

Finding Forever: Views on the Past and Present in Mexican Literature

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Mexican culture is rich in many ways, especially its literature. Much like American literature and literature of other countries, it was shaped by its own history. It has roots in the texts of the indigenous people and the New Spain. As a result, many genres have sprouted from the seeds of the historical contexts such as essays, novels, short stories, plays and poetry. Throughout the generations, time has managed to pass by and create genres along with the people who create them. In Mexican literature, there has always been a longing for understanding the unknown, the memory of its people and an aspiration to catch up to the rest of the world who is always spinning the wheel of modernity. Renowned Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes, said that whoever worries about time has a concern about the past and the history. Dr. Sara Poot-Herrera, a professor at the University of California in Santa Barbara, has dedicated her profession to studying Mexican literature and experiencing the changes around the culture. She understands all too well that Mexico has its place in world literature and its history will prevail as long as people continue to recognize it.

Professional Beginning

Dr. Sara Poot-Herrera, who holds a doctorate in Hispanic literature from the Colegio de México in Mexico City, has been a professor at UC-Santa Barbara in the Department of Spanish and Portugues since 1988.

She has authored, coauthored and edited over one hundred books, chapters of books, essays, and articles including: *El cuento mexicano. Homenaje a Luis Leal* (1996); *Los guardaditos de Sor Juana* (1999); *Cien años de lealtad. En honor a Luis Leal/ One Hundred Years of Loyalty. In Honor of Luis Leal* (2007); and *Realidades y Fantasías. Realities and Fantasies. Ninth Colloquium on Mexican Literature. In Memoriam Tim McGovern (1965-2006)* (2009).

Her works on Juan José Arreola, Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo, Jaime Torres Bodet, Josefina Vicens, Carlos Fuentes, Elena Poniatowska, and José Emilio Pacheco, among others, have been published in many academic journals.

Most recently, she was the first woman from California elected as a member of the Mexican Academy of Language, a cultural organization that aims to study and preserve the Spanish language.

Poot-Herrera had the initial idea to go back and live in Mexico to teach, but because of her love of teaching

first-generation students, the Mexican culture and literature, she decided to stay at UC-Santa Barbara.

“I am the Mexicanist [but I] try to travel back and forth to Mexico to be able to teach the culture and literature in both places,” Poot-Herrera said.

Mexican writer, Juan José Arreola, focused primarily on reality and fantasy in his short stories and although he only wrote one novel, *La Feria* (1963), he has been a key figure in Poot-Herrera’s work. Arreola is, in fact, the subject of her thesis and first book, *Un giro en espiral. El proyecto literario de Juan José Arreola* (1992).

“[People] say Arreola doesn’t have a lot of writing, but I think his writing says a lot without having to have many words,” she said. “I chose Arreola because he is one of the great stylists of Spanish literature who has a great quality in writing with such fluidity and ease that it’s almost poetic, and delivers it in a real amorous manner.” Poot-Herrera mentions that there is not an anthology about short stories that does not involve Juan José Arreola.

He was considered a prose writer when his first book, *Varia Invención*, came out in 1949 earning him praise from other writers such as Julio Cortázar and Octavio Paz.

“Through it all, I like his storytelling,” she said.

Another writer, but of a Baroque style, is sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who also caught the attention of Dr. Sara Poot-Herrera during her first years at UC-Santa Barbara.

“Initially, the university wanted for me to give a class on colonial literature so I had to do some research, and the research would lead to the first of fundamentals to help establish what I would work and teach on,” she said.

Poot-Herrera also stated that sor Juana’s documentation and historical aspects interested her among many other writers, both men and women, and allowed her to become “close” to her context and personal life.

From her many years of research, Poot-Herrera wrote books on sor Juana including, *Y diversa de mí misma/ entre vuestras plumas ando. Homenaje internacional a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (1993), *Sor Juana y su mundo. Una mirada actual* (1995), and *Los guardaditos de Sor Juana* (1999).

In 1997, she was awarded the “Woman of the Year” by the Mexican-American Opportunity Foundation in Los Angeles, California for her studies on sor Juana.

“[The award] means taking on a responsibility,” she said. “By that I mean, being more responsible in what I do, in what I investigate, in what I write and it is like a stimulus for my work.”

Poot-Herrera explained that the life of a professor can be a little overwhelming at times, but that doesn’t take away from one of her passions: reading.

“Sometimes we [teachers] get so caught up in our teachings and reading other work in our offices, we get home and realize that it is time to do more reading because we haven’t really done so all day,” Poot-Herrera said.

During her leisure time, she likes to read and reread sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as well as works of Rosario Castellanos, Elena Poniatowska, Rosa Beltrán, Cristina Rivera Garza, and the list goes on. Her most recent read though, has been *Fundada en el tiempo* (2014), a book about Mexico City written by poet Vicente

Quirarte.

“Reading is really companionable,” she said. “You can never be alone and it is always faithful, it never betrays.”

A Dedication to Hispanic Studies

One of the most popular genres in Mexican literature is the *cuento corto* or short story and one that Dr. Sara Poot-Herrera has dedicated years in researching.

“The state of the short story is alive and in full health.” Poot-Herrera said. “Some [short stories] are born, others end, and some continue where they left off.”

The Mexican short story is not a minority in the group of genres but rather is just as important as the *novela*. In fact, genres that involve history, poetry and short story all share some similarities and characteristics.

