Sandra Cisneros: 
Border Crossings and Beyond

Robin Ganz

For readers and writers of Chicana literature, the 1980s signalled the emergence of voices of power and pain which many previous decades of racism, poverty and gender marginalization had suppressed. Breaking a silence that had run long and deep, writers such as Lorna Dee Cervantes, Denise Chávez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga and Sandra Cisneros converted the unyielding forces of gender and ethnicity which had historically bound and muted them into sources of personal and stylistic strengths. Before the literary explosion of the ’80s—excluded from both the mainstream and from ethnic centers of power—the Chicana had been an outsider twice over. Sandra Cisneros derived inspiration from her cultural specificity and found her voice in the dingy rooms of her house on Mango Street, on the cruel but comfortable streets of the barrio, and in the smooth and dangerous curves of borderland arroyos. In her work, she charts new literary territory, marking out a landscape that is familiar to many and unfamiliar to many more. And yet, resonating with genuineness, testifying to the ability of the human spirit to renew itself against all odds, Cisneros’s voice carries across and beyond the barriers that often divide us.

Born the only sister into a family of six brothers, Sandra Cisneros “dreamed [her]self the sister in the ‘Six Swans’” fairy tale. Cisneros elaborates: “She too was an only daughter in a family of six sons. The brothers had been changed into swans by an evil spell only the sister could break. Was it no coincidence my family name translated ‘keeper of swans?’” (1987, 71). Cisneros was born on December 20, 1954, “the year of Rosa Parks.” A year and a half later, her mother gave birth to another girl child who died in infancy, leaving Cisneros the “odd number in a set of men.” That her birthplace and family home is Chicago characterizes the convergence of rootlessness and love that has shaped her family history. Her great-grandfather, whose family “boasted railroads and wealth,” played the piano for the Mexican president at his mansion in Mexico City. The fortune, lost at the gambling tables, was half-cloaked in secrecy by the time her father was born. Cisneros writes: “Our ancestors, it seems, were great

---

*MELUS, Volume 19, Number 1 (Spring 1994)*
gamblers...but this is never mentioned out of politeness, although I have disinterred a few...for the sake of poetry.” Her paternal grandfather, a military man who “survived the Mexican Revolution with a limp and a pension,” had put enough aside to send Cisneros’s father, Alfredo Cisneros Del Moral, to college. She writes: “Since my father had a knack for numbers, he intended to pursue an accounting career. However, he was not very interested in his books that first year, and when he failed his classes, my father ran away to the United States rather than face my abuelito’s anger.”

Alfredo Cisneros Del Moral and Cisneros’s “vagabond uncle” wandered the Eastern Seaboard and spent a “naive few weeks in the South,” unsure about whether they belonged in the front or the back of its Jim Crow buses and eating eggs morning and night because it was “the only English word they knew.” Planning to “cut across country and head to California, because they heard there were many Mexicans there, and New York was beginning to get too cold,” the brothers decided to stop in Chicago for one day to see what it was like. On that Autumn day, a chance meeting with Cisneros’s mother, Elvira Cordero Anguiano, was to change the course of Alfredo’s life. One day became a month and then a lifetime as love caused dreams of California to fade when Alfredo, “who liked children and wanted a large family,” married Elvira and set up housekeeping, for the time being at least, in a run-down house in one of Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods.

Although Elvira Cordero’s family history is “blurred and broken,” rooted in a town in Guanajuato whose name Cisneros doesn’t know, she recognizes that her “mother’s family is simple and much more humble than that of [her] father’s, but in many ways more admirable.” Cisneros recounts that:

My mother’s father was a hard-working Indian man, big-boned and strong, with a face made of stone. His wife, my maternal grandmother, was pale and quiet. She, too, worked very hard—for her stepmother who, as my mother tells it, was very cruel to her.

