

## POETRY MEDIA SERVICE

A Service of Poetry Foundation

contact: [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org)



For release 07/14/09

(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “but now he speaks for multitudes.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org) for the correct version.)

### RAISING HIS VOICE

The early sparks of the celebrated poetry of Juan Felipe Herrera.

By Milan Gagnon

Poetry Media Service

When Juan Felipe Herrera started third grade in San Diego’s Barrio Logan, he spoke little English; until then, he’d followed his parents, migrant Mexican farmworkers, from crop to crop around California. He couldn’t understand anything his classmates said to him, so he made no attempt to respond. The boy thought to himself, “My tongue is a rock.” He wouldn’t speak for fear of sounding stupid.

As his vocabulary improved, his teacher, Lucille Sampson, broke through his silence by assigning Herrera to write his first poem in English. Sampson pushed him further out of his shell by asking her students to perform plays and songs. “You have a very beautiful voice,” she told him when he sang “Three Blind Mice” in front of the class. Moments like these, according to Herrera, launched the career of one of America’s most celebrated Latino poets. (Sampson still receives dedications in his books.)

“I didn’t even know I had a voice,” says Herrera in his casual California Chicano twang. He’s 60 now, and the author of more than 20 acclaimed books, including this year’s new-and-selected-poetry volume, *Half the World in Light*, winner of the 2008 National Book Critics Circle award. “That’s how far away I was. I was just an observer.”

Herrera’s family moved frequently between San Francisco and San Diego when he was a kid. In 1958, at the age of 10, he shared a room in San Francisco’s Mission District with his teenage cousin Tito Quintana, whom he calls “the family beatnik.” The walls in Quintana’s room were black, save for an eyeball painted on one of them; he’d mounted the album covers from jazz records by the likes of Dave Brubeck and Cal Tjader, and hung strange mobiles. Music by the Cuban percussionist Mongo Santamaria provided the

soundtrack when Quintana wasn't pounding his own bongos. Herrera, having just found his voice in San Diego, now had the perfect place to raise it.

His work reflected the struggles he witnessed all around him. "I came out of the civil rights movement and also was involved in the Chicano-Latino literary political-arts movement of the '60s and '70s and to the present," he says. Herrera marched for the United Farm Workers in the 1960s and '70s and against U.S. involvement in Central America in the 1970s and '80s—but for the most part his poems were his placards. In poetry he explored the issues of injustice, oppression, inclusion, and exclusion that fueled the rallies, debates, and conferences in which he participated. "We had a lot of concerns about questions of homeland, questions of cultural roots, reclaiming our culture, you know, questions of religious foundations," he says. "What is a community? What are our indigenous community roots? Questions of language: What is our language? What is language? Literature: What is literature? What are all those things?"

The first book on the long literary road to these two collections was *Rebozos of Love*—selections from which still find their way into creative-writing and Chicano studies curricula—published in 1974. The words in the volume can confuse monolinguals, as Herrera never sticks too long to English or Spanish, preferring that third language, the version of Spanglish common in and specific to California.

we  
speak  
lluvia  
roja  
fuente  
song  
of  
our  
struggle

"(Dawning Luz)" offers a characteristic mash-up of words and worlds: *lluvia* means rain, *roja* means red, *fuente* means fountain, and *luz* means light. When you add connotations and double entendres in two languages, you can easily end up wondering what anything means anymore. It's an in-between world that Herrera still relishes. "I use words in those books on occasion that are directly from my childhood, and they're ways of speaking that farmworkers, campesinos, or working-class Mexicanos or Latinos employ every day to communicate," he says. "It's part of our linguistic universe and not necessarily valued in officialized language classrooms, but I choose to use those words because those are the words that I know. When I read those words in the classroom in California or the Southwest or any classroom where there's migrant students, they're going to know those words."

Many Chicano poets have come to look up to Herrera. "For Chicanos, poetry has always been an essential form of expression," poet Rigoberto González says. "It is our art, our declaration of perspective, but it's also our cry of protest. Juan Felipe Herrera has the

distinction of being one of these political activists who went on to build a career around his talent.” González ranks Herrera among Chicano poetry’s best, along with the recently deceased Abelardo “Lalo” Delgado, Alfred Arteaga, Raúl Salinas, Luis Omar Salinas, and Gloria Anzaldúa, and the “still marching” Lorna Dee Cervantes and Alurista. “Juan Felipe Herrera (and all those Chicano writers I just mentioned) taught me that writing is activism—not documentation.”

Herrera gives us his newest work in the final poems of *Half of the World in Light*: a section called “The Five Elements,” divided into “Wood,” “Fire,” “Earth,” “Metal,” and “Water,” and navigating the continents, conflicts, and tragedies of days recent and long gone. His sympathy goes out to the victims of Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 train bombings near Madrid; his characters inhabit Afghanistan and Austin, Texas. In “Follow Różewicz,” he writes, “all these years, he utters so many things / about days gone and villages raped and / winters that lasted decades / how the women / clenched their hands and held their backs.”

Will a writer who found his voice half a century ago, nurtured it in the academy and on the street, channeled it into more than 20 books, and still has so much to say find comfort in silence for long? His tongue was once a rock, but now he speaks for multitudes.

Former Poetry Foundation journalism fellow Milan Gagnon is a fellow attempting to not be a former journalist. This article first appeared on [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org). Learn more about Juan Felipe Herrera, and his poetry, on [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

© 2009 by Milan Gagnon. All rights reserved.