

HOMENAGEM / TRIBUTE

In Memoriam: Bobby J. Chamberlain, Ph.D. (1946-2022)

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Dr. Bobby John Chamberlain died on August 7, 2022, at age 75. His family reported that he suffered from dementia, compounded by a catastrophic brain injury. Like many colleagues, former students, and friends, I received this sad news two days later via email from the University of Pittsburgh's Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures, where he taught for 33 years until his retirement in 2018. He is survived by his wife Kay, daughter Katie, son Robert, five grandchildren, and his sister and brother. He was preceded in death by his parents and an infant grandson. We extend our heartfelt condolences to his family.

How much difference can one teacher make? Thanks to Dr. Chamberlain, my midlife dream of learning enough Portuguese to be able to research my hidden Azorean ancestry led not only to unearthing my lost heritage but also to an unexpected translating career. For more than a decade and a half, Dr. Chamberlain guided my academic progress—first in the classroom, then as a mentor on genealogical research (one of his personal interests)—and eventually my professional development, first as a mentor, then as a collaborator with me on numerous projects.



Dr. Bobby J. Chamberlain with some of his third-year Portuguese students at the University of Pittsburgh, Fall 2002. Photo by John J. Baker.

Unwittingly or otherwise, in retrospect Dr. Chamberlain may well have been “paying it forward” for his own college experience. After graduating from Los Angeles public schools in 1964, he enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he considered majoring in Spanish or French. As part

¹ Portions of this article were adapted from the author's personal remembrances of Dr. Chamberlain, published in the August 15, 2022 edition of *The Portuguese Tribune*.

of his study of romance languages, he registered in his first semester for beginning Portuguese, taught by a newly-hired doctoral candidate at the University of Southern California, Eduardo Mayone Dias (1927–2021). The experience permanently altered Chamberlain’s career trajectory.

This was not Chamberlain’s only connection to Portugal at UCLA, however. Another faculty member there who influenced his education was Azorean emigrant Dr. Alberto Machado da Rosa (1924–1974), a native of Angra do Heroísmo, Terceira. Among other classes he taught was a rigorous graduate course in which students read Camões’ entire *Os Lusíadas* in Portuguese, replete with its many hundreds of mythological allusions.

The eldest of three children, Bobby John Chamberlain was born in Huntington Park, California, on October 30, 1946, to Robert P. and Dorothy J. Chamberlain, originally from Texas. At UCLA Chamberlain earned his bachelor’s degree and then his Ph.D. in Brazilian and Spanish Linguistics and Literature. While in graduate school, Chamberlain was twice a Fulbright Scholar, enabling him to conduct research in Brazil—even meeting Jorge Amado, whose writings would become one of Chamberlain’s research specialties. He received the California Governor’s Award for his doctorate in Brazilian and Spanish Literature and Linguistics.

One measure of the caliber of UCLA’s program was the number of Chamberlain’s grad school contemporaries who also went on to careers as academics: Heraldo da Silva (1937–2021), San Jose State University; Francisco Cota Fagundes, University of Massachusetts Amherst; Manuel da Costa Fontes, Kent State University; Ron Harmon, California State University, Fullerton; and, Lasse T. Tihonen, Baylor University. In addition, one of the undergraduates in the department, Rosa Maria Neves Simas, would later earn her Ph.D. at the University of California, Davis and the University of California, Berkeley, then became a professor at the University of the Azores. Alvin Ray Graves (now at West Hills College-Coalinga, after decades in business) earned his Ph.D. in Geography at UCLA; when I met him in 2004 he still recalled Chamberlain, memorable for his red hair and beard, as having been his Portuguese TA.

After completing his doctorate, Dr. Chamberlain taught at the University of Southern California, then for several years at Michigan State University. From there he was hired by the University of Pittsburgh, where he spent the bulk of his career. Emeritus professor Dr. Keith A. McDuffie, a longtime chair of Pitt’s Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures, recalled to *The University Times*, Pitt’s newspaper for faculty and staff, that Dr. Chamberlain was an asset to not only the department but also “the Center for Latin American Studies and the University Center for International Studies. When he came he gave structure to the program and permanence, which was big. He was a nationally known figure at the time I hired him. He had published quite a bit. He’d also taught and we’d had good reports on his teaching.”

