shape of a small body, a boy looking down over the edge towards the ocean. As Jago Antia watched, the boy turned slowly, and in the weak light he saw that the boy was wearing a uniform of olive green, and he asked, "Where shall I go?" Jago Antia began to speak, but then his voice caught, because he was remembering his next and seventh birthday, the first party without Soli, and his parents holding him between them, soothing him, saying you must want something, and he looking up at their faces, at the lines in his father's face, the exhaustion in his mother's eyes. Burjor Mama sits on the carpet behind him with head down, and Amir Khan stands behind, and Jehangir shakes his head, nothing. His mother's eyes fill with tears, and she kisses him on the forehead, "Baba, it's all right, let us give you a present," and his heart breaks beneath a surging weight, but he stands up straight, and looking at her and his father, he says, "I want a uniform." So Jago Antia looked at the boy as he came closer, and he saw the small letters above the pocket, J. ANTIA, and the sun came up, and he saw the boy clearly, he saw the enormous dark eyes, and in the eyes he saw his vicious and ravenous strength, his courage and his devotion, his silence and his pain, his whole misshapen and magnificent life, and Jago Antia said, "Jehangir, Jehangir, you're already at home."

Thapa and Amir Khan came up the stairs slowly, and he called out to them. "Come, come. I'm all right." He was sitting cross-legged, watching the sun move in and out of the clouds.

Thapa squatted beside him. "Was it here?"

"He's gone. I saw him, and then he vanished."

"Who?"

Jago Antia shook his head. "Someone I didn't know before."

"What was he doing here then?"

"He was lost." He leaned on both their shoulders, one arm around each, for the descent down the stairs. Somehow, naked and hopping from stair to stair, he was smiling. He knew that nothing had changed. He knew he was still and forever Jago Antia, that for him it was too late for anything but a kind of solitude, that he would give his body to the fire, that in the implacable hills to the north, among the rocks, he and other men and women, each with histories of their own, would find each other for life and for death. And yet he felt free. He sat on the porch, strapping his leg on, and Amir Khan brought out three cups of tea. Thapa wrapped a sheet around Jago Antia, and looking at each other they both laughed. "Thank you," Jago Antia said. Then they drank the tea together.

Sandra Cisneros

Never Marry a Mexican

(UNITED STATES)

Never marry a Mexican, my ma said once and always. She said this because of my father. She said this though she was Mexican too. But she was born here in the U.S., and he was born there, and it's *not* the same, you know.

I'll *never* marry. Not any man. I've known men too intimately. I've witnessed their infidelities, and I've helped them to it. Unzipped and unhooked and agreed to clandestine maneuvers. I've been accomplice, committed premeditated crimes. I'm guilty of having caused deliberate pain to other women. I'm vindictive and cruel, and I'm capable of anything.

I admit, there was a time when all I wanted was to belong to a man. To wear that gold band on my left hand and be worn on his arm like an expensive jewel brilliant in the light of day. Not the sneaking around I did in different bars that all looked the same, red carpets with a black grillwork design, flocked wallpaper, wooden wagon-wheel light fixtures with hurricane lampshades a sick amber color like the drinking glasses you get for free at gas stations.

Dark bars, dark restaurants then. And if not—my apartment, with his toothbrush firmly planted in the toothbrush holder like a flag on the North Pole. The bed so big because he never stayed the whole night. Of course not.

Borrowed. That's how I've had my men. Just the cream skimmed off the top. Just the sweetest part of the fruit, without the bitter skin that daily living with a spouse can rend. They've come to me when they wanted the sweet meat then.

So, no. I've never married and never will. Not because I couldn't, but because I'm too romantic for marriage. Marriage has failed me, you could say. Not a man exists who hasn't disappointed me, whom I could trust to love the way I've loved. It's because I believe too much in marriage that I don't. Better to not marry than live a lie.

Mexican men, forget it. For a long time the men clearing off the tables or chopping meat behind the butcher counter or driving the bus I rode to school every day, those weren't men. Not men I considered as potential lovers. Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Chilean, Colombian, Panamanian, Salvadorean, Bolivian, Honduran, Argentine, Dominican, Venezuelan, Guatemalan,

Ecuadorean, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Costa Rican, Paraguayan, Uruguayan, I don't care. I never saw them. My mother did this to me.

I guess she did it to spare me and Ximena the pain she went through. Having married a Mexican man at seventeen. Having had to put up with all the grief a Mexican family can put on a girl because she was from *el otro lado*, the other side, and my father had married down by marrying her. If he had married a white woman from *el otro lado*, that would've been different. That would've been marrying up, even if the white girl was poor. But what could be more ridiculous than a Mexican girl who couldn't even speak Spanish, who didn't know enough to set a separate plate for each course at dinner, nor how to fold cloth napkins, nor how to set the silverware.

In my ma's house the plates were always stacked in the center of the table, the knives and forks and spoons standing in a jar, help yourself. All the dishes chipped or cracked and nothing matched. And no tablecloth, ever. And newspapers set on the table whenever my grandpa sliced watermelons, and how embarrassed she would be when her boyfriend, my father, would come over and there were newspapers all over the kitchen floor and table. And my grandpa, big hardworking Mexican man, saying Come, come and eat, and slicing a big wedge of those dark green watermelons, a big slice, he wasn't stingy with food. Never, even during the Depression. Come, come and eat, to whoever came knocking on the back door. Hobos sitting at the dinner table and the children staring and staring. Because my grandfather always made sure they never went without. Flour and rice, by the barrel and by the sack. Potatoes. Big bags of pinto beans. And watermelons, bought three or four at a time, rolled under his bed and brought out when you least expected. My grandpa had survived three wars, one Mexican, two American, and he knew what living without meant. He knew.

My father, on the other hand, did not. True, when he first came to this country he had worked shelling clams, washing dishes, planting hedges, sat on the back of the bus in Little Rock and had the bus driver shout, You—sit up here, and my father had shrugged sheepishly and said, No speak English.

But he was no economic refugee, no immigrant fleeing a war. My father ran away from home because he was afraid of facing his father after his first-year grades at the university proved he'd spent more time fooling around than studying. He left behind a house in Mexico City that was neither poor nor rich, but thought itself better than both. A boy who would get off a bus when he saw a girl he knew board if he didn't have the money to pay her fare. That was the world my father left behind.

I imagine my father in his *fanfarrón* clothes, because that's what he was, a *fanfarrón*. That's what my mother thought the moment she turned around to the voice that was asking her to dance. A big show-off, she'd say years later. Nothing but a big show-off. But she never said why she married him. My father in his shark-blue suits with the starched handkerchief in the breast pocket, his felt fedora, his tweed topcoat with the big shoulders, and heavy British wing tips with the pin-hole design on the heel and toe. Clothes that cost a lot. Expensive. That's what my father's things said. *Calidad.* Quality.

