UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

July 22, 2025
Debra Herrick

How to build global community through Mexican literature

For Sara Poot Herrera, distinguished professor of Spanish at UC Santa Barbara, literature isn't about solitary reading or isolated academic work; it's a vibrant force that builds community, fosters dialogue and bridges cultural divides. At the heart of her scholarly journey is the Mexican Baroque poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, whose feminist ideals and intellectual bravery have influenced Poot Herrera's approach to education, research and collaboration.

"What matters most to me is community," Poot Herrera said. "When I write an article or publish a book, it often connects directly to organizing a conference or teaching a course. All these activities reinforce one another."

Poot Herrera's extensive research on Sor Juana's feminist legacy underscores her commitment to creating meaningful scholarly networks. Her recent publications include essays such as "Sor Juana, imagen de México al mundo" (El Heraldo de México, 2025) and "¿Escribirte, Juana Inés?" (Laberinto, Milenio, 2025). She has also explored historical perspectives in "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz en dos revistas del siglo XIX" (El Pez y la Flecha, 2025), demonstrating Sor Juana's ongoing influence across centuries.

"When I reread Sor Juana's 'Respuesta,' I see it as a call for constant learning," said Poot Herrera, who was awarded a doctorate honoris causa from the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán in 2024 . "Sor Juana teaches us to approach life with humility

and openness. Her writings are foundational in understanding how literature helps us understand ourselves and others.”

In addition to her research on Sor Juana, Poot Herrera has written about authors such as Juan José Arreola, Elena Poniatowska, Nellie Campobello, Margo Glantz, Sergio Pitol, Juan Rulfo, Rosario Castellanos and Cristina Rivera Garza, highlighting major trends in 20th- and 21st-century fiction. She also brings attention to lesser-studied voices and genres, including contemporary short stories and early modern theater and theater from the Inquisition.

Building upon her research, Poot Herrera co-founded UC Mexicanistas in 2008, an academic network dedicated to Mexican literature and culture. The organization, initiated informally after a literary conference at UCSB, now boasts more than 170 members from the United States, Mexico and Europe. Its growth has been driven by scholarly exchange and shared academic interests.

“It started from a conversation among friends,” Poot Herrera explained. “We’ve never asked for funding or charged membership fees. We operate purely on friendship, respect and mutual support.”

Through UC Mexicanistas, Poot Herrera has actively cultivated scholarly collaboration by organizing conferences and symposia that frequently result in publications and anthologies, extending the impact of research projects across broader academic communities. She emphasized breaking down traditional academic hierarchies through mentorship and collaboration, involving students and encouraging them to present their research, interact with established authors and engage in international exchanges.

“My students don’t just set up conferences; they participate directly,” Poot Herrera said. “They present their work, meet authors, publish papers and build lasting professional connections. It’s their active participation that ensures the doors to academic opportunities remain open.” As for her own approachability, her students often say her office door isn’t even necessary because it’s always open to them. To that effect, she has directed 35 doctoral dissertations in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and been a committee member on 16 more.

Her contributions to literary scholarship and public humanities have earned her numerous honors, including the Woman of the Year award from the Mexican-

American Opportunity Foundation in Los Angeles, the Antonio Mediz Bolio Literary Medal in Mérida and the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Medal from the Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana in 2021. Poot Herrera has also received the Eligio Ancona Medal and the Yucatán Medal from the government of the state of Yucatán, the Enrique Díaz de León Medal from the University of Guadalajara recognizing its top graduates and the Outstanding Graduate Mentor Award from UCSB.

“Literature and life flow into each other seamlessly,” she said. “Reading isn’t just academic; it’s profoundly personal. Books accompany us, teach us and reflect our experiences. That kind of literature matters most.”

As Poot Herrera continues to organize conferences, mentor emerging scholars and publish research, Sor Juana remains a consistent touchstone for her broader vision of inclusive and collaborative scholarship.

“Sor Juana built intellectual bridges despite considerable constraints,” Poot Herrera concluded. “We must continue her legacy, using literature, education and thoughtful scholarship to build inclusive communities that transcend boundaries and unite people.”

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