

Interview with Sandra Cisneros*

JOSÉ ANTONIO GURPEGUI

José Antonio Gurpegui: Two novels, a book of stories and three volumes of poetry and you are considered as one of the most relevant Chicano writers. Do you consider yourself as a literary phenomenon?

Sandra Cisneros: No, I laugh when people say “only”, because it’s a lot of work. When I look at a book and I see how many pages they’ve got I think they’ve got a lot of years in my cell, and each book is like a prison-term. Even a person who write only one book or two, it’s not the number, it’s the quality. There are writers who write lots of books, but *no se ven*, for example somebody like Rulfo, he only wrote those two books, but they’re fabulous... he only had to write one short story and he could earn his death. I’m always astonished at how people rate a writer by number and not the quality.

JAG: Somehow your narrative is a recollection of all the tradition of the Chicano literature during the 60’s and 70’s?

SC: I don’t know all of the Chicano literature; I don’t read all of Chicano literature. I know the names, but not all the works. I don’t read all of Chicano literature, a lot of it I don’t like, and I won’t finish reading it if I don’t like it, so I can’t say I know all of Chicano literature. *No me interesan algunos y otro digo “sí me interesa pero no tengo tiempo.”* I’ll say this is relevant but it’s no what I need to read right now. I read what I need to read. It’s like *si tienes hambre*, you’ve got to read what you have to reak *para alimentarte* and there’s some food that is there...*te alimenta* but it’s not what you

José Antonio Gurpegui is Senior Distinguished Professor of American Literature at Universidad de Alcalá and Director of Instituto Franklin.

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crave. *No es decir que no sea comida pero hay veces que te dan ganas de comer un bistecito* and you don't want to eat corn flakes. For me it's like that with *literatura*, because there are all these different kinds of *literatura* that are out there, some of it was important for people to get an identity. By the time I came I was looking for something to nourish me as woman and a lot of works don't nourish me. That's not to say that it's not food, that it's not good, but for me personally *no me alimentaba*, so I put them in the category of "I'll read them when I'm in prison." Like when Malcolm X was in prison and he read lots of literature, and that's part of things I'll get to. So it's hard for me when people ask me this.

JAG: What are you reading now? Which are your literary interests?

SC: I'm reading a lot of non-fiction and I'm reading poetry, mystical poets, and I'm reading spirituality books and biographies.

JAG: Do you understand Chicano literature as the cultural background of the Movimiento Chicano?

SC: I don't know because I'm not a historian or a critic, so it's hard for me to answer. I eat what I like and I only eat what I like, I never have to eat anything I don't like. So, it's hard for me answer that question in the context of an expert in literature because I never felt I was an expert in Chicano literature... I never feel like I'm an expert in anything.

JAG: But you will agree that you belong to the movement which is known as Chicano literature.

SC: Do I belong to the Chicano literature movement?

JAG: I do consider you are a Chicano author. Do you consider yourself the same way?

SC: I do agree with that, culturally. That, I do claim.

JAG: To some critics Chicano literature was the culture product of the Movimiento Chicano of the 60's. Is it so nowadays or is it something else?

SC: I think it has become something else, at this time, in my opinion. I'm not an expert on anything except myself, but I think a lot of writers are writing now that don't have any Chicano consciousness, that don't call themselves Chicano writers.

JAG: And what about Chicanism...

SC: I was put in a school, where I taught, with Marxists, Leninists and Anarchists, and this was my introduction to the "isms", with people that were living their politics. They were a bunch of *locos*, and they saw me as a kind of "artsy-fartsy" who was just floating up there, but after a while when they saw that my students, these kids, were winning poetry awards, competing with the best schools and winning, they started giving me a little bit more of respect. I learned how to become a political person by working there and the book that changed my life, the only political book I read, *de pura casualidad*, when I was in Iowa was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which is one of my favorite books. And *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* made me realize this whole idea that you couldn't put books in a category for when you go to prison, that can change you and can change your life. I use *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* with my students and *A Hundred Years of Solitude* with me in this alternative school. I did the best things I could with the books that had changed my life, but I didn't know what I was doing. I did not realize that I was actually forming my political consciousness, and I still don't know what to call it, but I learned something working there and one of the things that Esperanza is looking for, if you read between the lines, you'll see that Sandra Cisneros is looking through the eyes of Esperanza for *otro modo de ser*. I didn't know how to be and exist with this reality of these young girls coming into my class, I was looking for my feminism and my politics, and teaching there and writing *House on Mango Street* helped me to find my "isms."

JAG: You have just mentioned Malcolm X. Could it be his influence why you are so radical in your feminism and your political view?

SC: I think so, that's why Esperanza renames herself with an X, in honor of Malcolm X.

JAG: Is Esperanza a special girl or is she an everyday woman?