My father must've found the U.S. Mexicans very strange, so foreign from what he knew at home in Mexico City where the servant served watermelon on a plate with silverware and a cloth napkin, or mangos with their own special prongs. Not like this, eating with your legs wide open in the yard, or in the kitchen hunkered over newspapers. *Come, come and eat.* No, never like this.

How I make my living depends. Sometimes I work as a translator. Sometimes I get paid by the word and sometimes by the hour, depending on the job. I do this in the day, and at night I paint. I'd do anything in the day just so I can keep on painting.

I work as a substitute teacher, too, for the San Antonio Independent School District. And that's worse than translating those travel brochures with their tiny print, believe me. I can't stand kids. Not any age. But it pays the rent.

Any way you look at it, what I do to make a living is a form of prostitution. People say, "A painter? How nice," and want to invite me to their parties, have me decorate the lawn like an exotic orchid for hire. But do they buy art?

I'm amphibious. I'm a person who doesn't belong to any class. The rich like to have me around because they envy my creativity; they know they can't buy *that*. The poor don't mind if I live in their neighborhood because they know I'm poor like they are, even if my education and the way I dress keeps us worlds apart. I don't belong to any class. Not to the poor, whose neighborhood I share. Not to the rich, who come to my exhibitions and buy my work. Not to the middle class from which my sister Ximena and I fled.

When I was young, when I first left home and rented that apartment with my sister and her kids right after her husband left, I thought it would be glamorous to be an artist. I wanted to be like Frida or Tina. I was ready to suffer with my camera and my paint brushes in that awful apartment we rented for $150 each because it had high ceilings and those wonderful glass skylights that convinced us we had to have it. Never mind there was no sink in the bathroom, and a tub that looked like a sarcophagus, and floorboards that didn't meet, and a hallway to scare away the dead. But fourteen-foot ceilings was enough for us to write a check for the deposit right then and there. We thought it all romantic. You know the place, the one on Zarzamora on top of the barber shop with the Casasola prints of the Mexican Revolution. Neon BIRRIA TEPATITLÁN sign round the corner, two goats knocking their heads together, and all those Mexican bakeries, Las Brisas for *huevos rancheros* and *carnitas* and *barbacoa* on Sundays, and fresh fruit milk shakes, and mango *paletas*, and more signs in Spanish than in English. We thought it was great, great. The barrio looked cute in the daytime, like Sesame Street. Kids hopscotching on the sidewalk, blessed little boogers. And hardware stores that still sold ostrich-feather dusters, and whole families marching out of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church on Sundays, girls in their swirly-whirly dresses and patent-leather shoes, boys in their dress Stacys and shiny shirts.

But nights, that was nothing like what we knew up on the north side. Pistols going off like the wild, wild West, and me and Ximena and the kids huddled in one bed with the lights off listening to it all, saying, Go to sleep, babies, it's just

firecrackers. But we knew better. Ximena would say, Clemencia, maybe we should go home. And I'd say, Shit! Because she knew as well as I did there was no home to go home to. Not with our mother. Not with that man she married. After Daddy died, it was like we didn't matter. Like Ma was so busy feeling sorry for herself, I don't know. I'm not like Ximena. I still haven't worked it out after all this time, even though our mother's dead now. My half brothers living in that house that should've been ours, me and Ximena's. But that's—how do you say it?—water under the damn? I can't ever get the sayings right even though I was born in this country. We didn't say shit like that in our house.

Once Daddy was gone, it was like my ma didn't exist, like if she died, too. I used to have a little finch, twisted one of its tiny red legs between the bars of the cage once, who knows how. The leg just dried up and fell off. My bird lived a long time without it, just a little red stump of a leg. He was fine, really. My mother's memory is like that, like if something already dead dried up and fell off, and I stopped missing where she used to be. Like if I never had a mother. And I'm not ashamed to say it either. When she married that white man, and he and his boys moved into my father's house, it was as if she stopped being my mother. Like I never even had one.

Ma always sick and too busy worrying about her own life, she would've sold us to the Devil if she could. "Because I married so young, *mi'ja*," she'd say. "Because your father, he was so much older than me, and I never had a chance to be young. Honey, try to understand . . ." Then I'd stop listening.

That man she met at work, Owen Lambert, the foreman at the photo-finishing plant, who she was seeing even while my father was sick. Even then. That's what I can't forgive.

When my father was coughing up blood and phlegm in the hospital, half his face frozen, and his tongue so fat he couldn't talk, he looked so small with all those tubes and plastic sacks dangling around him. But what I remember most is the smell, like death was already sitting on his chest. And I remember the doctor scraping the phlegm out of my father's mouth with a white washcloth, and my daddy gagging and I wanted to yell, Stop, you stop that, he's my daddy. Goddamn you. Make him live. Daddy, don't. Not yet, not yet, not yet. And how I couldn't hold myself up, I couldn't hold myself up. Like if they'd beaten me, or pulled my insides out through my nostrils, like if they'd stuffed me with cinnamon and cloves, and I just stood there dry-eyed next to Ximena and my mother, Ximena between us because I wouldn't let her stand next to me. Everyone repeating over and over the Ave Marías and Padre Nuestros. The priest sprinkling holy water, *mundo sin fin, amén.*

Drew, remember when you used to call me your Malinalli? It was a joke, a private game between us, because you looked like a Cortez with that beard of yours. My skin dark against yours. Beautiful, you said. You said I was beautiful, and when you said it, Drew, I was.

My Malinalli, Malinche, my courtesan, you said, and yanked my head back by the braid. Calling me that name in between little gulps of breath and the raw kisses you gave, laughing from that black beard of yours.

Before daybreak, you'd be gone, same as always, before I even knew it. And it was as if I'd imagined you, only the teeth marks on my belly and nipples proving me wrong.

Your skin pale, but your hair blacker than a pirate's. Malinalli, you called me, remember? *Mi doradita.* I liked when you spoke to me in my language. I could love myself and think myself worth loving.

Your son. Does he know how much I had to do with his birth? I was the one who convinced you to let him be born. Did you tell him, while his mother lay on her back laboring his birth, I lay in his mother's bed making love to you.

You're nothing without me. I created you from spit and red dust. And I can snuff you between my finger and thumb if I want to. Blow you to kingdom come. You're just a smudge of paint I chose to birth on canvas. And when I made you over, you were no longer a part of her, you were all mine. The landscape of your body taut as a drum. The heart beneath that hide thrumming and thrumming. Not an inch did I give back.

I paint and repaint you the way I see fit, even now. After all these years. Did you know that? Little fool. You think I went hobbling along with my life, whimpering and whining like some twangy country-and-western when you went back to her. But I've been waiting. Making the world look at you from my eyes. And if that's not power, what is?

Nights I light all the candles in the house, the ones to La Virgen de Guadalupe, the ones to El Niño Fidencio, Don Pedrito Jaramillo, Santo Niño de Atocha, Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos, and especially, Santa Lucía, with her beautiful eyes on a plate.

