



# ENTREVISTA

## María Herrera-Sobek: from ballads and *corridos* to film studies

Dr. María Herrera-Sobek is a Professor and Associate Vice-Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Academic Policy at the Chican@<sup>1</sup> Studies Department in the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has written numerous articles and books related to her research area: *corridos*, songs and ballads as discourse that portrays Mexican-American culture. In addition, she has participated in filming documentaries. Above all, she has had a very active role in pro of the Chican@ studies worldwide. We had the opportunity to interview her when she participated in the Third Biennial Conference of the International Association of Inter-American Studies, titled *De/Colonization in the Americas: Continuity and Change* held from August 6<sup>th</sup> to August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014 in Lima, Peru.

MR: First of all, we would like to know how was your migration process.

MHS: My grandparents were from *Zacatecas* and they decided to go to *San Pedro de las Colonias, Coahuila* because they were distributing *ejidos* there during the Lázaro Cárdenas period. But when they got there, there weren't any *ejidos* left. That program had been completed or terminated and so they lived there for a while. Then, in the 1940's, they heard about the discovery of oil in the *Tampico* area. However, they were having refineries that processed the oil in *Reynosa* so, my grandparents migrated. I was born in *San Pedro de las Colonias, Coahuila*. So then they

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Transcription:

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Entrevista recibida el

07/08/2014 y aceptada

el 20/10/2014

VERBUM ET LINGUA

NÚM. 4

JULIO / DICIEMBRE 2014

ISSN 2007-7319

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<sup>1</sup> We used the inclusive term Chican@ in this interview as it is stated at the Chican@ Studies Department at UCSB where they "seek to undo colonizing approaches to all areas of life."

migrated to *Reynosa* and there, again, my poor grandfather couldn't find a job with *petróleos* because they wanted a lot of money to enter the *sindicato* (the union). Then, he went looking for a job and some American farmers, actually they were Mexican-American farmers, were looking for workers and they got him. They asked him if he wanted to go work for them and he said yes. Then, he went to the US. So that's how he went there first and he was there for several years and then we went, my grandmother and I followed. So that's how it happened. Then, I grew up, as a little toddler, near *Reynosa* in *la frontera*. We used to go a lot to *Reynosa* to visit friends on weekends. Whenever my grandparents weren't working, they would go to *México*.

MR: In that sense and in regards to the representation of Mexican immigrant women in films and literature, what can you tell us?

MHS: The Mexican women in film and literature? What I did was actually, "how the *corrido* was used in films?" But I can discuss that, the women in film and literature, too. I started collecting films regarding immigration, with the subject matter of immigration, many years ago. And so, I started trying to analyze them to see what words or characteristics they had and what the salient points in the films were. What they did portray was basically that the movies were either tragedies or comedies. One comedy was *la India María*, right? There were a lot of films with her: "*Ni de aquí ni de allá*", for example. Then, there were tragedies where the people would die: "*El Vagón*

*de la Muerte*", for example. So, in these films women were the protagonists. A lot of the time, characters like the *India María* were always the protagonist. In conclusion, they are comedies and they still encapsulate one message and that's "Don't go the US. It's not what you think it is."

MR: Women are not allowed to go to the US.

MHS: Women or men. For example, *la India María* goes to the US and she's funny and everything, but she returns to Mexico and she's "oh, no. It's better here", "better to come back to Mexico", and so the comedies their message is "don't go to The US". The tragedies are even worse, "don't go over there because it is really tragic and you'll probably die" and so those are the messages for both, men and women.

MR: You also worked on *Luis Leal: A Journey of 100 years* and *Mexican immigration with Dignity*. What can you tell us about it?

MHS: There was a film that we did. It was a documentary about the Mexican-American history, and the history of immigration. It's just basically based on one of my books, which is *Northward bound: The Mexican Immigration Experience in Ballad and Song* published by Indiana University Press in 1993.

MR: So how did you become interested in ballads and songs?

