Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Juan Felipe Herrera, Poet Laureate for the Masses

Daphne Stanford · Wednesday, November 4th, 2015

Juan Felipe Herrera was appointed the new Poet Laureate of the United States this past June, and he gave his inaugural reading on September 15th of this year. Herrera is unique in that he brings the English and the Spanish languages, both, to the position, along with elements of storytelling, street theatre, and music. He comes to the position after having served as California's Poet Laureate for the past three years.

He's recently launched a special section on the Library of Congress website called "Casa De Colores," or "House of Colors." It has two features, a page called "El Jardín" (The Garden), where Herrera will share interactions with curators from the Library of Congress about select pieces from the collection. The second feature, "La Familia," is actually a call for submissions, of sorts, in which Herrera is asking for contributions to an epic poem that will have many parts—with a different theme every month. The theme for October 15th through November 14th is "Migrants: Portraits and Friendships." The only stipulation is that contributions be no longer than 200 characters. There is no guarantee that everyone's contribution will be included; however, with such a massive call for submissions, that's to be expected.

In addition to the inherently inclusive symbolism of asking anyone who accesses the Library of Congress website to contribute to an epic poem, the fact that Herrera writes in both English and Spanish—commonly known as 'code switching'—is symbolic of his understanding of language as a fundamentally auditory vehicle with which poetry can communicate not just denotative meaning but also moods, sounds, and complex nuances communicated through the drama of deliverance or private, solitary reading.

Herrera noted a few differences between the two languages, for him, in a recent interview with Mike Pesca on Slate's "The Gist," a daily news and culture podcast: "As a bilingual, first-generation immigrant, Herrera explains that writing in Spanish feels like writing in a dream language, where he can play with tenses and use words as sonic instruments. In English, his poetry becomes more about architecture and syntax." This makes sense when comparing Spanish, which is a Romance language—a linguistic family often favored for use in opera—with English, a Germanic language with a long history of poetic form and structure.

Interestingly, Herrera writes poetry that includes both English and Spanish—and the Spanish is usually left untranslated. The presence of both languages has a unique auditory effect on the listener, if the audience is hearing the poem being read aloud or reading it aloud. It makes the experience inherently more intuitive and sensory than it would be, otherwise, requiring the listener

to rely less on logic than usual, when reading or hearing a poem. The poetic experience also becomes more interactive and more oral, in nature—simply due to the auditory nature of the Spanish. It also places Spanish speakers and readers at an advantage, whereas in everyday life in the U.S., they may not be in that position of privilege.

The Poetry Foundation's biography of Herrera has this to say about the nature of his poetry, from a critical standpoint:

> *Influenced by Allen Ginsberg, Herrera's poetry brims with simultaneity and exuberance, and often takes shape in mural-like, rather than narrative, frames. Critic Stephen Burt praised Herrera in the New York Times as one of the first poets to successfully create "a new hybrid art, part oral, part written, part English, part something else: an art grounded in ethnic identity, fueled by collective pride, yet irreducibly individual too."*

Juan Felipe Herrera with fans. (from his public Facebook page)

I would echo the idea of Herrera's body of work as crossing into genres other than poetry—such as theatre. It's theatrical because it's performative. The poems beg to be read out loud. Not coincidentally, Herrera has a background in street theatre—specifically, in the form of *corridos*, or Mexican-American folk ballads. They got their start in the areas of the United States that were once Mexico, such as Texas, New Mexico, and California. Therefore, corridos are historically narrative songs that tell stories about incidents that took place on or near the border.

Although these types of Mexican narrative ballads have been in existence since the nineteenth century, Herrera began delving into the genre in the 1970s, when corridos were "sung to draw attention to social issues of Mexican American farm workers and the Chicano Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s and 1970s." It's possible to watch Herrera performing some of his poetry at a video of the 1973 USC reading that was part of the Festival de Flor y Canto de Atzlan. In the latter reading, he not only reads poetry but plays the guitar to accompany some of his poems. At the time, the relevant issues had more to do with humane treatment of migrant workers and recognition of Chicanos as a significant cultural group in the United States.

Fast forward to 2015: at Herrera's recent inaugural reading as the new U.S. Poet Laureate. Grace Toohey reported in McClatchy,D.C. that "It was the 'corrido,' a Mexican ballad, performed with Juan Díes from the Sones de Mexico Ensemble, about the death of Sandra Bland that filled the more than 300-member audience with emotion." What's interesting about this detail is that it was the corrido, in particular, that was the most emotionally-moving part of the night's reading. However, Herrera chose to focus on an incident that was part of a larger series of incidents involving police brutality and the alarmingly disproportionate rate at which African-Americans suffer violence at the hands of law enforcement officials for no apparent reason other than the color of their skin.

In choosing this particular incident, Herrera made it clear that he is interested in chronicling a wide variety of human events, not only those related to Mexican-Americans. This point should be apparent; however, because we are dealing with such a highly charged political atmosphere due to Donald Trump's obsession with deportation and the renewed discussion of immigration policy—despite the fact that the majority of U.S. citizens view Mexican immigrants favorably, according to a bipartisan national poll conducted by faculty at George Washington University—the distinction may not be as apparent as it might be, otherwise. Herrera's "Casa de Colores" is an

attempt to portray a multiplicity of voices, not merely one or another. His is not an either/or paradigm. Herrera's purview embraces all, rather than a select few.

His perspective is inherently democratic, embracing the most ideal form of the traditional 'American dream' of coming to the States as an immigrant, attending school, working hard, and emerging triumphant. Herrera is only one of many examples of success stories as the result of a good education. His is a decidedly rags-to-riches story: after attending from San Diego High School in 1967, he attended UCLA with the help of an Educational Opportunity Program scholarship. After UCLA, he received an MA in Social Anthropology from Stanford University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the prestigious University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Herrera's inclusion of a variety of voices via his "Casa de Colores," as with his juxtaposition of English and Spanish, allows for a complexity rich with meaning and ambiguity that—as with the best writing—illustrates a portrait of the U.S. that demands more than one reading or viewing. Like a good conversation, the interaction requires careful listening, empathy, consideration, and patience in order to be fully understood. It is significant that Herrera's call for submissions for contributions to his epic collective poem has no restrictions other than character count. It's as if, momentarily, our words may be considered apart from the version of ourselves we would ordinarily present, in physical form; as if, for a moment, we may be judged based on our thoughts alone.

(Featured photo by Steve Rhodes)

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