Your eyes are beautiful, you said. You said they were the darkest eyes you'd ever seen and kissed each one as if they were capable of miracles. And after you left, I wanted to scoop them out with a spoon, place them on a plate under these blue blue skies, food for the blackbirds.

The boy, your son. The one with the face of that redheaded woman who is your wife. The boy red-freckled like fish food floating on the skin of water. That boy.

I've been waiting patient as a spider all these years, since I was nineteen and he was just an idea hovering in his mother's head, and I'm the one that gave him permission and made it happen, see.

Because your father wanted to leave your mother and live with me. Your mother whining for a child, at least *that.* And he kept saying, Later, we'll see, later. But all along it was me he wanted to be with, it was me, he said.

I want to tell you this evenings when you come to see me. When you're full of talk about what kind of clothes you're going to buy, and what you used to be like when you started high school and what you're like now that you're almost finished. And how everyone knows you as a rocker, and your band, and your new red guitar that you just got because your mother gave you a choice, a guitar or a car, but you don't need a car, do your, because I drive you everywhere. You could be my son if you weren't so light-skinned.

This happened. A long time ago. Before you were born. When you were a moth inside your mother's heart. I was your father's student, yes, just like

you're mine now. And your father painted and painted me, because he said, I was his *doradita,* all golden and sun-baked, and that's the kind of woman he likes best, the ones brown as river sand, yes. And he took me under his wing and in his bed, this man, this teacher, your father. I was honored that he'd done me the favor. I was that young.

All I know is I was sleeping with your father the night you were born. In the same bed where you were conceived. I was sleeping with your father and didn't give a damn about that woman, your mother. If she was a brown woman like me, I might've had a harder time living with myself, but since she's not, I don't care. I was there first, always. I've always been there, in the mirror, under his skin, in the blood, before you were born. And he's been here in my heart before I even knew him. Understand? He's always been here. Always. Dissolving like a hibiscus flower, exploding like a rope into dust. I don't care what's right anymore. I don't care about his wife. She's not *my* sister.

And it's not the last time I've slept with a man the night his wife is birthing a baby. Why do I do that, I wonder? Sleep with a man when his wife is giving life, being suckled by a thing with its eyes still shut. Why do that? It's always given me a bit of crazy joy to be able to kill those women like that, without their knowing it. To know I've had their husbands when they were anchored in blue hospital rooms, their guts yanked inside out, the baby sucking their breasts while their husband sucked mine. All this while their ass stitches were still hurting.

Once, drunk on margaritas, I telephoned your father at four in the morning, woke the bitch up. Hello, she chirped. I want to talk to Drew. Just a moment, she said in her most polite drawing-room English. Just a moment. I laughed about that for weeks. What a stupid ass to pass the phone over to the lug asleep beside her. Excuse me, honey, it's for you. When Drew mumbled hello I was laughing so hard I could hardly talk. Drew? That dumb bitch of a wife of yours, I said, and that's all I could manage. That stupid stupid stupid. No Mexican woman would react like that. Excuse me, honey. It cracked me up.

He's got the same kind of skin, the boy. All the blue veins pale and clear just like his mama. Skin like roses in December. Pretty boy. Little clone. Little cells split into you and you and you. Tell me, baby, which part of you is your mother. I try to imagine her lips, her jaw, her long long legs that wrapped themselves around this father who took me to his bed.

This happened. I'm asleep. Or pretend to be. You're watching me, Drew. I feel your weight when you sit on the corner of the bed, dressed and ready to go, but now you're just watching me sleep. Nothing. Not a word. Not a kiss. Just sitting. You're taking me in, under inspection. What do you think already?

I haven't stopped dreaming you. Did you know that? Do you think it's strange? I never tell, though. I keep it to myself like I do all the thoughts I think of you.

After all these years.

I don't want you looking at me. I don't want you taking me in while I'm asleep. I'll open my eyes and frighten you away.

There. What did I tell you? *Drew? What is it?* Nothing. I'd knew you'd say that.

Let's not talk. We're no good at it. With you I'm useless with words. As if somehow I had to learn to speak all over again, as if the words I needed haven't been invented yet. We're cowards. Come back to bed. At least there I feel I have you for a little. For a moment. For a catch of the breath. You let go. You ache and tug. You rip my skin.

You're almost not a man without your clothes. How do I explain it? You're so much a child in my bed. Nothing but a big boy who needs to be held. I won't let anyone hurt you. My pirate. My slender boy of a man.

After all these years.

I didn't imagine it, did I? A Ganges, an eye of the storm. For a little. When we forgot ourselves, you tugged me, I leapt inside you and split you like an apple. Opened for the other to look and not give back. Something wrenched itself loose. Your body doesn't lie. It's not silent like you.

You're nude as a pearl. You've lost your train of smoke. You're tender as rain. If I put you in my mouth you'd dissolve like snow.

You were ashamed to be so naked. Pulled back. But I saw you for what you are, when you opened yourself for me. When you were careless and let yourself through. I caught that catch of the breath. I'm not crazy.

When you slept, you tugged me toward you. You sought me in the dark. I didn't sleep. Every cell, every follicle, every nerve, alert. Watching you sigh and roll and turn and hug me closer to you. I didn't sleep. I was taking *you* in that time.

Your mother? Only once. Years after your father and I stopped seeing each other. At an art exhibition. A show on the photographs of Eugène Atget. Those images, I could look at them for hours. I'd taken a group of students with me.

It was your father I saw first. And in that instant I felt as if everyone in the room, all the sepia-toned photographs, my students, the men in business suits, the high-heeled women, the security guards, everyone, could see me for what I was. I had to scurry out, lead my kids to another gallery, but some things destiny has cut out for you.

He caught up with us in the coat-check area, arm in arm with a redheaded Barbie doll in a fur coat. One of those scary Dallas types, hair yanked into a ponytail, big shiny face like the women behind the cosmetic counters at Neiman's. That's what I remember. She must've been with him all along, only I swear I never saw her until that second.

You could tell from a slight hesitancy, only slight because he's too suave to hesitate, that he was nervous. Then he's walking toward me, and I didn't know what to do, just stood there dazed like those animals crossing the road at night when the headlights stun them.

And I don't know why, but all of sudden I looked at my shoes and felt ashamed at how old they looked. And he comes up to me, my love, your

father, in that way of his with that grin that makes me want to beat him, makes me want to make love to him, and he says in the most sincere voice you ever heard, "Ah, Clemencia! *This* is Megan." No introduction could've been meaner. *This* is Megan. Just like that.

I grinned like an idiot and held out my paw—"Hello, Megan"—and smiled too much the way you do when you can't stand someone. Then I got the hell out of there, chattering like a monkey all the ride back with my kids. When I got home I had to lie down with a cold washcloth on my forehead and the TV on. All I could hear throbbing under the washcloth in that deep part behind my eyes: *This* is Megan.