And when the whirlwind of the revolution arrived, the people of the small towns were victims to the violence of war from both sides. My grandmother said, after a while you could not tell who was a federalista and who a revolucionario, both stole your chickens and raped your women. My grandfather came to the United States during this time and found work in Chicago with the railroads. All his life he would work with his hands. He saved his money and sent for his wife and her cruel relatives, and that is how my mother’s family came to be here, through the railroad money my grandfather earned. (Binder 54-55)

Regretting having “thrown away his college education,” and obliged to find a way to support his family, Alfredo learned upholstery from
his uncle, tío Perico (Uncle Parrot). Cisneros relates that her “father inherited this trade as well as the nickname.” Soon the Cisneros family began a compulsive circular migration between Chicago and Mexico City that became the dominating pattern of Sandra’s childhood. The origin of Alfredo’s obsessive need to uproot his family with almost seasonal regularity apparently lies in his relationship with his mother. Here, Cisneros describes her paternal grandmother:

She was a hysterical woman, over-sentimental, spoiled. (Come to think of it, she was not unlike myself.) She had favorites. Her best baby was my father whom she held tight to. As a result, we returned like the tides, back and forth to Mexico City. Each time we returned to Chicago, we had to find a new place to live, a new school. (Binder 55-56)

The loneliness that grew in Cisneros as a result of Alfredo’s nostalgic southward journeys conjoined with other forces to shape her passion for literature and her desire to become a writer. Cisneros’s feeling of aloneness intensified as the family established its own unique dynamics. In the following passage, she characterizes the alliances into which her siblings composed themselves within the frame of the family portrait:

The six brothers soon paired themselves off. The oldest with the second-oldest, the brother beneath me with the one beneath him and the youngest two were twins, genetically as well as socially bound. These three sets of men had their own conspiracies and allegiances, leaving me odd-woman-out-forever. (1987, 69)

Each time the family returned to “yet another Chicago flat, another Chicago neighborhood, another Catholic school,” Alfredo would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break and “complain or boast” that he had seven sons. In her narrative recollection “Only Daughter,” Cisneros writes that he meant siete hijos, seven children, and that she is sure that he didn’t “mean anything” by that mistranslation. Yet as she heard him describe his family in this way to the Sears Roebuck employee who sold them their washing machine, to the short-order cook who served up Alfredo’s ham-and-eggs breakfast, and to anyone else who would listen, Cisneros “could feel [her]self being erased and would tug [her] father’s sleeve and whisper: ‘Not seven sons. Six! and one daughter’” (256).

While Alfredo’s attitudes most influenced Cisneros’s incipient awareness of her feminist identity, it was Elvira who guided her intellect. A high school drop-out who “read voraciously,” and “quite superseded [Alfredo] in intelligence and social awareness,” Cisneros’s mother was never to fulfill her intellectual promise in any material way and, sadly “limited by the restrictions of her generation,” was “to be dependent
on him her whole life." It would be easy to understand a tale of Elvira's bitterness about her lost opportunities to express herself but, apparently, lamentation and regret were not in her nature. Elvira capitalized on her abilities by making Cisneros the benefactor of her intellectual and literary dreams and accomplishments. Although the Cisneros family "did not have any books in the house, [Elvira] saw to it that [Sandra] had [her] first library card even before [she] knew how to read" (Binder 56).

Tracing her evolution as a lover of reading and creating poetry and prose in "Living as a Writer: Choice and Circumstance," Cisneros recounts that:

Because of my mother, I spent my childhood afternoons in my room reading instead of in the kitchen.... I never had to change my little brothers' diapers, I never had to cook a meal alone, nor was I ever sent to do the laundry. Certainly I had my share of housework to do as we all did, but I don't recall it interfering with my homework or my reading habits. (68-69)

About growing up without the burden of endless housework, Cisneros said at a Chicana Poetry Conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico in October, 1991, "I felt guilty, but not that guilty." Soon Cisneros was a prodigious reader. She writes: "Had my sister lived or had we stayed in one neighborhood long enough for a friendship to be established, I might not have needed to bury myself in books the way I did." Around the time of her early passage into the unimagined world that books opened up for her, Cisneros began to hear a voice in her head, a narrator who chronicled the routine events that made up her life:

