



Voices  
from the  
Gaps

# VG Interview: Sandra Cisneros

**Maria-Ant3nia Oliver-Rotger (M-A O-R):** You have said that you found your personal voice as a writer when you ceased to try to emulate a writing about comfortable spaces and places. Yet, the idea of the house as a space of comfort and intimacy is very present in your writings, especially in *The House on Mango Street*. Do you think that, in that respect, Gaston Bachelard's description of the house as a space of intimacy in *The Poetics of Space* influenced you in any way?

Sandra Cisneros (SC): Yes, it did. Only I didn't understand it in the first place, and had to reflect on why this was so. I realized that I was the only person in the creative writing workshop that didn't have the same type of memory as Bachelard did regarding houses. This made me realize my class difference, and, subsequently, my gender difference regarding homes.

**M-A O-R:** In *Mango Street* Esperanza becomes gradually aware of the spatial divisions within her own neighborhood and within the city. It seems, on the one hand, that she can only find freedom outside the social and gender constraints of her neighborhood, away from her past, her tradition, her class, her family home. On the other hand, she promises to go back to Mango, to rescue the ones that cannot out. You have said before that *Mango Street* would have never been published if you yourself had not had that space or house of your own to write the stories. Can you comment on this identification with the experience of the poor, the sexually abused, the disenfranchised, which has been your own experience, and the need for some distance?

SC: I'm afraid I'm still trying to find that balance. Especially now that everyone wants a piece of me. I find that I have to become more and more reclusive, and pick and choose when I am public and when I am private.



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SC (continued): I also have had to deal with some seeing me now as “rich” or reclusive when I don’t see myself that way as a result of my success. This however seems to come from the unhappiest individuals on earth. So there’s been splits even there, with a lot of envy and hate tossed in. It’s quite astounding, and took me by surprise. However, I have to be solid when it comes to who and what and where I am, and these are all lessons in grace. I have to understand what my strengths and limitations are, and work from a true place. I try to do this as best I can while still protecting my writer self, which more than ever needs privacy. I realize that when I moved out of my father’s house I shocked and frightened him because I needed a room of my own, a space of my own to reinvent myself. I live in Texas precisely because I needed this privacy to excuse myself from Sunday dinners and baptism parties, etc. I think my family and closest friends are learning about my need to withdraw, and I am learning how to restore and store my energy to both serve the community to the best of my ability and to serve my writer’s heart.

**M-A O-R: Have you ever experienced guilt at being more privileged than those who “cannot out”?**

SC: Yes, sometimes. But I deal with this meditating and by understanding I’ve been put on the planet to serve humanity. I have to remind myself to live simply and not to overindulge, which is a constant battle in a material world.

**M-A O-R: I am curious about the story “Bums in the Attic.” Could you comment on what the particular space of the attic means for you, especially in the context of that story?**

SC: I wrote the story so long ago... I don’t know what inspired it. I wanted to share my home. In houses here in the U.S, attics are near the sky, nooks, comforting. I don’t share my attic with any bums because my office is in the attic, but I do have a guest bedroom often occupied by guest writers/artists. I call it the Stray-Writer-in-Residence room.

**M-A O-R: One of the themes you deal with in the stories is women’s idealization of white American or Mexican upper class standards of beauty and success. Beauty may enslave women, but it may also be a source of power if they consciously use the beauty system to their advantage and become “beautiful and cruel.” Do you feel this is a possible avenue towards women’s liberation?**

SC: No. I no longer do. I don’t see any kind of mirror of power, male power, that is, as a form of liberation. I don’t believe in an eye for an eye. I don’t believe this is truly freedom. Revenge only engenders violence, not clarity and true peace. I think liberation must come from within. But you’re asking me now at 45 not 25 when I wrote the piece.



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**M-A O-R:** There is a tendency to speak of women as victims. I feel that in your fiction there is always a nice balance between the exposure of that victimization and the emphasis on the need for inner strength, and the capacity of women to attain that strength. Doris Lessing has complained that we women often tend to put too much emphasis on our historical victimization, instead of focusing on positive role models. Which women (living or dead) do you admire and consider to be examples to follow?

SC: I admire parts of famous women. But not completely. I admire Maria Callas, Collette, Jean Rhys, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, but only in bits and pieces. I learn from them, and am warned as well as guided by their lives. They are human beings, after all. I also admire women whose obituaries I read. Not famous, just outstanding. Women who gave their lives for community rights or who donated their life earnings to a college. They are nameless women. Women who loved flowers, raised children. These women who harmed no one and who created I admire. I admire their humility and their service. The other women mentioned I know well enough to both admire and pity, because so much has been documented about their lives, so I'm reluctant to name anyone well-known to me. However, there are plenty of examples of women around me whom I admire fiercely; women who work very hard in the community as educators, or artists, or community activists. They are my friends.