And that's how I fell asleep, with TV on and every light in the house burning. When I woke up it was something like three in the morning. I shut the lights and TV and went to get some aspirin, and the cats, who'd been asleep with me on the couch, got up too and followed me into the bathroom as if they knew what's what. And then they followed me into bed, where they aren't allowed, but this time I just let them, fleas and all.

This happened, too. I swear I'm not making this up. It's all true. It was the last time I was going to be with your father. We had agreed. All for the best. Surely I could see that, couldn't I? My own good. A good sport. A young girl like me. Hadn't I understood . . . responsibilities. Besides, he could *never* marry *me*. You didn't think . . . ? *Never marry a Mexican. Never marry a Mexican* . . . No, of course not. I see. I see.

We had the house to ourselves for a few days, who knows how. You and your mother had gone somewhere. Was it Christmas? I don't remember.

I remember the leaded-glass lamp with the milk glass above the dining-room table. I made a mental inventory of everything. The Egyptian lotus design on the hinges of the doors. The narrow, dark hall where your father and I had made love once. The four-clawed tub where he had washed my hair and rinsed it with a tin bowl. This window. That counter. The bedroom with its light in the morning, incredibly soft, like the light from a polished dime.

The house was immaculate, as always, not a stray hair anywhere, not a flake of dandruff or a crumpled towel. Even the roses on the dining-room table held their breath. A kind of airless cleanliness that always made me want to sneeze.

Why was I curious about this woman he lived with? Every time I went to the bathroom, I found myself opening the medicine cabinet, looking at all the things that were hers. Her Estée Lauder lipsticks. Corals and pinks, of course. Her nail polishes—mauve was as brave as she could wear. Her cotton balls and blonde hairpins. A pair of bone-colored sheepskin slippers, as clean as the day she'd bought them. On the door hook—a white robe with a MADE IN ITALY label, and a silky nightshirt with pearl buttons. I touched the fabrics. *Calidad.* Quality.

I don't know how to explain what I did next. While your father was busy in the kitchen, I went over to where I'd left my backpack, and took out a bag of gummy bears I'd bought. And while he was banging pots, I went around the house and left a trail of them in places I was sure *she* would find them. One in her lucite makeup organizer. One stuffed inside each bottle of nail polish. I untwisted the expensive lipsticks to their full length and smushed a bear on the top before recapping them. I even put a gummy bear in her diaphragm case in the very center of that luminescent rubber moon.

Why bother? Drew could take the blame. Or he could say it was the cleaning woman's Mexican voodoo. I knew that, too. It didn't matter. I got a strange satisfaction wandering about the house leaving them in places only she would look.

And just as Drew was shouting, "Dinner!" I saw it on the desk. One of those wooden babushka dolls Drew had brought her from his trip to Russia. I know. He'd bought one just like it for me.

I just did what I did, uncapped the doll inside a doll inside a doll, until I got to the very center, the tiniest baby inside all the others, and this I replaced with a gummy bear. And then I put the dolls back, just like I'd found them, one inside the other, inside the other. Except for the baby, which I put inside my pocket. All through dinner I kept reaching in the pocket of my jean jacket. When I touched it, it made me feel good.

On the way home, on the bridge over the *arroyo* on Guadalupe Street, I stopped the car, switched on the emergency blinkers, got out, and dropped the wooden toy into that muddy creek where winos piss and rats swim. The Barbie doll's toy stewing there in that muck. It gave me a feeling like nothing before and since.

Then I drove home and slept like the dead.

These mornings, I fix coffee for me, milk for the boy. I think of that woman, and I can't see a trace of my lover in this boy, as if she conceived him by immaculate conception.

I sleep with this boy, their son. To make the boy love me the way I love his father. To make him want me, hunger, twist in his sleep, as if he'd swallowed glass. I put him in my mouth. Here, little piece of my *corazón*. Boy with hard thighs and just a bit of down and a small hard downy ass like his father's, and that back like a valentine. Come here, *mi cariñito*. Come to *mamita*. Here's a bit of toast.

I can tell from the way he looks at me, I have him in my power. Come, sparrow. I have the patience of eternity. Come to *mamita*. My stupid little bird. I don't move. I don't startle him. I let him nibble. All, all for you. Rub his belly. Stroke him. Before I snap my teeth.

What is it inside me that makes me so crazy at 2 A.M.? I can't blame it on alcohol in my blood when there isn't any. It's something worse. Something that poisons the blood and tips me when the night swells and I feel as if the whole sky were leaning against my brain.

And if I killed someone on a night like this? And if it was *me* I killed

instead, I'd be guilty of getting in the line of crossfire, innocent bystander, isn't it a shame. I'd be walking with my head full of images and my back to the guilty. Suicide? I couldn't say. I didn't see it.

Except it's not me who I want to kill. When the gravity of the planets is just right, it all tilts and upsets the visible balance. And that's when it wants out from my eyes. That's when I get on the telephone, dangerous as a terrorist. There's nothing to do but let it come.

So. What do you think? Are you convinced now I'm as crazy as a tulip or a taxi? As vagrant as a cloud?

Sometimes the sky is so big and I feel so little at night. That's the problem with being cloud. The sky is so terribly big. Why is it worse at night, when I have such an urge to communicate and no language with which to form the words? Only colors. Pictures. And you know what I have to say isn't always pleasant.

Oh, love, there. I've gone and done it. What good is it? Good or bad, I've done what I had to do and needed to. And you've answered the phone, and startled me away like a bird. And now you're probably swearing under your breath and going back to sleep, with that wife beside you, warm, radiating her own heat, alive under the flannel and down and smelling a bit like milk and hand cream, and that smell familiar and dear to you, oh.

Human beings pass me on the street, and I want to reach out and strum them as if they were guitars. Sometimes all humanity strikes me as lovely. I just want to reach out and stroke someone, and say There, there, it's all right, honey. There, there, there.

Jim Crace

The Prospect from the Silver Hills

(ENGLAND)

The company agent—friendless, single, far from home—passed most days alone in a cabin at Ibela-hoy, the Hill Without a Hat. His work was simple. Equipped with a rudimentary knowledge of mineralogy, neat, laborious handwriting, and a skill with ledgers, he had been posted to the highlands to identify the precious metals, the stones, the ores, that (everybody said) were buried there.

This was his life: awake at dawn, awake all day, awake all night. Phrenetic insomnia was the term. But there were no friends or doctors to make the diagnosis. The agent simply—like a swift, a shark—dared not sleep. He kept moving. He did not close his eyes. At night, at dawn, in the tall heat of the day, he looked out over the land and, watching the shades and colors of the hill and its valley accelerate and reel, he constructed for himself a family and a life less solitary than the one he was forced to live. He took pills. He drank what little spirits arrived each month with his provisions. He exhausted himself with long, aimless walks among the boulders and dry beds. Sometimes he fell forward at work, his nose flattened among the gravels on the table, his papers dampened by saliva, his tongue slack. But he did not sleep or close his eyes, though he was still troubled by chimeras, daydreams, which broke his concentration and, because he was conscious, seemed more substantial and coherent than sleeping dreams. As the men had already remarked among themselves when they saw the sacs of tiredness spreading across his upper cheeks and listened to his conversation, the company agent either had a fever or the devil had swapped sawdust for his brain.