MHS: When I was a little girl, my grandmother would sing *corridos de la Revolución Mexicana* to put me to sleep. I

was fascinated because she would speak about all these heroes and heroines about the revolution. *Soldaderas* that she knew who fought for the freedom of Mexicans and to make a better life for Mexicans. So, the *corridos* were very much a part of my life. I didn't necessarily like them because I grew up in the US, so I like the Anglo-American music. Although I like *boleros* better, I like Pedro Infante, I like other types of music than what my grandparents liked. Nevertheless, I found them very interesting because of the history, like *corrido de Pancho Villa*, *corrido de Zapata* and all the *corridos* that they—her grandparents—knew. *La Adelita* and many others that my grandmother would sing and it really fascinated me about finding that there was so much history in a song. That's how I started paying attention to *corrido* and all the things that it described. I even like one that's a *romance corrido*, that's the one on *La Delgadina*. I don't know if you know about that one. It's a ballad from Spain. It's from the 1600's, very old and my grandmother would sing it to me. But it would be on incest. Of course I didn't know at the time when I was little, but it would be about *que el rey, su padre*, he wanted to have an affair with his daughter and she says no and he punishes her. So, my grandmother used to sing that a lot to me. So, not only were historical issues, but social issues and I found that anything you want to know, any subject matter is in the *corrido*.

MR: Okay, so Delgadina migrated altogether with the Spaniards who migrated to Southern US.

MHS: Yeah, and then I saw that there was one way that the Mexican worker, that the *campesino* couldn't have access to printing presses, or to books. They detailed their history of immigration in the US through the *corrido*. I found some from the 1850's and then the 1860's when Mexicans came and were hired as *vaqueros* for the cattle drives from the *frontera* to Chicago and they were all the way to the Midwestern states like Kansas. There's a *corrido de Kansas*, they call it. There were Mexicans who worked in the railroad. There's a lot of *corridos* about Mexicans working on the railroad and so on, and the revolution came and the 20's and then the 30's when they were deported. So, I could see that there was a whole history there, that's why I wrote the book.

MR: Maybe we don't call them *corridos* anymore, but do you think music is also important nowadays for *campesinos* or other groups to express their ideas in an oral way?

MHS: There are lots of *corridos*, for example, in Arizona when all the issues were coming out about the laws that they were trying to institute, there are a whole bunch of *corridos* against that law that I tried to identify. Racial profiling, for instance, and I'm sure that there are *corridos* now about the kids that are migrating. I was too busy with this, but I wanted to look it up in the web to see if they'd already come out. I'm sure that they are.

MR: Nowadays they have directed two movies, two Mexican movies. One by

Diego Luna: *César Chávez*. Have you watched that movie?

MHS: Yes, I did.

MR: What do you think that the Mexican director is trying to portray?

MHS: Yeah, I think that it's very hard to put a whole life in two hours so that would be my only comment, that it was just really short. Well, a movie is short, right? But I think he did an excellent job. I found myself with a knot in my throat because it was very personal. It was my life with my grandparents. They picked cotton and they were agricultural workers. They were *campesinos* in the US, in Texas and Arizona. It was a hard film for me to watch because it was really hard to see all the suffering of the *campesinos*.

MR: Do you think he captured that essence of Chávez and field workers who fought for their rights even though he didn't live that experience?

MHS: I think he did, yeah. I think he did. The other thing that I would like to critique was that Dolores Huerta was kind of in the background, but it was a film on César Chávez. But I would have liked it if he had put Dolores.

MR: I would have liked her to be there, too.

MHS: Yeah, she was too much in the background instead of being with him.

MR: Yes.

MHS: I think he could've included her more, yeah.

MR: And on the other hand, René Bueno directed *Sor Juana's Second Dream*, which is a novel by Alicia Gaspar de Alba.

MHS: I haven't seen that one.

MR: It's about to be shown.

MHS: Yeah, that's what I thought because I know Alicia and she's a good friend of mine and when I saw her last she was at a conference. She said that they were making the film and yeah, so I'm looking forward to it.

MR: I'm looking forward to watching it, too. What I'm going to tell you is that René Bueno is also a Mexican director and I can see that Mexicans are, at least movie makers, are interested in capturing these Chican@ themes, right?

Speaking about Mexicans and having read in your e-mail that you have students from Russia.

MHS: From Rumania and from Russia, too.

MR: Yeah, from Rumania studying Chican@ studies.

MHS: And one from China that she's trying to get her visa, and she's getting a lot of trouble, but she wants to study Chican@.

MR: There are Mexicans who are studying Chican@, right?

MHS: Yeah, there's no *Departamento de Estudios Chican@s*, or *Centro de Estudios Chican@s*. What they have told me is that there are *Centros* for Immigration Studies, but everybody is not an immigrant and there's just so much. Immigration is part of our history but there's literature and

all other cultural aspects, paintings. All kinds of art.