CS: I don't know, I didn't think about that. She was me in my twenties, because in my twenties I was looking for my *camino* and I really was thinking at that time to stop writing and teaching because to me at that time it seemed *absurdo* to be teaching these kids to write poetry *cuando llegaban golpeadas, cuando tenía yo que enfrentarme* with their parents when they wanted them to quit school, my smartest student, they wanted her to quit school and start working because they were tired of taking care of her baby and go back to her boyfriend... *me daban ganas de llorar*. I was looking for my way, like Esperanza, I was looking at the bad examples and saying "how can I give a light and a direction to my students, why am I teaching them how to write? Why don't I just say "fuck this" and say to all the girls "I'm taking you all to planned parenting and working on those student statistics'?" I look a lot of classes on sexual education so that I could guide my women, I paid for an abortion, I did things I wasn't supposed to do but - good or bad - I did what I felt I had to do at that time. I felt that I wanted these women to live up to their potential, and I didn't see poetry and writing as to saving their lives, so I felt that maybe I should stop and let go. I felt really frustrated and angry, and I thought that maybe I should make them learn and distribute birth control flyers around the neighborhood, so something poetry was not doing, so out of frustration I felt the most impotent I've ever felt: in my twenties when I was forming my politics and writing *The House on Mango Street*, and I never dreamed that those stories that came from a moment of most despair would come back, become *House on Mango Street*, and be used in the very same school I collected the stories, and are saving women's lives now, *porque yo no tenía idea de que la literatura* and the political necessity that I saw in the community could come together. I saw my poetry as being separate, I've been trained to think of poetry as having nothing to go with changing the planet. This taught me more than all my years in college, those years that I was in the community really shuck my up and shaped me as a writer, so if I hadn't taught in the community I'd be a very different writer now.

JAG: Well, now is not clear to me if Esperanza is a real or fictitious character or maybe both.

SC: Yes, she was me searching for my *otro modo de vida*. Me and my students were *en la oscuridad*, clumsily trying to find our way.

JAG: After reading *Caramelo* I have a sense of the change Chicanas have gone through during these eighteen years.

SC: I think that one of the great things is that now we know we exist. We didn't even know before.... (laughs)

JAG: But the *Revolución Femenina* is still there...

SC: Well, I think that one of the great things that have happened in the eighteen years is that we know that we're not alone. [We know] that there is another woman like you trying to write, that also has the same issues and same problems, so that we know where to find each other. We're not all alike and the things that we write about, but there is a great comfort in having a spiritual family because our blood families do not understand what we were doing and thought we were crazy. We need a spiritual family, a community that understands you, and the Chicano movement was not my spiritual family, I did not feel like I was part of a family, until I found the women.

JAG: And Ana Castillo, Montserrat Fontes or Estela Portillo are members of that family. What do you have in common with them?

SC: Sometimes just a uterus. Maybe a uterus and sometimes even our Spanish is very different. It's like splitting hairs and saying what makes me different from even a Chicana writer who lives in Chicago, like Ana, I always look for place as a difference, not to compete but to find my voice, to find my center.

JAG: Are you saying that there is a Chicana voice?

SC: I don't know, that's your job. (laughs) I'm on the other end of the telescope, so I don't see what you see.

JAG: *House on Mango Street* is always your book name, but I really love your short stories. Sometimes I think that I like your short stories even more than your novels, some of them are so fabulous.

SC: Thank you, I like them better because I think they are better crafted.

JAG: What would you say if I compare you with Hemingway in the sense that Hemingway is always recognized by his novels and not so much by his brilliant short stories.

SC: Thank you, I appreciate it very much because I try, with every genre, every poem, every chapter that I write, to do it better than the last. I always try to *mejorar, y mi papa me enseñó eso*, “when you do a job, get paid higher the next time, never go backwards, always go up”. And I understood that about my craft with my *oficio* too. I try to do that with everything in my life because the public will be very happy if I wrote “Mango Street II”, I could write fifteen chapters more to Mango Street and that’s it, *pero para qué*, I already did that. I want to do something I’ve never done, so if I’m interested in something in the moment, something exciting that Rulfo is teaching me, I’m going to try that in the story, so some of the stories I learned from Rulfo, from Jane Reeves, from Nuria del Mar.

JAG: How do you understand La Llorona at the end of the 20th Century as a relic or as an actual reality.

SC: You only have to look at the papers, the Llorona stories happen every day. You know that woman in Houston who drowned her children, did you read about that? There’s always a Malinche story, a Llorona story in the papers, you just have to read the papers or read the *alarmas, sí ocurren* and you see these women, we look at it very deep, and say “I would never put that woman in jail, I’d put her husband in jail”. But anyway, that’s why I try to come to my work, because I feel like I see these vestiges of these nets in me. But I don’t know about Chicano literature or writers, or women writers, I’m very limited in that I only have consciousness of this body that I’m dragging myself around in for all these years of my life. I have a curiosity about other people, but I don’t know about them except by way of myself.

JAG: What remains of Esperanza in Lale?