**M-A O-R:** What aspects of your American and Mexican heritage do you value and cherish the most?

SC: This isn't something I wake up with and think about at length, but I guess that I value very much, if not most, my right to speak without being thrown in jail or killed—this is my American inheritance. Of my Mexican inheritance, I'd say it's the spirituality, the generosity, the *cariño*, the resilience.

**M-A O-R:** How do you think people of mixed origins, bilingual, bicultural people can use their mixed cultural identity to their advantage? What are the pleasures of belonging to different places at once or of having different identities?

SC: We're amphibians and bridges to communities at war with each other, but it's our job in the new millennium to help bridge and translate. Otherwise we all die. As for the pleasure, you see yourself in ways others might not see themselves; you are privy to many observations and perspectives. It's quite fascinating.



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**M-A O-R: What are the disadvantages, if any, of this bicultural or multicultural heritage?**

SC: Sometimes I feel I can't quite master my written and spoken Spanish, because I'm too much a student of English. I would need another lifetime to learn it. So I am not as fluent in my second language and I know I am losing something; I know I am losing a great deal because of my need, urgency, limit of time to work on the other language as a writer.

**M-A O-R: How do you like to refer to yourself when you are speaking about your cultural and national identity: "American," "Mexican-American," "Chicana," other?**

SC: I usually say Latina, Mexican-American or American Mexican, and in certain contexts, Chicana, depending on whether my audience understands the term or not. I was raised in Chicago, so always used Latina. It's what my Father and brothers called ourselves, when we meant the entire Spanish-speaking community of Chicago. If we meant just our group we preferred "Mexican," though this caused problems when I moved to the border where people from Mexico are constantly arriving. I thought that if I said that I was Mexican in English that would clarify it, but it didn't over here in Texas. I had to say "Mexican-American" or Chicana.

**M-A O-R: Do you feel at home when you go to Mexico?**

SC: Not at all. Not in the cities. I do feel somewhat at home in the villages, but it's a romanticized home, not a real one, only in the imagination, a home of the past, a nostalgia. Not an actual one where I could actually buy a house and move in and feel "safe." Mexico is only a memory of childhood safety.

**M-A O-R: You have been in Spain. Can you tell me a little about your view of this country?**

SC: My view of Spain is rather small, since I have only been there a handful of days three or four times in my life. But I did find parallels in the Catalan region with educators; I felt like I was talking to Chicano bilingual education teachers here. I identified with the Catalan people immensely, because of this and because of the work of Mercé Rodoreda, which I admire. However, I have to say the first time I came to Spain I came overland from the south of France, and the feeling of being treated as an animal of prey was immediate. It was a bit frightening, because I'd felt very safe and complacent in the south of France.



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SC (continued): I felt it again these last two trips to Barcelona. I was in Barcelona for a lecture in 1998 and they refused to serve me at a restaurant when I told them I was alone. I felt terrified as if I'd escaped from the harem. I felt as I do in Mexico. I felt grief that I was seen as a burden or as prey or as someone who could be successfully intimidated. It saddened me to feel that a city as civilized as Barcelona still stigmatized me for being that aberration, a lone female, and that whether it was out of economics or out of fear I'd create havoc. I was denied my dinner, and I felt like a character out of a Dickens novel. Out you go, find your own supper elsewhere! What a feeling! When dark came, I was terrified to go out and seek dinner, afraid I'd be refused again. It was an ugly feeling.

**M-A O-R: Do you see yourself as a feminist? How do you think your writing may widen the concept of feminism many people have had so far?**

SC: Yes, I do see myself as a feminist. I can't talk about the latter. I really don't know how I'm contributing to widening the concept. I don't really think or talk about that. I just do what I do, and I know I do it as a woman, a Latina, and as a Buddhist-Guadalupana. I try to be as honest about what I see and to speak rather than be silent, especially if it means I can save lives, or serve humanity. I try to speak because we've been silent as women for so long, especially Latinas, to the point of self-destruction. I speak because to not speak is to be complicit in this pain. I was silent as a child, and silenced as a young woman; I am taking my lumps and bumps for being a big mouth, now, but usually from those whose opinion I don't respect. My feminism is humanism, with the weakest being those who I represent, and that includes many beings and life forms, including some men.

**M-A O-R: What has been your greatest challenge as a writer?**

SC: Perhaps the greatest challenge has been trying to keep my time to myself and my private life private in order to do my job. Everything that is most mine belongs to everyone now.