

Interview with Professor Cotera. Nov. 14, 2007. (Full transcript)

When did you decide to go into the Latino/a Studies field?

When I went back to graduate school at the University of Texas, in Austin, I started off as a Victorian Literature Scholar, and I was really interested in the novels of the nineteenth century. Largely white people wrote them because at that time we didn't have a history of US Latino novels of the 19th century—that has since changed. I was working for a researcher, a literary scholar, who was writing a chapter in his book about folklorist Jovita Gonzalez, and she is someone who worked with in the 1920's and 30's with a white folklorist named Jake Frank Dobie. I was sent to the library to look at their letters and I became very interested about their interactions across the differences of race, age, and gender because she was young and she was older, and I thought it was interesting that this white guy that's doing Texas folklore, which was basically about cowboys and erasing the history of Mexicans for the most part, that he took interest in this young Mexican American scholar, and became her friend and colleague and supported her in her professional career and she actually became president of the Texas folklore society in 1929. She was Mexican American, she was a woman, and this was very unusual. So I became very interested in their relationship, but what sparked my interest even more and what took me into the field of Latino Studies was the fact that I discovered in reading her letters that she had sent him several chapters of a novel that she had written about 1848 and so I thought, "*well I'm going to find this novel—it's probably in the library*", and so I talked to my advisor and said, "*well there's this novel she keeps talking about, do you know that she wrote a novel?*" and he's like "*no, I didn't know that*". So we thought we immediately have to find it because the dates of the letter were in the 1930's like 1935 to 1938, and that would make it the earliest historical novel by a Latino writer that we knew of in the 20th century. Actually by chance we found the novel at a library that had just acquired a collection of her husband's and her papers. So the library had just gotten a whole office of their materials, and a box marked, *her personal papers*, and there was something that looked like this (aside: really fat and unwieldy manuscript—like the one sitting on Professor Cotera's office). So it's a 500 page novel called *caballero*. It was about women in a rancho, living with a patriarch, the father of this family, who has to control everyone from the women; his wife, his sisters, his daughters, his two sons, all the *peones* who live on the *rancho*. So it becomes a story of how he reacts to 1848 and to the transfer of what he'd known as his territory, Mexico, into the US, and how he can't negotiate that historical reality and the subplot, the way the story works out is that his daughters end up running from the rancho. They run away with gringos, members of the army, and that causes a crisis in him. It's a tragic story, sort of like *King Lear*, he feels like his family has betrayed him. In the mean time the *peones* start abandoning the hacienda because they're getting paid by the American ranchers who are moving in. And the other interesting thing about the novel is that it has a queer character in it, which is quite unusual in the 1930s and certainly extremely unusual in Latino literature, as we knew it at this time, which was in the 1990's when I was doing this work. Discovering *Caballero* really made me very interested in thinking about all the other literature. The lost novels, the hidden histories, like the repatriados. Those stories that don't get told and eventually disappear from our public consciousness. And so I decided from that point forward, I wrote the epilogue to that novel and wrote several articles about the novel, discovering it, and what I thought was going on which at the time I strongly believed there was a feminist critique of Mexican patriarchy happening, and that launched my career. Producing that novel as a master student enabled me to apply to Stanford to their PhD program and get accepted. And I ended up writing my dissertation on Jovita Gonzales and a Sioux Indian ethnographer, Ella Deloria, who also had written a novel that had been lost and was about women. I did a comparative

analysis of both, what it means that their novels were lost, that they were women of color, and how their novels are actually quite different and express certain kinds of feminist histories that are unique to either Texas in the borderlands or Dakota Sioux women in South Dakota.

How long have you been in Michigan? (the state and the university)

I've been in Michigan since January of 2001 because I came here on a postdoc, an award that they give you after you finish your dissertation and before you start teaching.

Was being so close to Detroit one of your goals/ an added plus when coming to Michigan?

