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Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Chair

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Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Chair

Cover Page Footnote
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On November 12, 2001 the Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz Chair was inaugurated at DePaul. It is appropriate that the Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz Chair should be established here at DePaul University, an institution with a social justice mission that is dedicated to life-long learning and advancing the education and rights of marginalized peoples. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, one of the greatest writers and activists of the Americas, certainly embodies these principals, as does Dr. Ana Castillo, the first recipient of this chair.

It was also fitting that this presentation took place on November 12, as it is Sor Juana’s birthday. She was born in Mexico, 350 years ago, on November 12, 1651. A child prodigy who was largely self-educated, she learned to read and write by the time she was three. As a child, Sor Juana begged and pleaded with her mother to dress her in boy’s clothing so that she could attend the university in Mexico City. Although this request was refused, she taught herself many subjects, among them Latin, which she is said to have mastered in 20 lessons. When she was 12, she was sent to live in Mexico City with a wealthy aunt who presented her to the Spanish Viceroy. The members of the court were so impressed with her intellect that she was made part of the viceroy’s entourage. During her five-year stay at the palace, she wrote poetry, studied music, mathematics, logic, and theology.
and served as lady-in-waiting to the Marquesa de Mancera. At one point, the viceroy arranged for an examination that called for the young girl to respond to the questions of 40 scholars, philosophers, theologians and other learned men. Quizzed on a great variety of subjects, she astounded all with her superior insight and knowledge. After this examination, Juana’s intellectual fame gained her the admiration of the most outstanding scholars and writers of the New World, at a time when very few could read and write.

In a day when convents were the only refuge for artistic and intellectual women, Juana entered the Convent of San Jeronimo (at the age of sixteen) so that she could pursue her studies. At Saint Jerome’s, Sor Juana served as accountant, librarian, and secretary. Her literary output was tremendous. She wrote music, baroque poetry, plays, comedies, historical vignettes, and imaginative tales of mythology. Her thirst for learning, however, brought her into conflict with her ecclesiastical superiors. Her famous testimony, Reply to Sor Filotea, defending her right to knowledge, is a major document in the struggle for women’s intellectual independence.

In spite of her fame as a poet and playwright, Sor Juana had to constantly defend her vocation within a society where the realm of academia was strictly reserved for men. Her impassioned defense of women’s right to the pursuit of wisdom and of the right to dissent, provoked the wrath of the archbishop, who had her books, musical instruments, and scientific equipment confiscated. A victim of constant pressure from the church, in 1692 Sor Juana gave up intellectual pursuits and dedicated herself to caring for the poor. Sor Juana’s affirmation to this new life was signed in her own blood. At this time Mexico was consumed by the plague, and Sor Juana cared for her sisters in the convent, until she herself caught the disease and died in 1695 at the age of 44.

Since the 17th century Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz has been acclaimed as the “Phoenix of Mexico”, and “America’s Tenth Muse.” Today, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz continues to be celebrated as one of the finest Hispanic writers and intellectuals of all time.

She is also regarded as the first defender of women’s rights in Latin America. As a testimony to her passion for knowledge, her enduring spirit, and her extraordinary legacy, we at DePaul are proud and honored to have established the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Chair. This is an important recognition of the intellectual, artistic, and activist tradition from which Latin American and Latino students, faculty, and staff emerge. Ana Castillo is an appropriate first recipient of this great honor. Over the last twenty years she has emerged as a powerful voice for Chicanas/os and Latinas/os in the United States. She is author of 15 books of fiction, essays and poetry. Several of her books have won important literary prizes. For example, Massacre of the Dreams: Essays on Xicanismo won the 1995 Gustaves Myers Award for outstanding book on Human Rights and So far from God won the 1993 Carl Sandburg Literary Award in Fiction. Many of her works has been translated into other languages and she has achieved an international reputation as an important writer.

Her activism spans thirty years, beginning in the 1970’s when she participated in the Chicano movement as a young Chicana growing up in Chicago. Her work gives voice to Latinas/as and other men and women of color who are often rendered voiceless in the U.S. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who consistently struggled for women’s rights during much of her lifetime, serves as an important source of inspiration for Ana Castillo. She explains, “When Latinas first started writing, early on, we looked for role models, for examples, because there weren’t any. At this point a student who wants to pursue a career in writing, or a university career can find resources that show that there is a precedent. The only thing that kept us going in the beginning was a vague possibility, a dream, now it is a probability, but 25 years ago we were looking anywhere for connections with people that vaguely, remotely spoke to us, were examples to us. So Sor Juana was very important as an intellectual, as a woman who obviously understood her position as a woman, stood up for it; so I remember very early as a college student being very compelled by her. It was at a time when we were looking—as Chicanas, Mexicanas, Latinas, women of color, looking for role models—so I remember going way back to Sor Juana. Now it just seems like the natural thing that if I am going to be at an institution and we are going to give my position a special title that the title should be some one that all of us can respect and hands down admire. I think that she set an example for all of us in many different ways, taking on the church, ultimately even her faith is important at a time now at the turn of the century when many people are looking for faith, renewed faith, when you make a space for that for yourself. So I feel very honored and happy, I feel like I traveled in a big huge circle and came back to her her.”

The Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz Chair is an important recognition by the University of the growing, important presence of Latinas/os at DePaul. By establishing this Chair DePaul is paying tribute to the many contributions that Latina/o students, faculty and staff make to the university community. As Castillo points out, “The chair is good morale for the Latino faculty, students and staff to be represented in this way as other groups are represented in this campus when you bring in a writer of some note.”

In her new position, Ana Castillo will teach courses in the Latin American/Latino Studies Program and the English Department. She will also participate in special conferences and symposia. She looks forward to working with many communities at DePaul. Castillo states, “I am very excited to do so, to lend myself in that way and I am pretty open to it, not only to issues specially related to Latina, but to other ways that we can make connections to other groups on this campus. I am very interested in working with other groups, including the students from the English department, and finding a way that we can let more people know how we contribute in different ways as Latino writers.”