SC: I think Esperanza was a really younger self, before the Fall. There was like a Paradise and a Fall for me in my life, and Esperanza is part of Lala in part one, before the crash. That was part of my innocence, because my father created a kind of shielded world for me where I really thought *que los hombres iban a ser como mi padre, muy caballeros conmigo*. I had no idea that people would treat me the way that I was treated,

and it was like night and day. When I had my relationship with my professor it was such a damaging relationship, that's why I always tell women when I speak, "don't have relationships with your professors." It is such an abuse to be treated like that from people that are your teachers, it is so disrespectful how they treat their women students that way, they don't see them as they would their daughters. I just went to some place that I never came back from, it was like vanquishing, and I think that Esperanza is me before that quake, before that shock, and Lala in part three is me now, that's who I am...*grosera* (laughs)

JAG: When reading *Caramelo* it remind me *The Brick People* by Alejandro Morales. The novel about his father coming to California, working...

SC: *Sí, me lo regaló, pero* I haven't had a *momento* to read it yet. Part of the problem is that I move a lot and I live in *cajas*, before I got this house, so I don't know where my books are, *no tengo libreros ni tengo donde ponerlos* so everything is all thrown around, It is easier for me to buy a book than to find it, but Alejandro [Morales] gave it to me, *me lo firmó y todo*, but I don't know where it is, I'm finally building a library in my office, and then I will be able to find where everything is.

JAG: After reading *Caramelo* I have had a clear sense of paralelism. What I mean is that even quite different experiences have many things in common.

SC: *Para mí todos los libros llegan en su momento*, so there were some books I read that it wasn't time for me to read them, and for example it's time for me to read Emerson now, it wasn't time before. Siddhartha, I didn't understand it when I read it before, but now that I'm searching for spirituality, it's time. All these things arrive in the moment when your body needs to be nourished by certain books, so I will read something that's in my library, but it's just that I don't know where they are.

JAG: About spirituality. Why do you have "Buddhalupe" tattooed?

SC: This book was very hard for me to write, and I really thought that when I did this tattoo it was to mark a death and a rebirth. I think we have lots of deaths in our lives, and if we're lucky we are reborn and if we're not lucky we wander around with the walking wounded. *Yo me morí con este libro* and a new me is being reborn and part of the process of searching for a spiritual cell in my forties is with pain. There are a lot

of *dolores* in this book, because there have been a lot of *dolores* in my life, so this [tattoo] is sort of like to celebrate this book with something significant. I originally was asked to pose for a Hispanic magazine but I have this policy where I don't appear in books with "Hispanic" on the title because I'm not Hispanic; I don't accept *premios* that have the word "Hispanic" because I don't feel Hispanic. So there was the paradox of appearing on the cover of Hispanic and I'm not Hispanic. So I put a temporary tattoo that said "*pura latina*" on it, but *me gustó tanto* the juxtaposition of a tough tattoo with something ultra-feminine. In my head I feel tough, I think I have a deep voice, I'm big like Lala, in my head, so people are always surprised when they meet me that I'm so feminine and small, but that's not how I see myself. So I liked the idea of having a tattoo thrown upside down and on its head, so when people see me they don't expect me to have a tattoo. I didn't want to have "*pura latina*" on me, I preferred to have something more significant for this stage in my life, and that was the Buddhism and the Virgen de Guadalupe that came into my life. Since I wasn't raised up in a religious home like Lala, my mother was a godless woman, so I wanted to mock that. My mother saw it and told me that it was the stupidest thing I've done and I told my mother "well I think the stupidest thing you've done was to have eight children". I didn't mean it to be mean, but I wanted to tell her that from my point of view I would have the tubes tied after the first one.

JAG: Culturally religion is at the heart of Latino machism; so I don't understand why you are using a religious image like the Virgin.

SC: *Sí, pero es la Virgen* but no from Catholicism, she's changed.....My work has always been spiritual, *House on Mango Street* is full of spirituality but it's not Catholic, it's looking for spirituality.

JAG:It seems Chicano literature is in fashion nowadays. What will remain, lets say, in twenty, thirty years from now? How do you see Chicano literature in general?

SC: I don't think Chicano literature is in fashion, it's only a fashion in Europe. I think in Europe anything exotic is always in fashion, so maybe it's due to exoticism, I don't think it's in fashion in the United States. Chicano literature is looking for a new direction and a new name, calling itself "latino literature," it's looking for itself. Things have changed, I grew up calling myself "latina" because on the city I grew up in, but we're seeing those changes in cities like Los Angeles and other places where we're

seeing how people redefining what it means to be Latino. I think we are going to see something that is kind of multi-ethnic, not just Mexican-Americans but more of a multi-Latino. I hope we see things that are more including, much more work that will explore other *fronteras*, not just *fronteras* of culture but *fronteras* of sexuality and class, because now we're seeing people publish from many different classes and niveles.

JAG: Any work in progress?

CS: I have a button box full of *cuentitos* called Infinito, erotic short stories. I have a book called "Uncensored Cisneros", which are ideas for poems, and a book called "Ten Times Ten", on how to teach writing to people who are afraid to write.

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