I came to Michigan because of the American Culture program and its reputation as an American Studies program that's valued interdisciplinarity. Because I'm not just reading literary text in my dissertation and my later manuscript, but also reading ethnography as a historical artifact—like how's ethnography and folklore studies done in the 1920's and 30's? What did it mean for these women to be in these fields? So my work is historical, it studies anthropology and also involves literary analysis so I wanted to be in a place that valued that kind of work because it is somewhat unusual. Because most academic work really happens and is controlled by the disciplines and I'm "*undisciplined*." It is quite true and important to remember that I'm jointly appointed in Women's Studies and American Culture. Both are very interdisciplinary practices. I doubt very seriously that historians would claim me, or that literary scholars would claim me. Definitely not anthropologists or folklorists would claim me. Though all of those disciplines would not claim me or what I do. But Women's Studies will and American Studies will. And those two interdisciplinary practices involve at the outset a research question that mobilizes the use of disciplines. So instead of beginning with a discipline, such as *I am a historian* or *I am a literary theorist* or *I am an anthropologist*—which are disciplines that have methodologies attached to them that are very different and are historical. Women's Studies and American studies begin with a question. *What is the role of gender in either cultural articulations, representational practices, the sciences, etc?* So it begins from that point. American Studies is, *What is the nature of American Culture? What are the social relations that underlie it? What are the historical relations?* So I use a little of that and a little of this and mix them all together to answer questions that I have that can't be answered by just reading history or reading books.

How did you get in touch with Elena Herrada?

For the past four years I've taken students to Southwest Detroit for a mural tour and to just get them to experience that part of the world. Over the years I've made connections with artists, cultural practitioners and community activists because of my engagement with Southwest Detroit in this class. I met Elena through that network. Fido Valdez, who led our tour, put me in contact with her when I was thinking about how to change the tour. Before we had gone to the Detroit Institute of Arts in the morning and looked at the Diego Rivera murals and then in the afternoon we did the mural tour, and because this time around the tour was more related to our immigration section. Before there was a Chicano art section that I bundled the tour with. This year I wanted to spend more time on immigration and migration and that why the tour and its focus changed to the history of immigrant communities, Mexican immigrant communities specifically in Detroit. This is my first year working with Elena.

To what extent have the two of you worked together?

Before meeting Elena, what did you know about the repatriations/ were involved in the project? I knew about the repatriation campaigns because I had read Latino history and also I've been advising a graduate student who is writing a dissertation on anti-immigrant discourse in the US who had a chapter dedicated to repatriation and I did a lot of reading about repatriation to advise her. What I didn't know was how repatriation impacted our local history here in Detroit and that was a story that I learned after advising several students who were working on Jesse Hufnagel-Garskof's class on local Michigan histories and working with them on their honors thesis. They were much more focused on this region and so last year I discovered how important the history of repatriation was to this region and conversely how important this region was to the ways in which repatriation was played out everywhere else. When they repatriated, when Diego Rivera came representing the Mexican government and encouraged people to move back to Mexico, that was a very early campaign. I wasn't aware of the extent to which the model for repatriation was Detroit and Southwest Detroit. And then that made me understand that the historical depth of the Mexican American community in Detroit.

How have your views on, or what you know about the repatriations, changed since then?

Coming from California I really believe I was moving to the Great White North. I thought, how am I going to deal? And it was really difficult for the first couple of years because there wasn't even a Mexican food store in my neighborhood. And I had to make my own tortillas and that's unheard of in my household. But I was desperate and I wasn't going to drive to Detroit to get my tortillas. So as my engagement with Detroit made this place seem more like a viable place for me, culturally, I've been able to watch it develop. I've been able to watch the growth in the Latino demographic in Washtenaw County, in particular in my town specifically, Ypsilanti. Connecting that back to Detroit, watching the demographic shifts that have impacted everywhere else in the country and watching it happen right here at my doorstep has really been enriched by knowing how long the history is here, and how long the history of Mexican population is in this state. That has really given dimensionality to my understanding of what it means to be Latino in Michigan. Because let's face it, I am a Latina in Michigan, although I identify as Texan. But it's part of embracing this place and its history. It all goes back to why I'm involved with Latino Studies—these histories are ignored or invisible. Really sort of forcing my students to see that Mexicans have been in Detroit for a long time and that they have been a marginalized community in Detroit for a long time is really important to me.

What are some of your expectations for the repatriados project?

This project started off when I contacted Elena about showing her film, and I really wanted her to either come to the class or show us her film in Detroit. And there're two reasons why I wanted this: One, it's important to know the history obviously. But two, it's important for students to understand that you don't need to be a Steven Spielberg, you don't even need to be rich, you don't even need to have time—Elena is super busy. You can make something that registers a history, even if it doesn't look perfect, even if it's not exactly how you want it right, the important thing is speaking and registering that history. And so I thought Elena would be someone who is very much about that; and then Elena is also someone who's a public intellectual, she wasn't a graduate student, she's not a professor—She's someone who is in the community working and organizing; working with people in the community against their own abuse and the manipulation of the power structures on the people,