Another emeritus professor of Hispanic Languages and Literatures at Pitt, Dr. John R. Beverley, told *The University Times* that before Dr. Chamberlain arrived, “few universities had programs in Portuguese language and literature. By dint of his patient and dedicated work, Pitt now has an undergraduate minor in Portuguese and a series of graduate courses in Brazilian literature that most grad students take as part of their preparation for the Ph.D. Our department decided to move from a Spanish peninsular focus to a Latin American focus in the late 1980s. Brazil is the largest and most advanced country of the region, so it was decisive for both the department in its new orientation and the Center for Latin American Studies to offer that country as an area of study.”

Among his administrative duties at Pitt, Dr. Chamberlain served as head of the Portuguese program, then of the Brazilian studies program. He also directed the university’s student field trips to Brazil for the Center for Latin American Studies. For many years he was secretary-treasurer of the Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana. In other professional service, from 1979–1984 he was national chair of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese’s Task Force for the Promotion of Portuguese, and was a member of the editorial boards of Arizona State

University's *Chasqui Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana* and the University of Pittsburgh's *Revista Iberoamericana*.

Dr. Chamberlain's departmental biography at Pitt lists his areas of research interest as the Portuguese language, literary theory and modern Brazilian prose fiction. His scholarly books range from Brazilian literature (including studies on Jorge Amado) to curriculum building, and both English-Portuguese and informal Portuguese dictionaries. His numerous journal articles deal with postmodernism, anthropophagy, canon formation, periodization and the role of U.S. Brazilianists.

Dr. Chamberlain's links between Dr. Eduardo Mayone Dias and me came full circle three times over the years. The first occurred in Fall 2000, with his use of the textbook *Brasil! Língua e Cultura* by Tom Lathrop and Dr. Dias for Pitt's first year Portuguese course. The text was the counterpart to Lathrop and Dias' earlier textbook *Portugal! Língua e Cultura*, and the choice reflected the university's switch away from Iberian focus, prompted by its Center for Latin American Studies.

The next time was in mid-2008, when Portuguese Heritage Publications of California [PHPC] asked me to translate Dr. Dias' slender history, *A Presença Portuguesa na Califórnia*. In weighing my decision, I consulted Dr. Chamberlain, who encouraged me to do it, emailing, "I wholeheartedly encourage you to accept the invitation [...]. As you know, Eduardo was one of my professors at UCLA, and I have always been a booster of his." I asked Dr. Chamberlain to be a co-translator (along with Diniz Borges, who updated a lengthy section about Luso-Californian authors), and Dr. Chamberlain consented.

When I consulted Dr. Dias about my choice, he approved, adding, "If you see Bobby, please tell him I send him 'um grande abraço.'" While I didn't give Chamberlain a literal hug of course, I conveyed the message, which pleased him greatly. *The Portuguese Presence in California* was published in September 2009, and became among PHPC's largest publications, with three printings.

My final collaboration with Dr. Chamberlain was a profile of Dr. Dias, "Towering Scholar," for PHPC's 2016 anthology *Untamed Dreams: Faces of America*. Upon Dr. Dias's death in April 2021, I emailed the sad news to Dr. Chamberlain, but was puzzled to receive no reply.

Dr. Dias had been a stalwart in the Luso-American community for decades, especially in California, as well as a regular contributor to the *Portuguese Tribune*. Due to the looming press deadline for the *Tribune's* section in tribute to him, I obtained permission from PHPC to update the essay for publication as "A Scholar and a Gentleman," including Dr. Chamberlain's name as the article's co-author. After the issue was published, I emailed the page to Dr. Chamberlain, but received no reply.

I received one last brief message from Dr. Chamberlain in February 2020, when Tagus Press published *Smiling in the Darkness*, the English translation of Adelaide Freitas's novel *Sorriso por dentro da Noite*, on which he was one of my co-translators. After Tagus sent him a complimentary copy, I received a brief note from his email address confirming that he received it; I was relieved even to have heard from him, although he did not respond to my follow-up email.

In the past year, when I forwarded the call for papers for the *Gávea-Brown* issue honoring UCLA's Dr. da Rosa (organized by Dr. Francisco Cota Fagundes), and later the announcement of its publication in April 2022, I heard nothing from Dr. Chamberlain, which by then I found troubling. Only since the announcement of his cause of death do I understand that the sad reason I heard so little from him since his retirement in 2018 must have been due to the onset of his dementia.

A number of translation collaborations between Dr. Chamberlain and me—including an updated edition of Dr. Onésimo T. Almeida's book of essays *The Weight of the Hyphen*, and Álamo Oliveira's poetry collection *andanças de pedra e cal* and his play *Bocas de Mulheres*, as well as assorted *crônicas* and short stories—remain to be published. They will constitute a fitting tribute to a teacher who made such a huge difference in this student's life.

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