One major theme in Mexican literature deals with the presence of time and Mexicans’ concern over it. For example, in Carlos Fuentes’ short story, “Chac Mool”, the writer presents a *fantastic* state where a character by the name of Filiberto who purchases an ancient statue from pre-Columbian time, only to witness the statue take over his life and lead him to his drowning in Acapulco.

In stories like Fuentes’ *Agua quemada* or other historical short stories from José Emilio Pacheco, there is a presence of memory that in turn fictionalizes in literature - into wounds that will not heal.

“From an early start, Fuentes had a concern with time,” Poot-Herrera said. “Whoever worries about time has a worry about history.”

She also mentioned that the notion of the past in Mexican literature becomes a way that Mexicans and the writers themselves can come to an understanding about who they are.

“Like Octavio Paz said, ‘In between the best pages in Mexican literature is the page of Carlos Fuentes.’ In other words Mexican literature wouldn’t be what it is without Carlos Fuentes,” she said.

Poot-Herrera is also editor and coauthor of *Realidades y Fantasías. Realities and Fantasies. Ninth Colloquium on Mexican Literature. In Memoriam Tim McGovern (1965-2006) (2009)*. This book presents many authors, their works, themes and perspectives that touch upon that Latin American *fantasia* –looking for their roots.

But just like every other tangible item, literature changes like the color of leaves on a tree that signal fall is near. In Mexican literature, certain styles of writing and their subject matter have presently taken a new course since the texts of the *Revolución*.

Poot-Herrera mentions that now, every writer seems to be writing essays, but that they are good changes in much the same way that we get surprises in life.

“[Literature] comes and goes, it recycles, it shaves and re-shaves itself,” she said. “Literature isn’t a reflection, but an approximation of life itself and not a reality.”

Perspectives on the *Hispanismo* in the U.S.

At UC-Santa Barbara, Dr. Sara Poot-Herrera, a self-proclaimed Mexicanist, is co-founder and currently

directs UC-Mexicanistas (Association of Mexicanist Scholars of the University of California).

The association has more than 15 years since it was formed, but became officially recognized by the university in 2006. The premise behind the formation of this group was based on uniting scholars and academics like writers of Mexican culture, initially only comprising of those outside of Mexico and only in California. Its physical location is for investigative efforts where, subsequently, alumni and other people who are not part of the University of California system would join.

“[UC-Mexicanistas] is a group of friends, in the best sense of the word, who value each other, value their work and of those who are just beginning [with the group],” Poot-Herrera said. “The idea is to recollect findings, be local or international, that deal with present-day themes in Mexican culture.”

As a professor for over two decades, Dr. Sara Poot-Herrera says that she has assimilated into some U.S values but remains loyal to her roots and understands that her past is what defines her. She mentions that being a Mexicanist in the United States means being away from your native home and living and presenting a culture that is unfamiliar to people, especially to students.

“Being a Mexicanist is not something made up, but rather is formed out of necessity to help students understand that Mexican culture goes beyond the food and the folklore,” she said.

Her students are another sort of stimulus that drives her to teach.

“I love what I do, it is a privilege to share both cultures, to speak two languages in two different countries, but even more so, it is a privilege to work with the students,” she said. In 2014, UCSB was officially recognized as a Hispanic-Serving Institution by the Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities.

Most of Dr. Sara Poot-Herrera’s students are considered Chicano and this chicanismo is apparent in her environment by noting that Mexican history is present in Chicano history.

“There is a sense of Mexican culture that became a hybrid one with the culture of [the United States] and the result is culture that is neither Mexican nor American,” she said.

For Poot-Herrera, the Chicano movement is very much in the same way as the Mexican movement in the days of the Revolution, an investigative aspect where a generation tries to find their identity in their culture. The Chicano movement is a cultivation of the grandparents and parents while also a cultivation of the present, in this instance, students who enroll in institutions of higher education.

Here Poot-Herrera adds that the concept of the past in the present is present among the new generation of university students, stating that students who were once embarrassed to speak Spanish are now realizing that it is just as important as knowing and understanding the English language.

As students in other parts of the world learn up to six or seven language, Dr. Sara Poot-Herrera feels that in some parts of the world people, and more importantly Hispanic people, don’t give the same prestige to Spanish even though language is culture.

“[Knowing] opens more doors, offering a panorama to more knowledge,” she said.

The same can be said of Mexico’s view on the Chicano movement.

Poot-Herrera states that Chicano studies, what once was overlooked by the universities in Mexico, are presently being taught and researched.

“History does not proceed in a linear fashion,” she said. “[The customs and characteristics of the past]

are present in our current time.”

There is also another group of people who Dr. Sara Poot-Herrera can familiarize with as her research on sor Juana has allowed her to dwell into thinking of women, and more importantly, Latinas.

In relation to Latinas and women in general, Poot-Herrera says that sor Juana represents freedom. Freedom in the strict sense where women are able to question, are able to be curious and learn in the same way that any man can.

“Sor Juana is that ‘pursuit of knowledge’ in women,” she said. “Sor Juana says, ‘I study not to learn, but to ignore less.’”

Poot-Herrera also plans to present a new book about Chicana writers stating that the book captures how these women writers see the difficulties they have faced and how they have been able to have a voice with their writing.

In the same sense that Poot-Herrera values sor Juana and what she represents, she also believes students who have an interest in Mexican culture and literature should have an inclination to ask questions, to study and more importantly, to have a steady discipline to learn.

Her message to university students: “If you have the ability, the interest to learn, you must be disciplined. Also, one must take risks and be passionate about things because without passion there is no life.”