Dr. Eliud Martinez, professor emeritus of creative writing at UC Riverside, passed away on December 18, 2020. Dr. Martinez was born in Pflugerville, Texas, on January 31, 1935, the oldest of six children. At four years of age, his family moved to East Austin, Texas, where Eliud, who learned English when he started school, was identified by his teachers as a promising pupil. His parents had had limited educational opportunities themselves, and encouraged Dr. Martinez to excel in school. Dr. Martinez also demonstrated early creative talents, and a photograph of him with one of his drawings was featured in the Austin Statesman when he was only ten years of age.

Dr. Martinez matriculated as an undergraduate student at the University of Texas, Austin, but left after one year to serve in the US Marines from 1953-56. He was stationed primarily in Japan. Upon his return, he received a BFA degree in Studio Art (painting) with a minor in Art History and Criticism from the University of Texas, Austin. His mentor, Dr. Donald L. Weismann, encouraged Dr. Martinez to consider graduate school, and remained an important mentor and friend to Dr. Martinez. After completing his undergraduate degree, Dr. Martinez did graduate work at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México from 1960-61, studying the history and criticism of Mexican art, as well as the culture of the Nahuatl, one of the indigenous peoples of Mexico. He returned to the United States to continue studying and teaching art history at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He found the program too limiting and left school, living what he described as a Bohemian lifestyle in Chicago and then New
York, where he met his future wife, Elisse (née Weintraub). The two were married on December 25, 1965. Dr. Martinez ultimately returned to his studies and received his PhD in English and Comparative Literature from Ohio University in 1972.

Dr. Martinez joined the faculty at UCR in 1972, where he remained until his retirement in 1995. His scholarship and teaching transcended disciplinary boundaries. He taught in the Department of Comparative Literature and Languages, chaired the Chicano Studies program for a number of years in the 1970s, and helped develop UCR’s Department of Creative Writing.

A specialist in the narrative cycle of the Mexican Revolution, with a special focus on Mariano Azuela, Dr. Martinez published The Art of Mariano Azuela: Modernism in La malhora, El desquite, La luciernaga (1980). A decade later, he published what became a classic novel of the Chicano experience, Voice-Haunted Journey (Bilingual Press, 1990). He edited the anthology American Identities: California Short Stories of Multiple Ancestries. Dr. Martinez also published numerous essays and literary criticism in other volumes, including a volume published in tribute to former UCR Chancellor Tomás Rivera, and literary periodicals, such as Latin American Literary Review. His collection of short stories, Guero Guero: The White Mexican, will be published in 2021 by Inlandia Institute.

In describing his own writing and thinking, Dr. Martinez wrote that, "In addition to my interest in international arts and letters, I am fascinated by cemeteries and by the quiet, unrecorded lives of ordinary people that are factually circumscribed by dates of birth and death. What sorrows and tragedy did they know in their lives, what joys and satisfaction? I am fascinated by the wisdom of unlettered people like my mother and father. I cherish their marvelous storytelling gifts.” Dr. Martinez documented everyday experiences, which helped him develop what he referred to as “autobiographical fiction,” in his journals, as well as in his extensive correspondence with family members and friends, including Dr. Weissman. Some of his papers are part of a collection at UCR’s Tomás Rivera Library.

As a faculty member, Dr. Martinez made significant contributions to the curriculum at UCR. In 1975, he introduced the first multi-ethnic literature course at UC Riverside, “Chicano Literature in Comparative Ethnic Perspective.” A decade later, he designed “Introduction to Race and Ethnicity,” a course that subsequently became central to the undergraduate breadth requirement in ethnic studies. In 1991, his course “Creative Writing and Ancestry” became a required course for majors and minors in Creative Writing. He valued his relationships with students greatly, and was known as an encouraging and thoughtful mentor who was an especially important mentor for Chicano/a students. He was also involved in initiating and planning the Tomás Rivera conferences, which have been held annually at UCR since 1988 to celebrate the contributions of Chicano/as and Latino/as in the worlds of the arts, literature, creative writing, culture, business, medicine, and education. Following his retirement, Dr. Martinez continued to visit campus regularly and engage with campus life, to mentor younger writers, and to participate in Riverside’s writing community.
In addition to his writing, Dr. Martinez was an accomplished and enthusiastic artist throughout his life. His works were included in nine exhibitions, including three solo shows, between 1965 and 1980. His art was also regularly exhibited on the UCR campus. Some of his drawings are included in Voice Haunted Journey, and one of his paintings will be on the cover of his forthcoming book. Beyond his interests in art and in writing, Dr. Martinez appreciated language, and spoke Spanish, English, French, and Italian.

His readers, former students, colleagues, friends and loved ones will remember Dr. Martinez as a man with a big smile, “an imagination as big as Texas,” a pioneer in Chicana and Chicano poetry and narrative, and a wonderful family man. He is survived by his wife, Elisse Martinez of Riverside, his daughters Laura and Tanya, and his grandchildren. In his memory, a scholarship has been established at UCR and as well as an annual prize for young writers at the Inlandia Institute.

This memorial was compiled and adapted by Katja M. Guenther from an obituary by Susan Straight and additional biographical information provided by Elisse Martinez, from an entry on Dr. Martinez written by Roberto Cantú in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, and found on-line at: https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/taro/aushc/00185/ahc-00185.html and https://prabook.com/web/eliud.martinez/3753719.