Several times a week one of the survey gangs arrived in a company mobile drilling rig to deposit drill cores of augered rock and sand, pumice and shale, and provide the company agent with a profile of the world twenty meters below his feet. He sorted clays as milky as nutsap and eggstones as worn and weathered as a saint's beads into sample bags. Each rock, each smudge of soil, was condemned. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. A trace of tin. Nothing.

Once, when he had been at Ibela-hoy for only a few weeks, one of the survey gangs offered to take him down to the lumber station, where the woodsmen had established a good still and an understanding with some local

Sandra Cisneros

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Sandra Cisneros (born December 20, 1954) is an American writer. She is best known for her first novel *The House on Mango Street* (1983) and her subsequent short story collection *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). Her work experiments with literary forms and investigates emerging subject positions, which Cisneros herself attributes to growing up in a context of cultural hybridity and economic inequality that endowed her with unique stories to tell.[1] She is the recipient of numerous awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, was awarded one of 25 new Ford Foundation Art of Change fellowships in 2017, and is regarded as a key figure in Chicana literature.[2]

Cisneros's early life provided many experiences she would later draw on as a writer: she grew up as the only daughter in a family of six brothers, which often made her feel isolated, and the constant migration of her family between Mexico and the United States

instilled in her the sense of "always straddling two countries ... but not belonging to either culture."[3] Cisneros's work deals with the formation of Chicana identity, exploring the challenges of being caught between Mexican and Anglo-American cultures, facing the misogynist attitudes present in both these cultures, and experiencing poverty. For her insightful social critique and powerful prose style, Cisneros has achieved recognition far beyond Chicano and Latino communities, to the extent that *The House on Mango Street* has been translated worldwide and is taught in American classrooms as a coming-of-age novel.[4]

Cisneros has held a variety of professional positions, working as a teacher, a counselor, a college recruiter, a poet-in-the-schools, and an arts administrator, and has maintained a strong commitment to community and literary causes. In 1998 she established the Macondo Writers Workshop, which provides socially conscious workshops for writers, and in 2000 she founded the Alfredo Cisneros Del Moral Foundation, which awards talented writers connected to Texas.[5] Cisneros currently resides in Mexico.[6]

Early life and education[edit]

Cisneros was born in Chicago, Illinois on December 20, 1954, the third of seven children. The only surviving daughter, she considered herself the "odd number in a set of men". Cisneros's great-grandfather had played the piano for the Mexican president and was from a wealthy background, but he gambled away his family's fortune.[7] Her paternal grandfather Enrique was a

veteran of the Mexican Revolution, and he used what money he had saved to give her father, Alfredo Cisneros de Moral, the opportunity to go to college. However, after failing classes due to what Cisneros called his "lack of interest" in studying, Alfredo ran away to the United States to escape his father's anger. While roaming the southern United States with his brother, Alfredo visited Chicago where he met Elvira Cordero Anguiano. After getting married, the pair settled in one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods. Cisneros's biographer Robin Ganz writes that she acknowledges her mother's family name came from a very humble background, tracing its roots back to Guanajuato, Mexico, while her father's was much more "admirable".[8]

Taking work as an upholsterer to support his family, Cisneros's father began "a compulsive circular migration between Chicago and Mexico City that became the dominating pattern of Cisneros's childhood." Their family was constantly moving between the two countries, which necessitated their finding new places to live as well as schools for the children. Eventually the instability caused Cisneros's six brothers to pair off in twos, leaving her to define herself as the isolated one. Her feelings of exclusion from the family were exacerbated by her father, who referred to his "seis hijos y una hija" ("six sons and one daughter") rather than his "siete hijos" ("seven children"). Ganz notes that Cisneros's childhood loneliness was instrumental in shaping her later passion for writing. Cisneros's one strong female influence was her mother, Elvira, who was a voracious reader and more enlightened and socially conscious than her father.[9] According to Ganz, although Elvira was too dependent on her husband and too restricted in her opportunities to fulfill her own potential, she ensured her daughter would not suffer from the same disadvantages as she did.

Her family made a down payment on their own home in Humboldt Park, a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood on Chicago's West Side when she was eleven years old.[10] This neighborhood and its characters would later become the inspiration for Cisneros's novel *The House on Mango Street*.[2] For high school, Cisneros attended Josephinum Academy, a small Catholic all-girls school. Here she found an ally in a high-school teacher who helped her to write poems about the Vietnam War. Although Cisneros had written her first poem around the age of ten, with her teacher's encouragement she became known for her writing throughout her high-school years.[11] In high school she wrote poetry and was the literary magazine editor, but, according to herself, she did not really start writing until her first creative writing class in college in 1974. After that it took a while to find her own voice. She explains, "I rejected what was at hand and emulated the voices of the poets I admired in books: big male voices like James Wright and Richard Hugo and Theodore Roethke, all wrong for me."[12]

Cisneros was awarded a bachelor of arts degree from Loyola University Chicago in 1976, and received a master of fine arts degree from the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1978. While attending the Workshop, Cisneros discovered how the particular social position she occupied gave her writing a unique potential, recalling "It wasn't as if I didn't know who I was. I knew I was a Mexican woman. But I didn't think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, and my class! And it didn't make sense until that moment, sitting in that seminar. That's when I decided I would write about something my classmates could write better than me."[1] She conformed to American literary canons and adopted a writing style that was purposely opposite that of her classmates, realizing that instead of being something to be ashamed of, her own cultural environment was a source of inspiration. From then on, she would write of her "neighbors, the people [she] saw, the poverty that the women had gone through."[13][14]

Cisneros says of this moment: So to me it began there, and that's when I intentionally started writing about all the things in my culture that were different from them—the poems that are these city voices—the first part of *Wicked Wicked ways*—and the stories in *House on Mango Street*. I think it's ironic that at the moment when I was practically leaving an institution of learning, I began realizing in which ways institutions had failed me.[13]

Drawing on Mexican and Southwestern popular culture and conversations in the city streets, Cisneros wrote to convey the lives of people she identified with.[5] Literary critic Jacqueline Doyle has described Cisneros's passion for hearing the personal stories that people tell and her commitment to expressing the voices of marginalized people through her work, such as the "thousands of silent women" whose struggles are portrayed in *The House on Mango Street*.[15]

Five years after receiving her MFA, she returned to Loyola University-Chicago, where she had previously earned a BA in English, to work as an administrative assistant. Prior to this job, she worked in the Chicano barrio in Chicago, and teaching high school dropouts at Latino Youth High School.[16]