"I want you to go to the store and get me a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk. Bring back all the change and don't let them gyp you like they did last time." In my head my narrator would add: ...she said in a voice that was neither reproachful nor tender. Thus clutching the coins in her pocket, our hero was off under a sky so blue and a wind so sweet she wondered it didn't make her dizzy. This is how I glamorized my days living in the third-floor flats and shabby neighborhoods where the best friend I was always waiting for never materialized. (1987,70)

In 1966, Cisneros was eleven, the family somehow borrowed enough for a down payment on its first home which she describes as "an ugly little house, bright red as if holding its breath" (Binder 57). The Cisneroses's move into a permanent home ended their nomadic migration which had dominated Cisneros's early years. For Cisneros, the transition from the apartment on Roosevelt Road into the new house in a Puerto Rican neighborhood on the North Side called Humboldt Park also represented an important step in her development as a
writer because, “it placed [her] in a neighborhood, a real one, with plenty of friends and neighbors that would evolve into the eccentric characters of The House on Mango Street” (57).

Cisneros composed her first poems at the age of ten, but doesn’t recall writing any more poetry until her sophomore year of high school when a “bright and vivacious young woman” came to her school to teach English. A poet herself, Cisneros’s teacher introduced her to the work of contemporary poets and asked her students to write about the Viet Nam War. Cisneros recounts that:

Somewhere here, amidst the tumult of the Viet Nam War and ecological awareness, I began my first poems. They were filled with pleas for peace and saving the environment. Here and there I threw in a few catchy words like ecology and Coca-Cola. Despite all this, I continued writing and began to be known around the school as the poet. (58)

Cisneros, “too busy being a college student and falling in love,” did not pick up her pen again until her junior year at Loyola University when she took a Creative Writing class. Under her teacher’s tutelage she applied and was accepted into the University of Iowa’s Writers Workshop where she began to study with Donald Justice. Unfortunately, he left on sabbatical and Cisneros, feeling isolated from familiar surroundings and alienated from the workshop which “was East Coast pretentious and operated totally without mercy or kind words,” floundered from one imitation to the next (61). Although Cisneros claims that the Iowa Writers Workshop failed her, she experienced an epiphany there that she frequently designates as the moment her writing acquired a voice. What’s more, in the moment of revelation in Iowa, the role which awaited her in the literary world suddenly became known to her.

It happened like this: Cisneros was enrolled in “a marvelous seminar that spring called ‘Memory and the Imagination.’” The students were heatedly discussing a book from their reading list, The Poetics of Space, written by the French theorist, Gaston Bachelard. As her classmates debated “archetypes...shells, with the shell as house with the house of the imagination, the attics and stairways and cellars of childhood,” Cisneros felt foreign from the others, alienated and dispossessed of some communal knowledge which they shared and which she felt she would never understand. Suddenly she was homeless, having no such house in her memory. As a child she had read of such houses in books and her parents had promised her such a house, but the best they could offer was the dilapidated bungalow in an impoverished inner-city neighborhood. Sitting in that classroom, her face grew hot and she asked herself, “What [do I] know? What could I know? My classmates were from the best schools in the country. They had been
bred as fine hot-house flowers. I was a yellow weed among the city’s cracks.” In that moment she realized that she had something to write about that her classmates had not experienced and would probably never be able to articulate with the understanding that she possessed. Cisneros recounts that, “this is how The House on Mango Street was born, the child-voice that was to speak all my poems for many years” (63-64).

After earning her MFA from the University of Iowa’s Writers Workshop in 1978, for the next three years Cisneros taught writing to (former) high school drop-outs at Chicago’s Latino Youth Alternative High School. Since the publication of The House on Mango Street in 1984, she has taught creative writing as the writer in residence at many universities all over the country and given hundreds of readings. My Wicked Wicked Ways, a stunning collection of poems, was released in 1987 to enthusiastic reviews. Her most recent tour de force, a collection of prose pieces entitled Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories, published by Random House in April, 1991, marks her transition from the relative obscurity of the small ethnic press into the mainstream of American literary culture and, in fact, into international prominence.

