many History Department students and also worked closely with the Spanish Department. She supervised numerous dissertation and MA theses in the History Department and was a member of dissertation and MA committees for students in the Spanish Department. With all her students she explored new methodologies and sent them off to conduct exciting research, publish and participate in scholarly debates.

Aurora was an incredibly productive scholar who also managed to be a generous mentor, bridge-builder, and all-around *simpática* person whom many feel honored to have known. Through her scholarly reputation, her excellent people skills, and sheer force of will, she was able to make FIU one of the few places in North America where students could receive a Ph.D. in Spanish and Mediterranean History—all at a time when the study of modern Spain has declined in United States' universities.

We cannot forget that she was a core member of the ASPHS. Not only did she participate in numerous panels and function as a member of the Executive Committee for a term, she also hosted two conferences, one in Santa Fe, NM (2001), and the legendary conference in Miami (2007). She also used the ASPHS conferences to mentor people, especially graduate students: she gently incorporated her FIU students into the professional life of Spanish and Portuguese history.

Aurora transformed our understanding of the Franco regime. All her monographs explored in some way the relationship between gender and power, and she consistently relied on Michel Foucault's theories of biopower to explain how the state and the Catholic Church wielded their power to shape the female body during the Franco regime. Her first book, *True Catholic Womanhood. Gender Ideology in Franco's Spain* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), analyzes how Franco's program of National Catholicism depended on well-defined notions of gender and the creation of an official discourse of femininity, what she would term, "true Catholic womanhood." Later, Spain's integration into the Western consumer economy in the 1950s required a redefinition of gender ideology. Through a careful analysis of legislation, educational practices, archival materials, and oral histories, she illustrated how Spanish women contended with the paradox of being both vessels of reproductive life and keepers of the hearth, while simultaneously participating in a consumer economy that often required them to work outside the home to pay for the new consumer goods. She aptly demonstrated how women straddled the odd divide between traditionalism and consumerism and how women tried to create a space for themselves within the constraints of a long dictatorship.

Her second book, *The Seduction of Modern Spain. The Female Body and the Francoist Body Politic* (Bucknell University Press, 2010), which was translated into Spanish as *En cuerpo y alma: Ser mujer en tiempos de Franco*

(Siglo XXI, 2015), continued her exploration of gender relations as they permeated the formal institutions of church, political parties, the economy, and schools, and the informal institutions of the media, movies, and advertisements. She argued that the changing identity of women, shaped by the modernizing forces of an emerging consumerist economy and a growing popular culture, eroded the official power of the state and church. This change in gender politics eased the transition from patriarchal autarchy to a representational democracy. Women's bodies were the site of both dictatorial oppression and of resistance and liberation. The originality of this work came from the examination of the female body as a metaphor of the Francoist body politic, the view that women were powerful agents of change rather than just victims of oppression, and the suggestion that popular culture competed successfully against formal culture in the modernizing of Spain.

In 2014 she edited and contributed to *Cultural and Social Memory of the Spanish Civil War: Realms of Oblivion* (Brill), a compendium of essays by sixteen scholars from Spain, the US, and Canada. The essays examine and rethink political and social narratives prevalent about the Spanish Civil War at the turn of the twenty-first century and address the historical and collective memory of the conflict as well as the dictatorship and post-transition to democracy.

In addition to being a serious scholar, she was also a dedicated teacher, and this is made obvious by her recently published sourcebook with co-editors Asunción Gómez, Paula de la Cruz Fernández and José Manuel Morcillo Gómez, *The Modern Spain Sourcebook: A Cultural History from 1600 to the Present*. The work makes once-inaccessible sources of Spanish culture and history available to English-speaking students. The work is organized thematically, and then chronologically within each theme, from the eighteenth century to the present, covering topics in literature and art, labor and business history, feminisms, education, politics...and so much more.

Before her life was cut too short, Aurora had finished a draft of a manuscript that her husband and others are now working to get into final shape. Tentatively titled, *Of All Things Visible and Invisible: Women's Life Narratives in Franco's Spain*, it is a collection of interviews from women who fought in the student resistance against Franco and working class women who exercised acts of daily resistance and empowerment against a totalitarian regime. The interviews were conducted between 1987 and 2004.

For many of us, the loss of Aurora began this 2020 *annus horribilis*. But those people closest to her, her husband Chuck and her son Carlos, have taken their grief and poured it into something that honors her memory: they have created a graduate scholarship to support the next generation of scholars to study Spanish women's history. As Chuck stated, "Aurora may not be with us anymore, but she can continue to inspire another generation of scholars to follow

in her wake.” Florida International University will still need contributions to help sustain the Aurora Morcillo Memorial Fellowship at Florida International University. Those interested in commemorating Aurora’s life and work should visit the [Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs Donation](#) page and follow the procedures outlined there. We are sure that this Fellowship will prove a fitting tribute to Aurora and prove an enduring memorial to her legacy.

Those of us who knew her will miss her dearly. Her meteoric light burned out too quickly. She is survived by husband Charles Bleiker, son Carlos Bleiker Morcillo, mother Aurora Sánchez Gómez, father Manuel Morcillo Miranda, sister Emilia Morcillo Gómez, brother José Manuel Morcillo Gómez, and a host of students, colleagues, scholars, and friends who mourn her.

**Sandie E. Holguin**  
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