Later life and career[edit]

Teaching[edit]

In addition to being an author and poet, Cisneros has held various academic and teaching positions. In 1978, after finishing her MFA degree, she taught former high-school dropouts at the Latino Youth High School in Chicago. The 1984 publication of *The House on Mango Street* secured her a succession of writer-in-residence posts at universities in the United States,[17] teaching creative writing at institutions such as the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Michigan. She was subsequently a writer-in-residence at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, Texas. Cisneros has also worked as a college recruiter and an arts administrator.[18]

Family[edit]

Cisneros currently resides in San Miguel de Allende, a city in central Mexico, but for years she lived and wrote in San Antonio, Texas, in her briefly controversial[19] "Mexican-pink" home with "many creatures little and large."[18] In 1990 when Pilar E. Rodríguez Aranda asked Cisneros in an interview for the *Americas Review* why she has never married or started a family, Cisneros replied, "I've never seen a marriage that is as happy as my living alone. My writing is my child and I don't want anything to come between us."[20] She has elaborated elsewhere that she enjoys living alone because it gives her time to think and write.[20] In the introduction to the third edition of Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Cisneros wrote: "It's why I moved from Illinois to Texas. So that the relatives and family would allow me the liberty to disappear into myself. To reinvent myself if I had to. As Latinas, we have to ... Because writing is like putting your head underwater."[21]

Writing process[edit]

Cisneros's writing is often influenced by her personal experiences and by observations of many of the people in her community. She once confided to other writers at a conference in Santa Fe that she writes down "snippets of dialogue or monologue—records of conversations she hears

wherever she goes." These snippets are then mixed and matched to create her stories. Names for her characters often come from the San Antonio phone book; "she leafs through the listings for a last name, then repeats the process for a first name."[22] By mixing and matching she is assured that she is not appropriating anyone's real name or real story, but at the same time her versions of characters and stories are believable.

Cisneros once found herself so immersed in the characters of her book *Woman Hollering Creek* that they began to infiltrate her subconscious mind. Once while she was writing the story "Eyes of Zapata," she awoke "in the middle of the night, convinced for the moment that she was Ines, the young bride of the Mexican revolutionary. Her dream conversation with Zapata then became those characters' dialogue in her story."[23]

Her biculturalism and bilingualism are also very important aspects of her writing. Cisneros was quoted by Robin Ganz as saying that she is grateful to have "twice as many words to pick from ... two ways of looking at the world," and Ganz referred to her "wide range of experience" as a "double-edged sword."[23] Cisneros's ability to speak two languages and to write about her two cultures gives her a unique position from where she is able to tell not just her story, but also the stories of those around her.

Community legacy[edit]

Cisneros has been instrumental in building a strong community in San Antonio among other artists and writers through her work with the Macondo Foundation and the Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Foundation.[24] The Macondo Foundation, which is named after the town in Gabriel García Márquez's book *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, "works with dedicated and compassionate writers who view their work and talents as part of a larger task of community-building and non-violent social change."[25] Officially incorporated in 2006, the foundation began in 1998 as a small workshop that took place in Cisneros's kitchen.[26] The Macondo Writers Workshop, which has since become an annual event, brings together writers "working on geographic, cultural, economic, social and spiritual borders" and has grown from 15 participants to over 120 participants in the first 9 years.[27] Currently working out of Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio,[27] the Macondo Foundation makes awards such as the Gloria E. Anzaldúa Milagro Award honoring the memory of Anzaldúa, a fellow Chicana writer who died in 2004, by providing Chicano writers with support when they are in need of some time to heal their "body, heart or spirit"[24] and the Elvira Cordero Cisneros Award which was created in memory of Sandra Cisneros's mother.[28] Macondo offers services to member writers such as health insurance and the opportunity to participate in the Casa Azul Residency Program. The Residency Program provides writers with a furnished room and office in the Casa Azul, a blue house across the street from where Cisneros lives in San Antonio, which is also the headquarters of the Macondo Foundation.[26] In creating this program, Cisneros "imagined the Casa as a space where Macondistas could retreat from the distractions of everyday life and have a room of his/her own for the process of emotional, intellectual and spiritual introspection."[29]

Cisneros founded the Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Foundation in 1999. Named in memory of her father, the foundation "has awarded over $75,500 to writers born in Texas, writing about Texas, or living in Texas since 2007".[30] Its intention is to honor Cisneros's father's memory by showcasing writers who are as proud of their craft as Alfredo was of his craft as an upholsterer.[30]

Chicano literary movement[edit]

Literary critic Claudia Sadowski-Smith has called Cisneros "perhaps the most famous Chicana writer",[31] and Cisneros has been acknowledged as a pioneer in her literary field as the first female Mexican-American writer to have her work published by a mainstream publisher. In 1989, *The House on Mango Street*, which was originally published by the small Hispanic publishing company Arte Público Press, was reissued in a second edition by Vintage Press; and in 1991 *Woman Hollering Creek* was published by Random House. As Ganz observes, previously only male Chicano authors had successfully made the crossover from smaller publishers.[32] That Cisneros had garnered enough attention to be taken on by Vintage Press said a lot about the possibility for Chicano literature to become more widely recognized. Cisneros spoke of her success and what it meant for Chicana literature in an interview on National Public Radio on 19 September 1991:

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.[33]

As a pioneer Chicana author, Cisneros filled a void by bringing to the fore a genre that had previously been at the margins of mainstream literature.[34] With her first novel, *The House on Mango Street*, she moved away from the poetic style that was common in Chicana literature at the time and began to define a "distinctive Chicana literary space", challenging familiar literary forms and addressing subjects such as gender inequality and the marginalization of cultural minorities.[35] According to literary critic Alvina E Quintana, *The House on Mango Street* is a book that has reached beyond the Chicano and Latino literary communities and is now read by people of all ethnicities.[36] Quintana states that Cisneros's writing is accessible for both Anglo- and Mexican-Americans alike since it is free from anger or accusation, presenting the issues (such as Chicana identity and gender inequalities) in an approachable way.[37] Cisneros's writing has been influential in shaping both Chicana and feminist literature.[38] Quintana sees her fiction as a form of social commentary, contributing to a literary tradition that resembles the work of contemporary cultural anthropologists in its attempt to authentically represent the cultural experience of a group of people,[39] and acknowledges Cisneros's contribution to Chicana feminist aesthetics by bringing women to the center as empowered protagonists in much of her work.[40]

Writing style[edit]

Bilingualism[edit]