In an interesting cycle, the childhood loneliness that propelled her from the “real” world into the more pleasing worlds of reading and creating books has evolved into an adult solitude that is now indispensable to her work as a writer. In a 1990 interview with Pilar Rodríguez Aranda, Cisneros joked that her relatives had long since given up questioning her about when she’s going to get married. She goes on to explain that, while they seem to have grudgingly accepted her decision not to marry, they still don’t understand it.

Now instead of asking: “When are you going to get married?” they’re asking: “What happened in your childhood? Who hurt you? Who did this to you?” And they don’t realize... “Look at your own marriage, tia, look at your marriage, mother, look at your marriage, abuela, look at your marriage, tio, papa,” I’ve never seen a model of a happy marriage, or I’ve never seen a marriage that is as happy as my living alone, I’ve never seen it!

[Aranda:] No models — like nobody...

I have some friends who are married and they seem to be happy, but I can’t imagine myself in that kind of relationship. I really like my solitude. I don’t like being lonely, but I’m not lonely. I need to be alone to work. I have very close friends and very close men in my life, but I don’t want them in my house. That’s the difference.... My writing is my child and I don’t want anything to come between us. I like to know that if I come home very late from teaching—and teaching is exhausting, as exhausting as factory work, except I work more hours and get paid more—I don’t want to come home to a husband. I want to come home to
my books, and if I want to, I want to be alone to think. As a writer you need time to think, even if you’re not writing.... I wish we had little lights on our forehead like confessionals had. When someone was inside, the little light used to go red: “Ocupado.” I want one like that: “Don’t bother me, I’m thinking.” Some men do respect. But people cannot read your mind and know that you are thinking even though you’re not writing.... When I’m living with a man, he becomes my project. Like it or not, you find yourself doing it, then you get angry at yourself. I know that I’m difficult to live with. I like my loneness, and I think that’s the way I work best. (71-72)

Sandra Cisneros’s discovery of her poetic voice in Iowa was, up until that time, the single most important moment in her life as a writer and the result of that insight was both the personal accomplishment and critical success of The House on Mango Street. After she’d explored and mastered that territory, that is, writing from the point of view and in the voice of Esperanza (the young Sandra), moving on meant experimenting with many voices—voices as divergent and dissimilar as possible from her own. In Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories she brilliantly realizes her intentions as she presents us, from one prose piece to the next, with a complex variety of voices and points of view. Her gamut of characters ranges from, for example, the disembodied spirit of Inés Zapata (Emiliano Zapata’s wife), to Rudy Cantú, drag queen extraordinaire. Cisneros creates what she calls a “deluge of voices” (Campbell 6), “voices,” she emphasized at the 1991 Poetry Conference in Santa Fe, “that weren’t mine at all.” They speak in language as rich and diverse as the expanse they embody—they are the expressions of her immediate family, of the Chicano-Riqueño community she grew up in, and the voices from her life both between and as a part of the two cultures in which she now dwells.

One particular prose piece, “Little Miracles, Kept Promises,” is perhaps the most telling representation of the diversity of voices that make up Woman Hollering Creek. It is introduced by a prelude told in the voice of a young, working-class Chicana who, while shopping in a “religious store” for a statue or “holy picture” to give to a friend in the hospital, is told by the “crab ass” storeowner, “I can see you’re not going to buy anything.” When the narrator protests and says that she will, she’s just thinking, he replies, “Well, if it’s thinking you want, you just go across the street to the church to think—you’re just wasting my time and yours thinking here.” She does go across the street, and inside the church she reads the little letters of supplication that the churchgoers leave for the Virgin and other saints. A sampling follows of the twenty-three letters covering the church walls that comprise “Little Miracles, Kept Promises”: 
Miraculous Black Christ of Esquipulas,
Please make our grandson to be nice to us and stay away from drugs. Save him to find a job and move away from us.
Grandma y Grandfather
Harlingen

Saint Jude, patron saint of lost causes,
Help me pass my English 320, British Restoration Literature class and everything to turn out ok.
Eliberto Gonzalez
Dallas