but also someone who understands that *one needs to make these interventions to bring people their own history—it is rightly theirs and they should know it*. When I started talking to Elena about this, I thought that the repatriados project is an excellent project. Again, website projects can be about just purely academic products and I've been trying to encourage students to work with existing organizations to actually do something that helps them in their work. This is the first year that I've really pushed students to do that, so I hooked you up so that students don't just feel like they're going through the motions in producing this thing and that it is going to be over at the end of the semester. It is important that students feel that what they're doing and what they're putting their energies in will make a difference and that it's not just an exercise. But also because people in the community, this is a huge resource in Southeastern Michigan, The University of Michigan. It is a resource that's yet untapped by people in the community. The university does not do that much to make connections with the community and so any opportunity I have that will bring students who may potentially continue these relationships which community actors I think should be taken advantage of. This was an opportunity to make learning and assignments relevant to students, but also to bring community activists and organizers into greater relationships with the university—and also to use the resources of the university for public good. A project like this should begin as a sort of limited project but then students with their creativity, their boundless energy, their intellectual youth and excitement can then combine that with their ability to think outside the boxes that professors often bring to a situation and will do something interesting.

Is there anything in particular you would like for it to accomplish? What community impact do you foresee?

I hope to inspire in students, perhaps for the first time, an understanding of how they can be producers of knowledge and what the stakes of the production of knowledge are, and hopefully get them interested in Latino history and hopefully get them interested in this project that we all share, which is to uncover shared history.

Do you have any final comments/ anything that you would like to add? What other issues or topics do you see a need for in our community locally? Nationally? Globally?

One of the things that Elena and I have just started talking about and that I think could be a very interesting, multiproduct project would be to begin talking about what it would mean in Southwest Detroit to create a museum of Latino or Mexican American history there, like the African American museum or the Arab American History museum and one of the things that we've talked a lot about is that we would have to do this in collaboration with people who are involved in these museums and the ways in which Detroit at this crucial juncture is actually quite fractured racially and how there's a lot of anti-black racism in the Latino community, there's a lot of anti-immigrant sentiment in the black community. So the bricks and mortar project of thinking about a museum forces us to think about what it takes to bring such projects about and one of the key things it's going to take is mentorship and racial reconciliation. So this is to me sort of like the website project, which is to say that you have a goal that's a bricks and mortars goal that is an actual product, like your website, but what is accomplished in the making of that could be something that involves research on black and brown relations and on Detroit; research in the ways in which the Arab American community interacts with the Latino community and the black community, like multiracial research about that in Southeastern Michigan and those complex racial histories. So it would involve research about the city, but also be a project of racial reconciliation that absolutely needs to happen in Detroit whether or not a museum is built because in this particular historical moment, in the moment of globalization,

where all across the globe the thing that we share as a country and specially southeastern Michigan with other countries is that our society is characterized by increasingly stratified class relations. Detroit is becoming a center of a permanent underclass, a status that Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Latinos and Blacks share and unless we can find a way of understanding what we do share, as well as respecting our differences, Detroit is going to fail and it can't survive in a post-industrial, globalized world it just can't. If you look at other industrialized cities across the globe, there are things that Detroit and southwest Michigan share with places in Bolivia and other places where you have a permanent underclass that's being constituted and created via the workings of the state and state power. And so if what we share with a place, say for example, like Bolivia is that the welfare state is contracting, liberalized economic and trade practices are taking jobs away, and the thing that we share with other global cities across the world is that the poor are getting poor and the rich are moving out. I think there are enough points of similarity between the black and brown communities of Detroit that racial reconciliation and understanding what is at stake and what we share can be done. But I think what's interesting about it is to think about how you can't just say, 'OK we're going to do a racial reconciliation project,' but how it can be done, how you can get at something obliquely. Sort of like this website project, it is a way of getting people to think outside the box so that it's not just the same old academic product. Instead this gives students a project that's going to force them to think outside of the box—that kind of project is something that can enable other kinds of projects that may not have anything to do ultimately with the final project. I'm interested in new directions. I'm interested in getting students involved in this kind of work in sort of the way that Elizabeth Moje is doing. She has one project over here, then she's doing things that have something to do and intersect with that project, but they all have different goals essentially. So working on a multifaceted, multigenerational project with community actors and academics and students and staff coming together to produce different things and different kinds of knowledge, and maybe someday in fifty years or so build a museum—it's not going to happen anytime soon, but in a sense that goal is not what is important, but the process of getting there. The overall point is really that if we live here as academics, as students, as a university and institution, we need to be engaged with this place.