Cisneros often incorporates Spanish into her English writing, substituting Spanish words for English ones where she feels that Spanish better conveys the meaning or improves the rhythm of the passage.[41] However, where possible she constructs sentences so that non-Spanish speakers can infer the meaning of Spanish words from their context.[41] In *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* Cisneros writes: "La Gritona. Such a funny name for such a lovely *arroyo*. But that's what they called the creek that ran behind the house."[42] Even if the English-speaking

reader does not initially know that *arroyo* means *creek*, Cisneros soon translates it in a way that does not interrupt the flow of the text. She enjoys manipulating the two languages, creating new expressions in English by literally translating Spanish phrases.[41] In the same book Cisneros writes: "And at the next full moon, I gave light, Tía Chucha holding up our handsome, strong-lunged boy."[43] Previous sentences inform the reader that a baby is being born, but only a Spanish speaker will notice that "I gave light" is a literal translation of the Spanish "dí a luz" which means "I gave birth." Cisneros joins other Hispanic-American US writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Piri Thomas, Giannina Braschi, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, and Junot Díaz, who create playful linguistic hybrids of Spanish and English. Cisneros noted on this process: "All of a sudden something happens to the English, something really new is happening, a new spice is added to the English language."[41] Spanish always has a role in Cisneros's work, even when she writes in English. As she discovered, after writing *The House on Mango Street* primarily in English, "the syntax, the sensibility, the diminutives, the way of looking at inanimate objects" were all characteristic of Spanish.[44] For Cisneros, Spanish brings to her work not only colorful expressions, but also a distinctive rhythm and attitude.[41]

Narrative modes, diction, and apparent simplicity[edit]

Cisneros's fiction comes in various forms—as novels, poems, and short stories—by which she challenges both social conventions, with her "celebratory breaking of sexual taboos and trespassing across the restrictions that limit the lives and experiences of Chicanas", and literary ones, with her "bold experimentation with literary voice and her development of a hybrid form that weaves poetry into prose".[45] Published in 1991, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* is a collection of twenty-two short stories that form a collage of narrative techniques, each serving to engage and affect the reader in a different way. Cisneros alternates between first person, third person, and stream-of-consciousness narrative modes, and ranges from brief impressionistic vignettes to longer event-driven stories, and from highly poetic language to brutally frank realist language. Some stories lack a narrator to mediate between the characters and the reader; they are instead composed of textual fragments or conversations "overheard" by the reader. For example, "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" is composed of fictional notes asking for the blessings of patron saints, and "The Marlboro Man" transcribes a gossiping telephone conversation between two female characters.

Works by Cisneros can appear simple at first reading, but this is deceptive.[46] She invites the reader to move beyond the text by recognizing larger social processes within the microcosm of everyday life: the phone conversation in "The Marlboro Man" is not merely idle gossip, but a text that allows the reader to dig into the characters' psyches and analyze their cultural influences.[47] Literary critics have noted how Cisneros tackles complex theoretical and social issues through the vehicle of apparently simple characters and situations. For example, Ramón Saldívar observes that *The House on Mango Street* "represents from the simplicity of childhood vision the enormously complex process of the construction of the gendered subject".[48] In the same vein, Felicia J. Cruz describes how each individual will interact differently with *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, thus eliciting such varied reader responses as "it is about growing up", to "it's about a Chicana's growing up", to "it is a critique of patriarchal structures and exclusionary practices".[47] Cisneros's writing is rich not only for its symbolism and imagery, deemed by critic Deborah L Madsen to be "both technically and aesthetically accomplished", but also for its social commentary and power to "evoke highly personal responses".[45][49] this helped her achieve the way she taught.

Literary themes[edit]

Place[edit]

When Cisneros describes the aspirations and struggles of Chicanas, the theme of *place* often emerges. *Place* refers not only to her novels' geographic locations, but also to the positions her characters hold within their social context. Chicanas frequently occupy Anglo-dominated and male-dominated places where they are subject to a variety of oppressive and prejudicial behaviors; one of these places that is of particular interest to Cisneros is the home.[50] As literary critics Deborah L. Madsen and Ramón Saldívar have described, the home can be an oppressive place for Chicanas where they are subjugated to the will of male heads-of-household, or in the case of their own home, it can be an empowering place where they can act autonomously and express themselves creatively.[50][51] In *The House on Mango Street* the young protagonist, Esperanza, longs to have her own house: "Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after."[52] An aspiring writer, Esperanza yearns for "a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem."[52] She feels discontented and trapped in her family home, and witnesses other women in the same position. According to Saldívar, Cisneros communicates through this character that a woman needs her own place in order to realize her full potential—a home which is not a site of patriarchal violence, but instead "a site of poetic self-creation."[51] One source of conflict and grief for Cisneros's Chicana characters is that the male-dominated society in which they live denies them this place. Critics such as Jacqueline Doyle and Felicia J. Cruz have compared this theme in Cisneros's work to one of the key concepts in Virginia Woolf's famous essay "A Room of One's Own", that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," or put another way, "economic security" and personal liberty are necessary for "artistic production."[53][54][55]

Cisneros explores the issue of *place* in relation not only to gender but also to class. As Saldívar has noted, "Aside from the personal requirement of a gendered woman's space, Esperanza recognizes the collective requirements of the working poor and the homeless as well."[56] He refers to Esperanza's determination not to forget her working-class roots once she obtains her dream house, and to open her doors to those who are less fortunate. Esperanza says "Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house."[57] According to Saldívar, this statement of Esperanza's alludes to "the necessity for a decent living space" that is fundamental to all people, despite the different oppressions they face.[58]

Construction of femininity and female sexuality[edit]

As Madsen has described, Cisneros's "effort to negotiate a cross-cultural identity is complicated by the need to challenge the deeply rooted patriarchal values of both Mexican and American cultures."[59] The lives of all Cisneros's female characters are affected by how femininity and female sexuality are defined within this patriarchal value system and they must struggle to rework these definitions.[59] As Cisneros has said: "There's always this balancing act, we've got to define what we think is fine for ourselves instead of what our culture says."[60]

Cisneros shows how Chicanas, like women of many other ethnicities, internalize these norms starting at a young age, through informal education by family members and popular culture.

In *The House on Mango Street*, for example, a group of girl characters speculate about what function a woman's hips have: "They're good for holding a baby when you're cooking, Rachel says ... You need them to dance, says Lucy ... You gotta know how to walk with hips, practice you know."[61] Traditional female roles, such as childrearing, cooking, and attracting male attention, are understood by Cisneros's characters to be their biological destiny. However, when they reach adolescence and womanhood, they must reconcile their expectations about love and sex with their own experiences of disillusionment, confusion and anguish. Esperanza describes her "sexual initiation"—an assault by a group of Anglo-American boys while awaiting her friend Sally at the fairground.[62] She feels stricken and powerless after this, but above all betrayed; not only by Sally, who was not there for her, but "by all the women who ever failed to contradict the romantic mythology of love and sex".[62] Cisneros illustrates how this romantic mythology, fueled by popular culture, is often at odds with reality in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, where multiple references to romantic telenovelas obsessively watched by the female characters are juxtaposed with the abuse and poverty they face in their own lives.