M3r1c5145s B1lck Chr3st 4f 2sq53p51ls,
3 1sk y45, L4rd,w3th 1ll my h21rt pl2s2 w1tch 4v2r M1nny
B2n1v3d2s wh4 3s 4v2rs21s. 3 l4v2 h3m 1nd 3 d4n’t kn4w wh1t t4 d4
1b45t 1ll th3s l4v2 s1dn2ss 1and sh1m2 th1t f3lls m2.
B2nj1m3n T.
D21 R34 Tx (122-24)

In the case of the last letter, Benjamin T. is apparently so discomfited by his love for another man that he creates a code (a=1, e=2, i=3, etc.), trusting that his faith will translate both his message and his pain:

[Miraculous Black Christ of Esquipulas,
I ask you Lord, with all my heart please watch over Manny Benavidas who is overseas. I love him and I don't know what to do about all this love sadness and shame that fills me.
Benjamin T.
Del Rio TX]

One of the unexpected reasons that Cisneros’s stories resonate with such genuineness is that her indispensable source for names and other cultural information is the San Antonio phone book. When she’s searching for just the right name for a character, she leafs through the listings for a last name then repeats the process for a first name, thereby coming up with a euphonious or suitable combination without appropriating anybody’s real name. Cisneros also uses the Yellow Pages and mail-order catalogues in much the same way for the names of businesses and so forth. For inspiration, she reads the Popul Vuh, the Maya Bible.

About the experience of writing Woman Hollering Creek and giving voice to so many different characters, Cisneros said at the Santa Fe conference, “I felt like a ventriloquist.” Her advice to the writers in attendance was to “transcribe voices of the people of a community you know,” and confided that she keeps voluminous files of snippets of dialogue or monologue—records of conversations she hears wherever she goes. She emphasized that she’ll mix and match to suit her pur-
pose because, as she put it, "real life doesn't have shape. You have to snip and cut."

When Cisneros was at work on Woman Hollering Creek, she became so immersed in her characters that they began to penetrate her unconscious; once, while writing "Eyes of Zapata," she awakened in the middle of the night, convinced for the moment that she was Inés, the young bride of the Mexican revolutionary. Her dream conversation with Zapata then became those characters's dialogue in her story. The task of breaking the silence, of articulating the unpronounceable pain of the characters that populate Woman Hollering Creek, was a very serious undertaking for Cisneros. She said in a recent interview: "I'm trying to write the stories that haven't been written. I felt like a cartographer; I'm determined to fill a literary void" (Sage 74). The pressure intensifies for her because of her bi-culturalism and bilingualism: She charts not only the big city barrio back alleyways, its mean streets and the dusty arroyos of the borderland, but also offers us a window into the experience of the educated, cosmopolitan Chicano/artist, writer and academic. While she revels in her bi-culturalism, enjoys her life in two worlds, and as a writer she's grateful to have "twice as many words to pick from...two ways of looking at the world," her wide range of experience is a double-edged sword. In the Sagel interview, she revealed another side of her motivation to tell many peoples's stories in their own voices—the responsibility and the anxiety which that task produces: "One of the most frightening pressures I faced as I wrote this book," she says, "was the fear that I would blow it.... I kept asking myself, What have I taken on here? That's why I was so obsessed with getting everybody's stories out" (74).

She feels under additional pressure as the first Chicana to enter the mainstream of literary culture. Until Random House published Woman Hollering Creek and The House on Mango Street was reissued by Vintage Press, the Chicano literature that had crossed over into the mainstream remained a male domain—Gary Soto, Luis Valdez, Richard Rodriguez, Jimmy Santiago Baca and Alberto Rios had all made the transition. Women, however, were unrepresented there until Cisneros's recent successes. On September 19, 1991 she said in a National Public Radio interview broadcast on Morning Edition:

I think I can't be happy if I'm the only one that's getting published by Random House when I know there are such magnificent writers—both Latinos and Latinas, both Chicanos and Chicanas—in the U.S. whose books are not published by mainstream presses or whom the mainstream isn't even aware of. And, you know, if my success means that other presses will take a second look at these writers...and publish them in larger numbers then our ship will come in.
While it is undeniable that Sandra Cisneros has traversed the boundary dividing the small press market and the mainstream publishing establishment, a controversy continues about her writing among the critics over the issue of genre-crossing. In her review of Woman Hollering Creek in the Los Angeles Times titled "Poetic Fiction With A Tex-Mex Tilt," Barbara Kingsolver writes that "Sandra Cisneros has added length and dialogue and a hint of plot to her poems and published them in a stunning collection called Woman Hollering Creek." Later on in the review she elaborates:

It's a practical thing for poets in the United States to turn to fiction. Elsewhere, poets have the cultural status of our rock stars and the income of our romance novelists. Here, a poet is something your mother probably didn't want you to grow up to be.... When you read this book, don't be fooled. It's poetry. Just don't tell your mother. (3-4)

In her review in The Nation, Patricia Hart writes, "In her new book, Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories, Cisneros breathes narrative life into her adroit, poetic descriptions, making them mature, fully formed works of fiction" (598).

We might ask then, is Woman Hollering Creek poetry or is it prose? Ever since the publication of The House on Mango Street, critics have debated the degree to which Cisneros embraces both forms simultaneously. Gary Soto addresses the mirror image of the same issue in his review of her poetry collection, My Wicked Wicked Ways:

I use the term "prosaic poetry" not in disapproval, but as a descriptive phrase. Cisneros, as she illustrated in The House on Mango Street, is foremost a storyteller. Except for the "Rodrigo Poems," which meditate on the themes of love and deceit, and perhaps a few of the travel poems, each of the poems in this collection is a little story, distilled to a few stanzas, yet with a beginning, middle, and end. (21)

It is unlikely that critics will ever reach a definitive agreement on the matter of whether Cisneros's writing is poetic prose or prose-like poetry. I predict, however, that this question will persist throughout her literary career, continuing to arise in subsequent criticism of her work. Cisneros herself is entitled to the final word (for the time being, at least) on the subject. At a reading in Albuquerque, New Mexico in October, 1991 she said that when she has the words to express her idea, it's a story. When she doesn't, it's a poem.

Sandra Cisneros is a relatively young writer, both chronologically and in the sense that she is a fresh voice, a new presence in the spectrum of contemporary literature. One is likely to forget her relative inexperience because of the wisdom and understanding that
charge and permeate her stories and poems. From time to time I am
reminded of it, however, when I come across a passage that verges on
the cute—at times, whether in a poem or story, she veers dangerously
toward the precious. A reviewer for Booklist wrote the following
criticism about The House on Mango Street, but it could apply to her
work in other instances as well:

These vignettes of autobiographical fiction...written in a loose and de-
liberately simple style, halfway between a prose poem and the awk-
wardness of semiliteracy, convincingly represent the reflections of a
young girl. Occasionally the method annoys by its cuteness. (281)

Far more often than it is coy or cloying however, Cisneros’s work is
affecting, charming and filled with the humor and the rich cultural
offerings of Mexican America. Her style is as clear as water, as evinced
in her unadorned syntax, her spare and elegant phrasing, and the
entirely original Mexican-American inflected diction of her poetry and
prose. Yet, as with the clearest water, beneath the surface, Cisneros’s
work is alive with complexity and depth of meaning. Cisneros’s voice
is the sound of many voices speaking—over the kitchen table, out on
the street, across the borderlands, and through the years.

Works Cited

Aranda, Pilar E. Rodriguez. “On the Solitary Fate of Being Mexican, Female,
Wicked and Thirty-three: An Interview with Writer Sandra Cisneros.” The

Binder, Wolfgang, ed. “Sandra Cisneros” in Partial Autobiographies: Interviews with

Campbell, Bebe Moore. “Crossing Borders.” Rev. of Woman Hollering Creek and Other

Cisneros, Sandra. “Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession.” The Americas

_____. “Living as a Writer: Choice and Circumstance.” Revista Mujeres 3.2 (June


Hart, Patricia. “Babes in Boyland.” Rev. of Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories,

Kingsolver, Barbara. “Poetic Fiction With a Tex-Mex Tilt.” Rev. of Woman Hollering
Creek and Other Stories, by Sandra Cisneros. Los Angeles Times Book Review


Soto, Gary. “Voices of Sadness and Science.” Rev. of My Wicked Wicked Ways, by