MR: Yes, so in that sense, how would you suggest Mexicans read and approach Chican@ studies?

MHS: I would think that it has to start with instituting courses and making Mexican students aware that how they're staying behind because worldwide they're having Chican@ literature at Spain, at Turkey, Germany. Some of these people are experts in Chican@ literature. Why Mexicans don't see the value of it? Aside from the fact that I say one way they want to see for their own benefit is that if they understand Chican@ culture, they're better able to interact with Chican@ tourists when they visit Mexico and Chican@s want to go back to Mexico. Sometimes they have very negative experiences in Mexico and they say, "well, I'm not going to go back to Mexico." The reason is misunderstanding. For one say Spanish. Why don't they speak Spanish? Well, since you go to school, in kindergarten they try to take away Spanish. They used to punish us. I was punished. *Te pegaban*, oh my gosh. If you read some of our literature, the experiences of the first day of school is one of the most traumatic things for a lot of Chican@s and they write about it. Like in *Bless me Última* by Rudolfo Anaya where the main character is very traumatized and there's others. Their first experience is they wanted to go to the bathroom and the teacher didn't understand because they didn't speak Spanish.

MR: Gloria Anzaldúa mentioned that fact.

MHS: They would wet their pants because they couldn't hold it. They were 5 year olds. I think people think that we don't want to learn Spanish or that we didn't want to- *que nos avergonzamos de hablar el español* but I think it is a trauma that when you're 5 years old and they tell you since you're five "don't speak Spanish. Don't speak Spanish." Then we internalize it and you want to say, "no, I don't know Spanish." I had a very interesting case when I was teaching Spanish because I have a doctoral degree in Spanish and one of my students came and he was speaking in Spanish. "*Yo quiero tomar el curso, profesora, pero yo no sé nada de español*", and he's saying that!

MR: He was already speaking Spanish.

MHS: He had been told that he doesn't speak Spanish. You know, like you don't speak Spanish, you speak Mexican Spanish and Mexican Spanish is not Spanish. *No sé qué les dicen*, I don't know what they would tell those kids and this is, he was already a college student.

MR: When did this happen?

MHS: That happened in the 60's. It happens all the time because they think they don't know how to speak Spanish. They really do, and you can't convince them because they have been told they don't speak Spanish. I have a friend, she comes to Lima, as a matter of fact, and she speaks Spanish. But she thinks she doesn't. I cannot convince her that she does. She gets so nervous speaking Spanish that she'd rather say, "no, I can't

speak it.” But if she’s relaxed and all that, she speaks Spanish.

MR: You can communicate and that’s the most important thing.

MHS: Yeah. If somebody asked her officially to welcome a group of parents, for example, she wouldn’t do it. She’d be very traumatized and say- “no, I don’t speak Spanish. You do it.” You know, *me dice a mí*.

MR: So my last question is, would you like us to include something else in relation to Chican@ studies, or your areas of interest in this interview?

MHS: I really would like for Mexico and the universities in Mexico to begin instituting Chican@, Latino studies or Mexican-American studies, whatever they want to call it but to study the population which is around 50 or 54 million already. It’s bigger than most countries, we’re like a country unto ourselves. Lots of my family are still in Zacatecas and most Mexican Chican@s have relatives in *México*, so not only because there’s those *lazos*, those interconnected ties for *México*. There’s a lot of love for Mexico, but if it’s just for self-interest because Mexicans, especially Mexican immigrants send tons of money home. I think it’s the second *ingreso*. That’s what they tell us when you’re

here in the media, and when I see in the newspapers. If there’s this negativity towards Mexican-Americans or Mexicans that are in the US, eventually it might stop. But I don’t know, it just breaks my heart because there is so much money that is sent to Mexico and yet the Mexicans- even the Mexican immigrants are not appreciated or respected. So, I would like to begin to understand the population. We’re *hermanos y hermanas* and we should really understand the population in the US that is so close to the heart of *mexicanos*. Like I said, we all have relatives and in Mexico they have relatives in the US and we just need to change those structures that prevent trying to study or to stereotype.

MR: That’s right.

MHS: And it is said, if they think that Germany accepts us, that Turkey accepts us, that Russia... then maybe they’re okay to study. We should have our own *criterio*. We want to study them. Why not? Other nations don’t have to tell them, “hey, you’re not studying your own people.” In addition, they should institute more *becas* for students to study abroad; for example, at the University of California in Santa Barbara.

MR: Thank you very much. We really appreciate your time.