When Cisneros addresses the subject of female sexuality, she often portrays negative scenarios in which men exert control over women through control over their sexuality, and explores the gap she perceives between the real sexual experiences of women and their idealized representation in popular culture. However, Cisneros also describes female sexuality in extremely positive terms, especially in her poetry. This is true, for example, of her 1987 volume of poetry *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*. According to Madsen, Cisneros refers to herself as "wicked" for having "reappropriated, taken control of, her own sexuality and the articulation of it – a power forbidden to women under patriarchy".[63] Through these poems she aims to represent "the reality of female sexuality" so that women readers will recognize the "divisive effects" of the stereotypes that they are expected to conform to, and "discover the potential for joy in their bodies that is denied them".[64]

Cisneros breaks the boundary between what is a socially acceptable way for women to act and speak and what is not, using language and imagery that have a "boisterous humor" and "extrovert energy" and are even at times "deliberately shocking".[65] Not all readers appreciate this "shocking" quality of some of Cisneros's work. Both female and male readers have criticized Cisneros for the ways she celebrates her sexuality, such as the suggestive photograph of herself on the *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* cover (3rd Woman Press, 1987).[64] Cisneros says of this photo: "The cover is of a woman appropriating her own sexuality. In some ways, that's also why it's wicked: the scene is trespassing that boundary by saying 'I defy you. I'm going to tell my own story.'"[66] Some readers "failed to perceive the transgressive meaning of the gesture", thinking that she was merely being lewd for shock value, and questioned her legitimacy as a feminist.[67] Cisneros's initial response to this was dismay, but then she reports thinking "Wait a second, where's your sense of humor? And why can't a feminist be sexy?"[68]

Construction of Chicana identity[edit]

The challenges faced by Cisneros's characters on account of their gender cannot be understood in isolation from their culture, for the norms that dictate how women and men ought to think and behave are culturally determined and thus distinct for different cultural groups. Through her works, Cisneros conveys the experiences of Chicanas confronting the "deeply rooted patriarchal values" of Mexican culture through interactions not only with Mexican fathers, but the broader community which exerts pressure upon them to conform to a narrow definition of womanhood and a subservient position to men.[59]

A recurrent theme in Cisneros's work is the triad of figures that writer and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa has referred to as "Our Mothers": the Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche and La Llorona.[69] These symbolic figures are of great importance to identity politics and popular culture in Mexico and the southwest United States, and have been used, argues theorist Norma Alarcón, as reference points "for controlling, interpreting, or visualizing women" in Mexican-American culture.[70]

Many theorists, including Jacqueline Doyle, Jean Wyatt, Emma Perez and Cordelia Candelaria, have argued that the gender identity of Mexican and Chicana women is complexly constructed in reference to these three figures.[71] La Virgen de Guadalupe, a Catholic icon of the manifestation of the Virgin Mary in the Americas, is revered in Mexico as a "nurturing and inspiring mother and maiden".[72] La Malinche, the indigenous mistress and intermediary of conquistador Hernán Cortés, has according to Wyatt "become the representative of a female sexuality at once passive, "rapeable," and always already guilty of betrayal".[73] Cisneros describes the problematic dichotomy of the virgin and the whore presented by these two figures: "We're raised in a Mexican culture that has two role models: La Malinche and la Virgen de Guadalupe. And you know that's a hard route to go, one or the other, there's no in-betweens."[74] Madsen has noted that these 'good' and 'bad' archetypes are further complicated by the perception, held by many Chicana feminists, that they would be guilty of betraying their people, like La Malinche, if they attempt to define their femininity in more "Anglo" terms.[75] Through her work, Cisneros critiques the pressures Chicanas face to suppress their sexuality or channel it into socially acceptable forms so as to not be labeled "Malinchista[s] ... corrupted by gringa influences which threaten to splinter [their] people".[76]

The third figure, La Llorona, who derives from a centuries-old Mexican/Southwestern folktale, is "a proud young girl [who] marries above her station and is so enraged when her husband takes a mistress of his own class that she drowns their children in the river".[77] She dies grief-stricken by the edge of the river after she is unable to retrieve her children and it is claimed that she can be heard wailing for them in the sound of the wind and water.[77] These entities, from the gentle and pure Virgen de Guadalupe, to the violated and treacherous la Malinche, to the eternally grieving la Llorona give rise to a "fragmentary subjectivity" often experienced by Chicanas, and their need to come to terms with them, renegotiate them on their own terms, or reject them altogether.[78]

The three "Mothers" come out most clearly in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. In the stories "Never Marry a Mexican" and "Woman Hollering Creek", the female protagonists grapple with these "Mexican icons of sexuality and motherhood that, internalized, seem to impose on them a limited and even negative definition of their own identities as women".[73] The protagonist in "Never Marry a Mexican" is haunted by the myth of la Malinche, who is considered a whore and a traitor, and defies la Malinche's passive sexuality with her own aggressive one.[73] In "Woman Hollering Creek" the protagonist reinvents the la Llorona myth when she decides to take charge of her own future, and that of her children, and discovers that the *grito* of the myth, which is the Spanish word for the sound made by la Llorona, can be interpreted as a "joyous holler" rather than a grieving wail.[3] It is the borderland, that symbolic middle ground between two cultures, which "offers a space where such a negotiation with fixed gender ideals is at least possible".[79]

Borderland[edit]

Even though that Cisneros does not explicitly locate her stories and novels on the Mexico-U.S. border, Sadowski-Smith identifies the concept as perhaps Cisneros's most salient theme due to the constant border crossings, both real and metaphorical, of characters in all of her works.[80] *The House on Mango Street* takes place in Chicago where the narrator lives, and in Mexico City where she visits extended family. *Caramelo* primarily takes place in those settings as well, but part of the book details the narrator's experiences as a teenager in San Antonio, TX. Various characters in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* also make trips to Mexico to reunite with family members. However, to quote literary critics Jesús Benito and Ana María Manzanas, the "image of the border has become fully meaningful not only when we consider it as a physical line but when we decenter it and liberate it from the notion of space to encompass notions of sex, class, gender, ethnicity, identity, and community."[81] Cisneros frequently divorces the border from its strictly geographic meaning, using it metaphorically to explore how Chicana identity is an amalgamation of both Mexican and Anglo-American cultures. The border represents the everyday experiences of people who are neither fully from one place nor the other; at times the border is fluid and two cultures can coexist harmoniously within a single person, but at other times it is rigid and there is an acute tension between them. Literary critic Katherine Payant has analyzed the border metaphor in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, which manifests in references to the Chicana/o characters' Mexican roots and the (im)migration between the two countries, the recurrence of overlapping pre-Columbian, mestizo and Southwestern Chicano myths, and the portrayal of Chicanas/os as "straddling two or three cultures."[82] Payant makes use of Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of living "on the borderlands" to describe the experience of Cisneros's Chicana characters who, in addition to their struggle to overcome patriarchal constructs of their gender and sexual identity, must negotiate linguistic and cultural boundaries.[83]